



SHIFTING SANDS



PCI's President Message

20 Years of Options

In January 1998, the families who founded the Options program at Paul VI High School were two months into negotiating with PVI's Principal, Father Lyle, the school's Board of Directors and Dr. Tim McNiff, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, to convince them to establish a special education program at PVI.

Why were the original families doing this when Fairfax County schools were ranked as the top public school system in the country? Simply, our children were in the public schools, but not part of the schools. They were shunned and their classes were in corner and back sections of the high schools, sometimes behind closed doors. They were not challenged in instruction. They did not have adapted sports programs. They did not have individualized instruction. They did not enjoy any form of inclusion, much less acceptance.

During the past 20 years, over 100 families have so far benefited from an inclusive Catholic education provided by five special education programs in our Diocesan schools. Our children and young adults carry their heads high because they are accepted and participate in all facets of the school community. The self-esteem they have gained and which continues to grow has led for some to post-secondary education at George Mason University's LIFE Program, also established by PVI Option's founding families. This education has led to gainful employment in the community for many; for others it has led to housing and independent living just like their siblings. Twenty years later, all of the families that have come along are still looking for the same things we hoped for at the outset.

We are embarking now on the next 20 years. Time flies! Bishop Burbidge has made it clear that providing a Catholic

education in ALL of our Diocesan schools is the RIGHT thing to do.

We at Porto Charities and Porto 104 (PCI/Porto) are making great strides with this Diocesan support and starting the year with a bang! In the next six weeks, there will be much going on. PCI/Porto members have meetings scheduled with St. Veronica's, St. Bernadette's, and Bishop Ireton. The goal is to establish and open a new program by September, and several more each year thereafter.

This will require work and commitment not only from our current members, but also from **NEW** members. I ask that all of our current members talk to friends whose goals for children with special needs coincide with those of your family's and PCI/Porto's. Invite them to join us at all of our events and describe to them the valuable work our organization carries out. It is never too soon or too late to join the effort.

After our annual Founder's Day awards dinner on February 10th, join us on March 10th, when we will be holding our first annual Porto Charities Gala (see separate article and flyer). The Gala will help raise funds to support the new programs we hope to establish. We are producing a video and hopefully it will be ready for the Gala. Bishop Burbidge will share the video with all the contacts in the Diocese's database, including pastors, priests and school principals. In addition, Bishop Burbidge has written a very supportive letter to all of our pastors requesting 100% participation in the Special Kids/Special Needs annual second collection.

Our 20th year promises to be exciting and full of future accomplishments. PCI/Porto needs you to be part of this future!

PCI President Leo Alonso