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Catholic Charities USA Names 2009 Volunteers of the Year

ALEXANDRIA, Va., July 21 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- On the eve of marking its milestone Centennial and in a year in which its work to reduce poverty in America has never been more challenging--or more essential, Catholic Charities USA announces its 2009 Volunteer of the Year co-winners, who symbolize the organization's rich history of volunteer service and performance: Dr. William Rainford, Ph.D. , M.S.W., associate professor and chair, Master of Social Work program, Boise State University, for his tireless work on behalf of Catholic Charities of Idaho; and a trio of dedicated women--Elsa Amboy, Melissa Kreisa, and Andrea Lee--for their refugee work with Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County, in San Jose, CA.

(Logo: <http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20081008/CCUSALOGO>)

"Congratulations and a heartfelt thanks to these four wonderful individuals who provide witness of God's preferential love for the poor and vulnerable in our society," said Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA. "They are truly doing God's work, delivering help and creating hope day-in and day-out, without seeking anything in return."

Dr. William Rainford, who has devoted much of his life and career to community organizing and advocacy and serves as the lead legislative advocacy volunteer for Catholic Charities of Idaho and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Idaho, is honored as a 2009 Volunteer of the Year for his development of a legislative email alert system, a legislative intern program, and for his capacity and acumen in empowering parishes to act as legislative advocates. Over the years, Dr. Rainford has also assisted Catholic Charities of Idaho with the formation of a Social Action Committee and was instrumental in the establishment of an interfaith coalition--Interfaith Sanctuary Housing Services--that has provided emergency shelter and social services to men, women, and children in need.

"He is a real team player and he is very faith-based--that is his foundation," says Christine Smith, MA, parish and community partnership coordinator at Catholic Charities of Idaho. "The work he's doing in legislative advocacy may not bespeak that, but it is where he speaks from--his faith."

Beyond his commitment and help to the agency, Dr. Rainford has been an advisor and organizer for a large group of low-income manufactured housing residents who are speaking out for tenant rights and improvements. When local housing park owners filed for bankruptcy, many low-income residents were evicted from their manufactured homes. Dr. Rainford organized them to educate the broader community about the resulting crisis and helped them advocate for just housing laws that would protect tenant rights, with a new 501(c)3 organization growing out of the effort. Additionally, as part of his endless community engagement and spirit, he and Catholic Charities of Idaho provide internship opportunities for Boise State University students, enabling them to gain first-hand experience with the social problems present in the community.

His social action email alert network has grown to include more than 500 members in the past five years, with Dr. Rainford himself often functioning as the primary spokesman in parishes throughout the state of Idaho, explaining the value of individual Catholics banding together to express their thoughts and views on social policy as seen through the lens of Catholic social teaching. As Dr. Rainford says, "The goal of the network is to look for electoral support in telling the legislators how to vote on issues important to the families we serve."

"When I see him give legislative testimony, he isn't there on behalf of himself. He is there for other people," Smith continued. "He has a passion for legislative change that will benefit the underserved. He uses his experiences, his humor, to bring people to life through his testimony. He makes it easy to understand, to be a witness to the work of Catholic Charities."

The leadership and commitment of Elsa Amboy, Melissa Kreisa, and Andrea Lee has allowed Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County in San Jose, CA, to create a broader network of support and community for newly arrived refugees. The agency has been recognized as one of the leading refugee resettlement agencies in the county and is the only agency authorized to resettle refugees who do not have an "anchor"(i.e. a family relative) in the community.

In the face of a brutal economic climate impacting the ability to find affordable housing and entry level jobs for refugees who arrive with no family to receive or support them, this triad of women representing two separate faith-based communities stepped up to create an expanded network of support and community for newly arrived refugees throughout the area.

"Elsa, Melissa, and Andrea spearheaded an effort in their respective communities to generate a commitment of over \$200,000 for housing for newly-arrived refugees," said Ellen Dumesnil, division director of Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County. "They are incredible human beings who have recruited and galvanized a significant number of other volunteers who now too are passionate about 'welcoming and helping the stranger.' They have worked at all levels--with individual refugees, with families and with the building community--and they are both advocates and partners in this work."

Through the efforts of all three, volunteer ESL tutors have been linked with stay-at-home refugee moms, a new group of volunteers has been formed solely committed to working with newly arrived refugees, and other critical links and partnerships have been forged, such as a partnership with Salvation Army to provide \$300 vouchers to refugees and the creation of an additional special Emergency Fund.

"All three bring different and unique gifts to their work and the commonality is their passion. They never lose sight of the people, the human beings involved, and the human touch that is essential for each and every person," Dumesnil further explained. "As an example, two young women came here as refugees from Rwanda--one 17 and one 18--and had met on the plane. The 17-year-old had an immediate loving foster home to go to, but the 18-year-old was ineligible to be part of the same--she was placed in our refugee transition home. She was lonely and confused about why she too could not join the foster home with her 17-year-old new friend. Thanks to the advocacy of Andrea, the 18-year-old now lives in a loving home with a couple that will provide nurture and guidance. Both girls now have support, community, and a bright future."

These three women have collectively created a stronger, more energized refugee program in the toughest of times with their passion and persistence, building a broader network of caring and

support for refugees who come to the area with little more than the clothes on their back and an indomitable belief in a new future. Catholic Charities USA salutes and recognizes their volunteer contribution in naming them as 2009 Volunteers of the Year.

Dr. Rainford and Elsa Amboy, Melissa Kreisa, and Andrea Lee will be honored and receive their 2009 Volunteer of the Year Awards at Catholic Charities USA's Annual Gathering, September 24-27 in Portland, OR. The Volunteer of the Year Award not only recognizes these 2009 winners, but also the invaluable contributions and work of all Catholic Charities volunteers. Volunteers nationwide are the backbone of the Catholic Charities movement. Collectively, local Catholic Charities rely on more than 260,000 volunteers each year to serve nearly 8 million people of all faiths and diverse needs.

Catholic Charities USA's members--more than 1,700 local Catholic Charities agencies and institutions nationwide--provide help and create hope for nearly 8 million people a year regardless of religious, social, or economic backgrounds. For almost 300 years, Catholic Charities agencies have worked to reduce poverty by providing a myriad of vital services in their communities, ranging from health care and job training to food and housing. In 2010, Catholic Charities USA celebrates its centennial anniversary.

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