



JOHN GRAHAM HOUSING & SERVICES

Food, Shelter, Hope

69 Main Street, Vergennes, VT 05491

802-877-2677 www.johngrahamshelter.org

Summer 2016

Patrick's Story

A few months ago, I came up short on rent. The landlord gave me all this paperwork relating to my eviction, but I couldn't read it due to my disability. I didn't realize what was going on and I didn't ask for help. They wouldn't take a deal, so I lost my Section 8 voucher. I ended up in court with thousands of dollars in lawyer fees, and my kids and I became homeless.

I kept my full-time job as a car mechanic and moved into the Shelter. Pete made lots of phone calls and got my Section 8 back. My deposit was also put to my court dues, so I can pay that off with a monthly plan. I'm looking for a place now, but the only places I've seen are just way too expensive.



Patrick with his sons and the day's catch from Otter Creek!

“My biggest fear was losing my kids... The Shelter called me right back.”

My biggest fear after I got evicted was losing my kids. I didn't want them to get taken by DCF, and I would've done anything to keep them. I looked all around and the Shelter called me right back. (Continued on page 2)

Through a Child's Eyes

by Michael Cunningham

Last summer, I graduated from Middlebury College and began my AmeriCorps*VISTA year of service at John Graham Housing and Services. I had always supported poverty alleviation and human services work, but this was my first major opportunity as a provider, advocating for members of my community.

Something that stood out to me was the experience of homeless kids. Children at John Graham have left me energized, saddened, and impressed on a number of occasions. They have shown themselves to be calm under stress, sometimes helpless to their parents' decisions, but also inspiring and courageous—able to make bold decisions about their own futures.

(PATRICK'S STORY, continued) I was actually here more than thirty years ago. The Shelter looked a lot different way back then. I was so surprised when the office was where the old kitchen used to be! I was seven when I came with my mom, brother, and step-dad. My real dad wasn't around anymore. He was a child molester—molested a bunch of kids at my school and me.

My step-dad was abusive in other ways. He'd beat on us. I saw him break my mom's arm. He'd line us up on the wall and throw vinyl records at our heads. So I was sent into foster care and group homes when I was twelve years old, and I dropped out of school when I was in eighth grade. I went right to work at a shop, stripping cars, putting them together, all that.

The first time I went to jail I was eighteen years old. I got out and went back several years later, then back and forth. This last one, I did a 3 year bid. That was 5 or 6 years ago. I've been out of trouble since then.

You can't erase the past, but you can change the future, and that's why I want my two boys to be raised different than I was. And they have been so far. Them two are my life. They're pretty well-behaved most of the time—do their chores and homework. Sometimes they act up, like all kids do, but at least they aren't like me when I was younger! They really helped me smarten up. I don't ever want to make a mistake where I'd miss any more time with them.



Michael (left) with board member Dan Adamek at the annual MiddAction Fair by Middlebury College Community Engagement

the house. While nobody explicitly told the ten-year-old daughter what was going on, with a single look, it was clear to me that the little girl knew. She was the most calm out of anyone in such a tense moment. With a sigh, she conveyed that she would make it through the madness and that she would forgive her parents for breaching the rules and missing the current opportunity.

“You can't erase the past, but you can change the future.”

Living at Green Street is not like the Shelter where everyone's around. The people are still nice, but it's very calm and quiet. We like to get out and about—bike around town, get a soda or a creemee, go to the park, fire up the grill by Otter Creek Falls.

John Graham has let me know they plan to offer us one of their apartments in the beginning of August when it becomes available. In the meantime, all in all, things are really good now. I'm working every day. My kids are happy. We have a roof over our heads. Once we find a place we'll be back on our feet for good!

(THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES, continued)

At one point this year, a family staying with us was asked to leave. One of the parents, struggling with opioid addiction, tested positive for a banned substance. His behavior threatened the sobriety and safety of others in

Another family became involved with people outside the Shelter who were unsafe for the children. The children did the most remarkable and inspiring thing; they asked for help from professionals, no doubt knowing that their well-intentioned parents could temporarily lose custody of them. Whether to live with violence or without the unconditional love of their parents—is not a choice any child should have to make. Their behavior is a testament to the human services providers that help them be able to express their emotions and deconstruct what is going on around them. What courage and empowerment it took for these kids to act in this way for their own best interest!

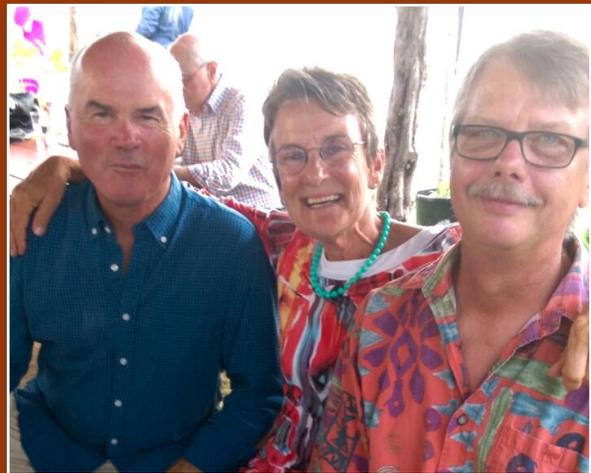
What also occurs to me about children at the Shelter is that they are statistically most likely to get caught in the cycle of poverty. Study after study has shown that chronic homelessness disrupts child development, leading to tremendously different educational, socioeconomic, and mental health outcomes than those of their peers. On the other side of the coin, children are the people best positioned to break the cycle, and that is why we invest in their growth. At John Graham, we act to get families into safe housing as soon as is possible, and we provide support for as long as it takes for them to be successful.

As I move from Vermont to Washington, D.C., I will carry with me the experiences and lessons of my time at John Graham, and I will seek to impact the lives of disenfranchised people in my new community.

Board Organizes for Homeless Families

Rux Martin is editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Vice Chair of the John Graham Board. This Spring she came up with an innovative idea to strengthen the work we do. Why not bring together the extended John Graham Family and serve a sumptuous meal prepared from renowned cookbook author.

Dorie Greenspan's best-selling book, *Around My French Table*? The Board pulled together to realize Rux' vision and create a magical experience. This July, American Flatbread in Middlebury, led by expert chef Samantha Langevin, was transformed into a French bistro. Dozens of amazing donations came in from local businesses, farms, and individuals. Friends and community leaders from around Addison County came to support the people we serve who seek a safe place to live. Everyone



John Graham Board Chair Abi Sessions enjoys a moment at A Midsummer Night in Paris with new Board Member Ashley Cadwell and Ben Wood from the Otter Creek Bakery



Board member Elise Blair hosts table for ten at a Midsummer's Night

went home with a signed copy of Dorie's book and a renewed sense of inclusion for our neighbors not yet at the table.

We asked those who came to the event to join our extended John Graham Family in ways large and small. And, every nickel of funds raised is going to help homeless families move into housing so that that every person has a place to call home.

It Takes a Village

By Peter Kellerman, Assistant Director

Vermonters know it takes a village, and sometimes a whole state, to solve tough problems like family homelessness. At John Graham, we place a high value on working in collaboration with local and statewide partners. Since 2014 I've chaired the Addison County Continuum of Care. The Continuum is made up of community partners working in concert to provide shelter, housing, and services to homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless. We work hard together to see that no one is left out. The County has a rich heritage of excellent services that work in a cooperative way to ensure that all are swiftly housed and served. I have learned a great deal and am grateful to our partners for what we have done together to quickly house and serve homeless neighbors at a time when our county and state faced new challenges without new resources.



Pete with Board Member and Mountain Street resident Sandra Curran



Joerg Klauck (right), owner of Vermont Wine Merchants who donated the wine for the five course meal, speaks with editor and John Graham Board Member Rux Martin before dinner.

This July I was nominated and elected to a co-chair the Balance of State Continuum of Care. It is similar in role to our local Continuum and includes partners from throughout Vermont except for Chittenden County. The Continuum of Care (CoC) Program is a creature of HUD (Housing and Urban Development) designed to promote community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness. The Continuum provides federal funding for efforts carried out by nonprofit providers, in consort with state and local governments. The bottom line is we work on local and statewide strategies to quickly rehouse people while minimizing their trauma, suffering and dislocation. The idea is to bring statewide partners together in a way that brings all resources of the community to bear on solutions that work.

A top goal of the Balance of State Continuum is to target precious federal dollars to results based

programs that help people get and keep permanent housing. John Graham and all our partners use a common data entry system that tracks outputs (how many served), outcomes (how well were they served and, most important of all, whether people are better off. For example we want to know who is homeless, what it will take in terms of services and housing to rapidly rehouse them, and how have their lives changed once they have safe and permanent housing.

This year Addison County and our partners around the state will be working together to put in place a system of Coordinated Entry (CE). Required by HUD, the idea is to give homeless individuals and families a single point of entry within the community where they can work with local partners to evaluate their needs and gain access to resources that will help them to become safely housed. The hope is that CE will help communities prioritize shelter, housing and services to people who need them most in a helpful and efficient way. CE will also help identify service needs and gaps and thus help partners become more responsive in developing and optimizing resources.

Stay tuned! Certainly there will be challenges ahead. But I do believe that Addison County and Vermont are in an excellent position to make best use of federal funds and the guidance that comes with them in providing shelter, housing and services to homeless families. We will do our best for those we serve.

Lessons for a Lifetime

by Jonah Heiser

My summer as a Shepherd Intern at John Graham Housing and Services is drawing to an end. Looking back on my work with homeless families and individuals, I realize that the uncomfortable situations and challenging individuals have truly taught me the most in my time here.

Everyone loves a family with cute children who love to play, and hard-working parents who care for them. Working with people who are thankful, friendly, and respectful makes this job easy and fun. I find myself naturally feeling compassion for them and wanting to go the extra mile to help them in whatever way I can.

But why do I have a different response when people are rude toward other residents or shelter staff? What is the proper professional response when people disrespect rules or make life choices that damage themselves, their families, and people that care about them? Compassion does not always come easily in these situations, nor does the desire to stay later, work harder, or spend as much time with them.

However, there is tremendous opportunity in facing these very challenges. These situations are a chance to show unconditional love and compassion to people who might need it the most. I have come to recognize that I can never understand what another person has been through. While it can



Jonah (left) with Munroe Floyd Jr. out by the vegetable patch on a beautiful summer day.

“Often, I could do nothing more than to sit and listen to difficult stories... provide a smile, kind words, or a gentle presence.”

be easy to become tired or lose motivation dealing with people who make harmful life choices, it is never possible to really know what goes on underneath the exterior front that people put up. Difficult past histories can make it hard for people to be trusting, and the shelter staff are often the first people in a long time to show genuine care for some people. Everyone has their own struggles and difficulties that they have to overcome in life, and I believe that everyone tries their best to do so.

Often, I could do nothing more than sit and listen to difficult stories. For those that did not want to talk, all I could do was provide a loving smile, kind words, or a gentle presence. Being present and showing that a person matters to us is a simple act of compassion that can yield far-reaching results. In displaying such care, I recognize that I am no different from the individuals we serve, as everyone has scars in their pasts that affect their present circumstances and outlook on life. For this reason, it is so important to put in that extra effort to look past the immediate circumstances and difficult attitudes to see and know the amazing person that lies underneath the weight of their trying pasts. Some people may be harder to serve, but that in no way means we should give less in our service to them. Although it may be challenging in the moment, I believe that the love and compassion will often result in the most powerful changes, and that is what truly matters in the end.

This lesson not only applies to my work at the Shelter but can be applied throughout my life. These challenges are at the heart of every aspect of life, and I feel confident that I can bring these lessons forward, whether I continue my studies of religion in graduate school or go on to further social work. I thank everyone, both residents and staff, for leading me and teaching me this summer. My hope is that I have become a more compassionate, driven person because of those influences and experiences.



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