



*“Don’t dwell on the bad things, but don’t forget them. Every bump and bruise along the way has put us where we are today.”*



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**ROCKY  
BALSAMO**  
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# Going Toe-to-Toe With Poverty

In the past year, **Rocky Balsamo** has inspired hundreds of young people to advocate for those mired in economic distress.

“The world ain’t all sunshine and rainbows,” says the title character in the 2006 film “Rocky Balboa.” “It’s a very mean and nasty place, and I don’t care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it.”

That line hews closely to the message a real-life Rocky is trying to spread to youth throughout the mid-Atlantic region—that the world can be a tough place, but every one of us has the power to make it better.

Rocco “Rocky” Balsamo welcomes the comparison, and not just because of his name. He’s a fighter too, but his opponent isn’t in a boxing ring. It’s poverty, a sub-

ject he understands intimately. Balsamo was the oldest of seven children, growing up in East Brunswick, N.J., in a family that was comfortably middle class—that is, until he turned 12. That was the year his father passed away, and from that point on, life became a struggle. The Balsamos occasionally had to turn to food stamps and social services, he says. But the household held together thanks to his strong, good-hearted mother and the efforts of Knights of Columbus and the nuns at the Roman Catholic school the Balsamo kids attended.

He didn’t forget the kindness shown to his family. In 2008, Balsamo helped establish the Center for

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**Center for  
FaithJustice**  
[www.faithjustice.org](http://www.faithjustice.org)

By Brian Summerfield



FaithJustice, a faith-based nonprofit that serves needy households over a wide swath ranging from the inner cities of central New Jersey to the small towns nestled in the Appalachian mountains of West Virginia to the City of Brotherly Love—Philadelphia—the hometown of the iconic fictional boxer portrayed by Sylvester Stallone.

The Center stands on the Catholic values of service, justice, and faith, educating middle school, high school, and college students about poverty's ill effects and challenging them to do something about it.

Although there are different programs with varying activities and levels of commitment, the goal is the same: "We want to provoke action in these kids," Balsamo says. "What it's about is doing the right thing and caring for people who can't care for themselves."

One program is called ServiceworX. In this one-day event, hundreds of young people volunteer at a service site such as a nursing home, food pantry, soup kitchen, or inner-city daycare facility. Another, known as a "turning point" activity, takes high school students to a remote site where they are given a \$6 budget. Students have to make hard decisions about whether to spend money on dinner, a shower, or a phone call home. "The same things they were getting all along [for free], they now have to buy back," Balsamo says. "What we're trying to do is give them the understanding of what it's like—not just to be poor but to have your hope and dignity stripped away."

## Extending its Reach

About 850 middle and high school students and 150 young adults have been involved in Center for FaithJustice programs, Balsamo says. Last summer these young volunteers contributed 20,000 hours to local charities, and many participants have been inspired to go even further to alleviate entrenched economic distress, he says. Jennifer Heil, a program alum who's currently



working toward a Ph.D. in applied anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, says the lessons she learned at the center—as well as the personal example set by Balsamo—helped her decide to pursue a career that involves tackling social problems like poverty.

"It was the first time I'd been exposed to social justice issues in the world and the first time that someone told me I could change it," Heil says. "It was the starting point of this desire, as well as something that nurtured that desire along the way."

Balsamo's efforts are a testament to the truth of another line from that same speech from "Rocky Balboa": "It ain't how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward." ■

This real-life Rocky's strong faith and indomitable will are driving his crusade against poverty, a crusade that has inspired hundreds of young people to help the less fortunate.