

# Caroline Center marks 15 years of job training for women

## East Baltimore organization has helped more than 1,500 learn trades

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Cynthia MacKinnon says she is working at her dream job, thanks to training and encouragement she received at the Caroline Center in East Baltimore.



The nonprofit center, run by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, a Roman Catholic religious order, celebrates its 15th anniversary Thursday with a salute to MacKinnon and others who acquired education and job skills within its walls.

"We are flourishing," said Sister Patricia McLaughlin, the center's executive director. "Meeting all these wonderful women and watching them blossom has been a blessing to us."

More than 1,500 women have completed the center's employment readiness programs since it opened its doors on Somerset Street. They have moved from joblessness and poverty and have excelled in a variety of fields, including child care, culinary arts and, like MacKinnon, upholstery. Many have earned their GED certificates, and about 80 percent of center graduates are in the workforce. Sixty are enrolled in the center's programs for certified nursing assistants and pharmacy technicians.

"I am ever so grateful to the Caroline Center," MacKinnon said. "Their support has been wonderful. I can still call on them."

The center offers lessons in life skills such as financial management, along with job training to help participants set and meet long-range goals, McLaughlin said. She has found no shortage of prospective candidates. The center will handle as many as 800 calls and interview 285 applicants before filling 60 slots in each course, she said.

"We end up with 60 truly motivated women," she said. "But it is disheartening to know so many more want to attend."

The center, which in the past has offered classes in day care management, clerical skills and house painting, is concentrating on health care courses and will soon offer an eight-week nursing assistant refresher course on evenings and Saturdays for women interested in renewing their certification.

"We try to follow the job market, and allied health is where the jobs are now," McLaughlin said.

MacKinnon, 50, came to the center in 2006. She needed to learn a new trade after debilitating arthritis in her back forced her to leave a packaging job in a large warehouse.

"I wanted to find something I loved, and upholstery just popped into my head," she said. "It is a lot like fishing. You can lose yourself in it."

An Internet search led her to the center, and after 15 weeks of training and an apprenticeship with a experienced upholsterer, she was certified in the trade. The center hired her as a trainer at its in-house upholstery shop.

Upholstery seemed a natural for MacKinnon, who grew up in Sandtown among family skilled in crafts.

"We hooked rugs, knitted and sewed," she said. "I learned early to use my hands and be creative."

The center had hoped to make its upholstery shop self-supporting, but with the downturn in the economy, commissioned work all but disappeared and the shop closed. MacKinnon was undeterred. She purchased much of the upholstery equipment and moved it to her workroom at her Parkville home and now earns a living "bringing new life to furniture," she said.

She offers residential and commercial reupholstering to a growing list of customers and does some freelance pieces, usually items she has found waiting for bulk trash pickup on city streets.

"I know now right away what is worth doing," she said. "Old furniture is well-made and more durable than what you find today."

Her workroom is filled with sets of dining room chairs, a chiropractor's table, and assorted living room and den furnishings. One wall is full of fabric samples, and another is lined floor to ceiling with bins of sewing materials.

"She is truly a well-organized woman," said her husband, Oliver Pope, whose moving company is an asset to the business.

Mackinnon says the nonprofit helped her establish a new career.

"Now I tell all the girls I know who are trying to do something with their lives that the Caroline Center is the best program in the city," she said. "It will certainly change your life."