From homeless to housed: Mr. M’s story

By Mackenzie Hurlbert

If you were to walk by the Val Macri permanent supportive housing complex around 4 pm, you would surely smell Mr. M.’s home-cooking. “It’s been a long time since I had the opportunity to be in the kitchen by myself and concentrating on my cooking,” said Mr. M. “The last time before now was in 2005 or 2006.”

Mr. M. has a passion for cooking and often creates his own recipes. “What did Sammy Davis Jr. say?” he asked. “Mix it up with love and make the world taste good? Yeah, that’s what I like to do. Mix it up with love and make the world taste good.”

Mr. M. moved into Columbus House’s Valentina Macri Apartments, a newly renovated 17-unit permanent supportive housing complex in a residential neighborhood in New Haven, in February 2015. He is determined to make the best of his experience. “This place downstairs, where I can call my own, helps me a lot,” Mr. M. said. “I’m very thankful and grateful for it.”

When Mr. M.’s second wife passed, he found himself without a home. He had a fixed income from his 20+ years driving big rigs, but it was never enough for the rent and security deposit for an apartment. “It bothered me for a long time,” he said. “I get income. I get it every month, but it’s never to where I could pay the rent and the security because it was so high.”

So Mr. M. moved in with his daughter from his first marriage, but after disagreeing with her boyfriend’s way of life, he felt pressured to move out on his own. “I left my clothes and took just my backpack and my bicycle,” he said. “I go down to Chapel Street, find me a little spot under the highway, and I make me a room. I’m sleeping in the wilderness, and then when it gets cold, I got to go to the shelter on Grand. From there I go to the Overflow.” [Columbus House Men’s Seasonal Overflow Shelter]

“I was drinking and didn’t really care where I was staying the night. That’s how I got to be homeless. I’d get drunk and I didn’t care.

“It got to where I wound up smoking weed, drinking whiskey, knowing that I was sick. I’m diagnosed with COPD Lung Disease. Every time I’d go to the emergency room, they’d ask me where I stayed and I’d give them the address of my daughter,” he said. Mr. M. had to take medicine regularly for his COPD, so while homeless he carried a portable machine in his backpack that would dispense his medicine.

He often had to visit a local Dunkin Donuts or McDonalds so he could plug his machine in and take the medication.

After about ten years of living this way, Mr. M. connected with Columbus House’s outreach staff, who put him in touch with Willona Ferguson, a case manager at Val Macri Permanent Supportive Housing.

Willona assisted Mr. M. in completing the Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization and Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). This survey is being adopted nationwide to assist service providers in identifying the type and urgency of needs for each individual experiencing homelessness. Because of Mr. M.’s long-term homelessness, and his disability, he was deemed “chronically homeless,” identifying him for permanent supportive housing through the VI-SPDAT.

Columbus House supports the national goal of ending chronic homelessness
On the frontlines of homelessness: Addressing the health needs of the chronically homeless

By Alison Cunningham, Executive Director

“By creating access to healthcare, we can help create a more stable housing situation.”

People who are homeless experience myriad challenges that contribute to or are a result of their lives on the streets or in the shelters. One of the more critical issues is their health needs, which mostly go untreated. Studies and focus groups show that homeless men and women do not go to primary care physicians for a variety of reasons. Instead, they often seek care from the Emergency Departments of local hospitals, driving the costs of care to extraordinary levels.

Columbus House has been working to reverse this trend for the past several years. As part of a national effort with three other programs across the country, Columbus House offers permanent supportive housing and intensive services for people who are in and out of shelters or living on the streets, and whose medical costs are higher than $40,000 annually. We are one of four organizations in the state who are part of the Social Innovation Fund or “SIF” program that has a goal of housing 160 people in permanent supportive housing using Rental Assistance Program vouchers contributed by the State of CT.

In New Haven, Columbus House is responsible for housing 55 clients, all of whom have access to case management and patient navigation services. Patient Navigation is a new form of service assisting clients to reduce inappropriate use of the emergency department, increase access to primary care physicians, and enhance overall health. The case manager works on housing stability, daily living skills and access to other mainstream services and community resources.

On Monday, May 4, I was invited by Sarah Gallagher, Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), to join other CT SIF partners to meet with leaders of federal agencies to discuss the challenges and successes of CT SIF. Staff and directors from CSH, Corporation for National and Community Service, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, and U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (including Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) were present. All were eager to learn more about the housing and intensive services needed to change the lives of those in this highly vulnerable population.

We shared our experiences from the patient navigator point of view, from a systems view, and from a funding view, raising the issues of the complex needs of this population and the need for sustaining SIF programs.

My time in our nation’s Capitol continued as I attended the annual conference of the National Healthcare for the Homeless Council. I learned more about various programs addressing the healthcare needs of homeless men and women, including those such as our own Respite program, where those who are homeless receive care and shelter after their release from a hospital stay. I also participated on a panel with Carl Schiessl, CT Hospital Association; Terri DiPietro, Middlesex Hospital; Michael Ferry, Yale-New Haven Hospital; and Elizabeth Grim, Partnership for Strong Communities.

Our focus was on our statewide efforts to standardize identification and track people experiencing homelessness within hospitals, improve discharge planning and strengthen partnerships between various providers who serve people who are homeless.

Targeting interventions such as SIF will help us reach our goal of ending chronic homelessness, by focusing the appropriate services to help people find and maintain housing and increase their quality of life. Columbus House has experienced success through SIF and Respite. By creating access to healthcare, we can help create a more stable housing situation, end homelessness, and save lives.

Wish List!

Here is a list of summer essentials our clients need most.

Sunscreen, Insect Repellent, Hand Sanitizer (travel size)
New Men’s Boxer Underwear (medium, large & x-large)
New Women’s Underwear (sizes 7 through 12)
New T-Shirts (all sizes, for men & women)
Full Size Toiletries (shaving cream, disposable razors, aftershave, shampoo, soap, toothpaste)
Travel Soap, Wash Cloths, & Toothbrush Holders
$25 Stop & Shop Gift Cards
Gift Cards to Big Lots, Walmart & Kmart

Please contact sdimario@columbushouse.org, or (203) 401-4400 x 138 if you are able to help. Thank you!

L-R: Lisa Bahadosingh, Patient Navigator, Supportive Housing Works; Betsy Branch, Program Manager, Corporation for Supportive Housing; Alison Cunningham, Columbus House Executive Director; Sarah Gallagher, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Corporation for Supportive Housing.
Overflow Shelter closes for the season

On May 1, we closed the Overflow Shelter after a long, brutally cold winter. Overall, 391 men were sheltered. The average number served each night this year was 84 compared to over 90 last year. Lower numbers this year result from the intensive push across the region in the past 6 months to get the chronically homeless housed.

The Overflow Shelter exists because of a court order from the early 90’s mandating a right to shelter for people during the coldest New England months. Columbus House has had a contract with the City of New Haven to manage the Overflow Shelter for the past 20 years and relies on dedicated staff and volunteers from over 50 religious, social, and business groups to help provide food, shelter, and a safe place to stay.

It is difficult to close the shelter at the end of the season, knowing that some people will once again return to the streets. Others will try to get a bed at one of the other shelters in town, and some will return to family or friends to share a room for a few months. Some will be able to rent an apartment on their own if their job prospects are realized or if they have other sources of income.

The Overflow Shelter is a critical service in the region, offering a safe haven so that people can come inside when the winter weather is life threatening. We have seen people in the Overflow Shelter who would never come inside due to their fear and anxiety. But when warned of snow storms or dangerously cold temperatures by our Street Outreach Team, these very same clients would find their way into the Overflow Shelter for a night or two.

We save lives, literally, by ensuring that our doors are open to all who need shelter.

Mr. M.’s Story...continued from page 1

by 2016. Part of the strategy to do so is to quickly identify those who are most vulnerable, and move them into permanent supportive housing as soon as possible. This “Housing First” model has proved successful, reducing chronic homelessness in the U.S., and saving tax payer dollars.

With the results of the VI-SPDAT, Willona was able to work swiftly to get Mr. M. one of the two handicap units at Val Macri. “It’s a thing I could never forget,” said Mr. M., “That Willona set me on my way.” Mr. M. is committed to creating a fresh start in his new apartment. He’s aware of the mistakes he has made in the past, and is very careful to avoid making similar mistakes in the future. “I see life in a way most men don’t see it,” he said, “It takes a man to own up to his mistakes.”

According to Willona, “[Mr. M.] always wants to help. He wants to cook meals for everyone in the complex. Sometimes I have to remind him that he needs to focus on his own needs.”

Willona explains that Mr. M. is “a work in progress,” but has been steadily improving since moving into Val Macri. He is attending recovery meetings and making fewer trips to the hospital. “He’s working on being a healthier him.”

“Yesterday is a memory, it’s behind me. I’m living today, thank God, and tomorrow’s yet to come. I want to keep it like that.”

While Mr. M. stays in touch with friends, he’s careful and hesitant to let certain people back into his life. “A lot of my friends provoked me to want to drink and smoke with them, so as long as I’m hanging with them, it’s going to happen. So I stay a little bit to myself now and keep to myself. Now all I got to do is continue concentrating and meditating,” he said.

Mr. M. is grateful for his new apartment and wants to make the most of his opportunity for improvement at Val Macri. “I have plenty of room and my own kitchen where I can do my cooking,” he said. “I needed my own place where I could start doing the right thing for me. I intend to make the best out of it.”

“I’ve got Willona to thank a lot for getting me in this place so I could put life together like it should be, like it was before. She’s been a great deal of help to get me in,” Mr. M. said.

For now, Mr. M. is taking life one day at a time. “Yesterday is a memory, it’s behind me. I’m living today, thank God, and tomorrow’s yet to come. I want to keep it like that.”

Note about the author: Mackenzie recently graduated from Southern Connecticut State University with a major in English and a minor in journalism. She is a freelance writer for national trade magazines and websites and her fiction and poetry have been published in literary magazines and anthologies. Mackenzie interned at Columbus House in the spring of 2013 and again in the spring of 2015, and plans to continue working with nonprofits.

Over $18,000 raised through The Great Give!

Thank you to all those who gave through The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven’s 36-hour online-giving event, “The Great Give,” on May 5 & 6, 2015. Thanks to you, we exceeded our goal of $18,000 to help end homelessness and save lives! Many thanks to The Community Foundation for their investment in our community.

THE great Give®
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SAVE THE DATE!

AUGUST 29, 2015
SIKORSKY’S 5TH ANNUAL “HOMERUN FOR HEROES” BLUEFISH BASEBALL GAME!
Supports Connecticut Veterans charities, including Columbus House’s Homefront initiative for homeless Veterans!

SEPTEMBER 11, 2015
THE 3RD ANNUAL KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS GOLF TOURNAMENT
Hon. W. Patrick Donlin Assembly #2459
Held at The Country Club of Woodbridge, 50 Woodfield Road, Woodbridge, CT.
Benefits The Homefront for Homeless Veterans (a program of Columbus House) and other charitable causes. Contact Ric Raffone at (203) 640-6482 for more info.

For more info about these events and more, stay tuned at www.columbushouse.org/events

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