

Called to Serve

Melissa Chedid honored for service, solidarity with the poor

By Carolyn Hughes

Correspondent

NORTH BRUNSWICK — For Rutgers University senior Melissa Chedid, social justice is not a passing phase in the life of every Christian. It is, rather, a "lifestyle, a mindset," the 21-year-old told *The Catholic Spirit* in an interview in her family's home.

For her extensive work in social justice rooted in a deep faith, Chedid was recently selected as the 2010 recipient of the Rich Cunningham New Leader in Justice Award of the Metuchen Diocese Catholic Charities Solidarity Team.

The award is given to a young adult between the ages of 18-30 who has demonstrated leadership and experience consistent with Catholic social teaching. Chedid will receive the award Oct. 8 at the annual Harvest of Hope Dinner, to be held in Sacred Heart Parish Hall, New Brunswick.

She was also nominated by Father Joseph J. Kerrigan, Sacred Heart pastor and diocesan director of the solidarity team and Campaign for Human Development, as the Metuchen diocesan representative for the USCCB Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award. A winner of this national award is decided at the November bishops' annual meeting to honor a Catholic young adult for working to end the root causes of poverty in the United States.

Formation in social justice began early for Chedid, who lives with her parents Lisa and Joseph, her twin brother George, and siblings Jessica and Daniel. The family are members of St. Augustine of Canterbury Parish in Kendall Park.

After attending St. Augustine of Canterbury School from pre-K through eighthgrade, where service was first introduced into her life, Chedid found her personal "call" to social justice while attending Bishop George Ahr High School, Edison.

"Bishop Ahr was really great for service," Chedid said. Her experience was a balance of faith and service, which led her to question poverty's root causes in light of the Catholic Church's social teaching. "There comes a point where you ask yourself: *why do we have people who are hungry?*"

Chedid's studies at Rutgers reflect her passion for social justice. She is majoring in social work, with a double minor in planning and public policy, and women's and gender studies. She sees social justice as an integral part of the life of every Christian.

"It's doing those small things . . . to raise awareness. They can be as impactful as starting your own non-profit. We can each do small things with great love. If everyone lived that, then those small things would equal really, really

big things," Chedid said. "That's what it comes down to — trying to be a servant like Jesus, not trying to gain the world."

Recently, Chedid developed a Youth Empowerment Group for New Brunswick teens in the 40-block area of the Unity Square Partnership, which offers a variety of programs and activities for residents in the Unity Square neighborhood. The group was funded in part by local funds from the Metuchen Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

She started her own ESL class for adults in Sacred Heart Parish with funds received from her participation in the Leadership Scholars Program, a two-year program within the Rutgers Institute for Women's Leadership. Working with parish member Nancy Ramos, Chedid allowed the parishioners to choose and build an ESL program to meet their needs. "You do it that way because you want to empower people. I'm here to facilitate, to provide this service to them to give control to them," she said.

She has also participated and volunteered in the Center for FaithJustice, a nonprofit organization in Lawrenceville. "It's about connecting your faith with justice. You don't just have faith. It's a balance. That's why the word is connected," Chedid explained.

This summer she accompanied a group of teens as a facilitator for the center to Philadelphia and Appalachia, where they did construction work for the poor and saw the ravages of poverty. Social justice is the universal call of all Christians, Chedid concluded.

"Let us be the hands and feet of Jesus and go out and do this work," she said. "There is no one way to commit to social justice. It comes from gratitude. You're ready to serve because you're grateful for all you've received."



Melissa Chedid sometimes uses a simple technique of not wearing shoes to raise awareness of the world's poor who die of diseases of the feet because they cannot afford shoes.

— Carolyn Hughes photo