

Passaic County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Prevention celebrates 25 years of service

By **CECILE SAN AGUSTIN**
Reporter

CLIFTON — To know where you're going, you have to know where you have been and as the Passaic County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Prevention Inc. here marks its 25th anniversary May 25, Father Alan Savitt, executive director of the council,

reflected on the council's humble beginnings.

"We started in a 200-square foot trailer on the grounds of the Clifton Civic Center," said Father Savitt, a diocesan priest, who is the founding director of the council and celebrates 36 years as a priest on May 26, the day after the Council's quarter-century anniversary.

From those early days in the trailer with no running water or restroom facilities and two space heaters for the winter, the council today has served since 1985 in a historic renovated building on Clifton's city hall property, to fit the Council's expanding needs, which are almost metaphoric to the growth of the council from those beginnings to its work today.

According to Father Savitt, the council has served more than 50,000 people during the past 25 years through its different alcoholism and drug prevention programs. The goal of the council has been to increase public awareness and advocacy for alcoholism and other drug information, assessment and referral, its

nature and treatment for the purpose of alleviating the damage of alcoholism and other drug abuse and reducing the incidence of alcoholism and other drug abuse.

A member of the N.J. Prevention Network (NJPN) and affiliate of the National Council of Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), the non-profit agency holds the unique distinction of being the only council in the state to have a priest and a religious sister serving clients. Father Savitt is also the only founding director in the prevention network still serving as director.

Sister of Mercy Pauline Kuntne, director of prevention services, began serving a few months after the Council opened in 1984. Father Savitt calls Sister Kuntne "the heart and soul of the Council. She has been a great gift to this agency and a first-class professional and she's been my very best friend."

For Sister Kuntne, working at the Council has meant simply helping others in their life struggles. "I felt it was God's call and I answered the call to serve," said Sister Kuntne, who formerly ministered as a teacher and director of the music department at Camden Catholic High School for more than 20 years. She also has served as a nurse in Atlantic, Passaic and Union counties and director of health services at Emmaus House in Perth Amboy. She has been in religious life for 61 years and recently inducted into the Camden Catholic Hall of Fame.

Both Father Savitt and Sister Kuntne believe helping those dependent on alcohol and addicted to drugs has been a life's mission. Father Savitt said, "My life's experience and God's Will have involved me in creating and founding the Council. This has been for me both a mystery and dream come true."



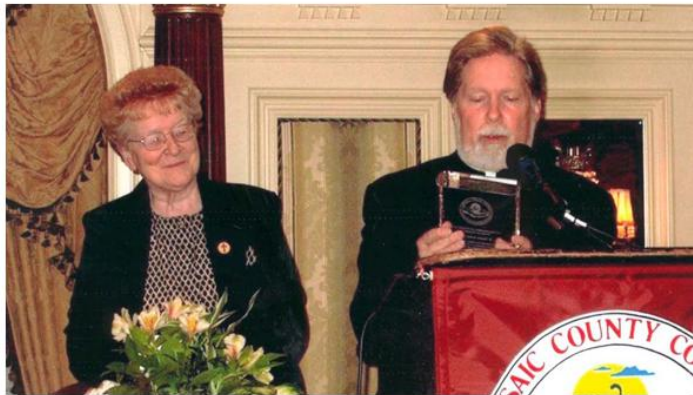
CARING STAFF — From left: Philip Berlier, community partnership coordinator; Sister of Mercy Pauline Kuntne, director of prevention services; Paulette Posey, REBEL coordinator; and Father Alan Savitt, director and founder of the Passaic County Council. Photo courtesy of Clifton Merchant Magazine

Today the issue of alcohol and drug abuse continues to affect countless families no matter their backgrounds. Savitt said, "Alcoholism and other addictions are equal opportunity non discriminatory diseases." With the economic woes facing the country, the problem will get worse before it gets better, he feels, and it is a problem, he said, that often times is overlooked. Father Savitt believes everyone needs to get involved in outreaching to those with these serious problems.

"Silence, ambivalence, misinformation and most of all — denial — have dealt their blows of pain, unnecessary anxiety, fear and forgotten dreams of peace and happiness, through the disease of chemical dependency/co-dependency," said Father Savitt.

To mark the anniversary the Council hosted a dinner at the Brownstone in Paterson May 19 with keynote speaker Scott Clark, sports director and anchor for WABC-TV. Honored speakers also included Gerard McAleer of the Drug Enforcement Agency N.J. Division special agent in charge; Dr. Robert Zlotnick, president of NJPN; and

See 25 years on Next Page



catholicbeacon@patersondiocese.org

HEALTH & WELLNESS

THE BEACON † MAY 21, 2009 19

25 years: Passaic County Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention marks quarter century

Continued from **Preceding Page**
Robert J. Lindsey, president and chief executive officer of NCADD.

At the dinner, Father Savitt also acknowledged the work of Sister Kuntne with a special recognition award with the inscription: "She has epitomized the charisma of mercy, offering caring and compassion to the uneducated, the poor, the disadvantaged, the sick, the forgotten and the powerless for the past 25 years at the Passaic County Council."

Also reflecting on the many people they have served, he especially remembers one client who wrote in to The Beacon in the March 1, 1990 issue. Father Savitt reads excerpts of the letter, "When I went to the PCC, I felt hopeless, helpless, desperate and suicidal. The staff made me feel that I was in the right place. They gave me a



sense that there was hope for someone like me at a time in my life when I needed to see that there was just a little bit of hope."

The care of the staff at the Council stems from their own lives and understanding about recovery. As the Passaic

County Council of Alcoholism and Drug Prevention begins its next 25 years, the staff hopes the mission to help those overcome great obstacles will continue.

With its 11 different programs — Beginning Alcohol and Addictions Basic Education Studies (BABES), Underage Drinking Initiative, Employee Assistance Program, Footprints for Life for students in grades two and three, Forest Friends for kindergarten and first grade children, Healthy Options Prevention Education (HOPE), Reaching Everyone by Exposing Lies (REBEL), Strengthening Families Program, Wellness Initiative for Senior Education (WISE), Faith-based Initiative and Community Partnerships

for a Tobacco Free New Jersey — the Passaic County Council offers services for people of all ages to get the word out on this serious disease.

Father Savitt said, "One person can mean the difference between life or death, hope or despair, awareness or confusion, acceptance or rejection, the solution or the problem."

Information:
www.passaiccountycouncil.org or call
(973) 473-3366, ext. 105.

Color photos added by Judy Ward