

John Graham Housing & Services

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Peter Kellerman, co-director, of John Graham Housing & Services located in Vergennes. I am also a past co-chair of the VT Coalition to End Homelessness.

On behalf of my co-director, Kate Schirmer-Smith, our board of directors and especially, those we serve, I would like to thank the committee for your hard work and your past support for funding affordable housing and supporting homeless families and individuals.

- As a service provider, I am compelled to advocate that you
 1. increase the State's investments in funding for supportive services for homeless Vermonters through the Housing Opportunity Grant Program and Family Supportive Housing, both administered by the Office of Economic Opportunity
 2. As well as, increase the State's investments in permanent supportive housing through VHCB
- John Graham Housing & Services is a year-round homeless shelter. We manage five buildings in Addison County providing a combination of shelter space and twelve rental units for low income families and individuals. We provide an increasing myriad of services to address the complex needs of those displaced due to addiction, domestic violence, mental illness and the layers of trauma imbedded in poverty.
- In our work, we are distressed by the increasing level of need within the homeless population. Our service coordinators note an increasing number of children in our shelter – including 8 newborns over the past two-years – an increase in opioid addiction further complicated by mental illness, the lack of affordable housing as well as the absence of a livable wage and sustainable employment. Our dedicated staff face steep challenges helping residents stabilize, find sustainable employment, affordable housing and address the need for ongoing outreach to assure good outcomes. None of our residents can find housing without a rental subsidy.
- Consequently, I share with you the following observations and needs:
 1. Longer shelter stays because there is not enough affordable housing to move people out of shelter
 2. Need for additional ongoing supportive services to provide the supports that families and individuals with multiple challenges need to successfully access and maintain housing
 3. Need for additional investments through VHCB, which have allowed John Graham to build transitional housing that allows residents get support and build a successful track record so they can move on to more permanent housing.
 4. We have specialized federal rental assistance vouchers that are at risk because of insufficient required service match, many have been lost already
 5. Homeless shelters get a broad array of essential funding through OEO's HOP program, including funding for the case management and the supportive services needed to get families and individuals out of the downward spiral of homelessness and draw down the federal vouchers
 6. OEO's Family Supportive Housing Program is a proven, successful model for pairing housing and services for homeless families that can also be used to draw down federal vouchers and is only available in 7 counties, not including Addison. It would take \$900K to expand statewide, most of it paid by Medicaid.
 - 7.
- I would like to thank you again for your ongoing support and acknowledge the difficult choices you must make. On behalf of those we serve, I respectfully ask you to support these increased investments in supports for homeless families and individuals.



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Food, Shelter, Hope
69 Main Street, Vergennes, VT 05491
802-877-2677

Spring 2019

www.johngrahamshelter.org

Victoria's Story: Welcome to Damon!

I welcomed my son Damon in February. He was born on Valentine's Day, which was the best Valentine's Day present I ever got. He was 8 pounds, 6.9 ounces. He was 19 1/4" long with a 14" head, born at 7:52 am.

I was a little worried when he was first born because he was not crying. He didn't actually cry until they put a diaper on him.

So for now there's like no sleep at all. He's up most of the night, and I'm learning how to find time to eat. I try to do what I can for myself when I can. I've been taking care of him since day one.



My hope is that he does not follow in my footsteps. I don't want him following my past. It's not the way I would want anyone to live their life. I want him to support himself first

before he can support anyone else. You can't help others if you can't help yourself. I want him to be independent and secure.

"He was born on Valentine's Day, which was the best Valentine's Day present I ever got."

I'm trying to get to know him. He's quite the entertainer. He makes the funniest faces. Physically he's strong, trying to hold up his head. He's like he's already trying to crawl and roll over. He likes to eat and cuddle. It's been supportive for us here at John Graham.

As a first time single mother the support is helpful. Eventually we want to get our own place. I'm feeling confident that I can provide for him the world I want for him.

Road to Recovery: By Marsha Barber

I thought the scariest moment in my life was waking up barefoot and hungover and disoriented in the back of a van in the middle of the Arizona desert. I didn't recognize the driver, but he introduced himself as Mr. Thrillkill. I was rescued by some construction people working on an obscure project, by either chance or divine intervention. That was where my alcoholism had taken me.

But that turned out not to be the scariest moment of my life. That dubious honor goes to the minute I realized I was homeless at age 60.

Given my background, it realistically wouldn't be surprising that I would become homeless. But given the unrelenting drive I had to escape that background (which I successfully pulled off for decades), becoming homeless IS a surprise. And a learning experience. And a humbling experience, And a crappy experience. And sometimes, strangely enough, a beautiful experience.



I was born a product of rape, growing up on welfare and charity and big blocks of government cheese. The house I grew up in with my mother, grandparents and an uncle was vermin-infested, with no running hot water, no heat other than a tiny wood stove, and holes in the floor. My uncle started sexually abusing me when I was 2 years old.

My mother was in and out of mental institutions for my whole life and addicted to a savage cornucopia of prescription medications that left her in a perpetual zombie-like state.

“I was born a product of rape, growing up on welfare and charity and big blocks of government cheese.”

She had attempted suicide when she discovered that she was pregnant with me. It was the late '50s in a small southern town and an illegitimate pregnancy was pretty much the society equivalent of murder.

She lied to me when I was a child and said that the delicate necklace of a scar that snaked across her neck was surgical, the result of removing a benign tumor. But when I accidentally found out the truth when I was an adolescent, that scar reminded me every day that I was not wanted, not supposed to be here, and I felt that way beyond her death from cancer some 20 years ago. Not supposed to be here. I spent my teenage years in alcohol and drug-induced haze. That was my sweet escape then. (Continued on Page 4)

Letter to the Editor

Dear John Graham Staff,

I will never forget the first phone call to John Graham Shelter. It was a call of desperation for myself and my children and it ended in HOPE! I talked with Kate and just that one phone call changed all of our lives for the better. Kate, you gave me hope, something I have not had in so long (at that point in my life).

From that call, people and plans slid into place and my children and I were finally safe and finally free. Peter and Kate were there to welcome Jimmy and I, and the next day Courtney and Chrissy as well. There will never be enough words to really show you all at John Graham how your help has positively changed four lives so drastically. My babies can wake up with hope for a better day. They get to go to sleep knowing and believing they are good kids and deserve love and respect. They no longer live in fear and can continue to grow and change and become better little people.

And I am also able to now become the mother I have always wanted to be. Thank you all from the bottom of our hearts for giving us this chance. I had given up hope, but you all have never given up on me.

Bless you all with this New Year.

Maria



We have a lot of good help here in the office!



Look who got an apartment!

(Road to Recovery, Continued) Later, my raging addiction cost me everything that was ever important to me. It robbed me of my dignity and self respect, perpetuated a string of toxic and eventually violent relationships with men, and both directly and indirectly led me to where I am today: homeless and feeling starkly alone.

Now to the unlikely positive things I accomplished, given my background (audible sigh of relief from readers....)

My first move out of high school was driving my beat-up Chevy Nova, with \$500 in my pocket, from the small Appalachian hamlet where my life was so small and tortured, to L.A. I didn't know a soul there, but almost immediately I had a small apartment and landed enough temp work to survive. But this was not the life that would prove my worth to anyone and I realize now that was (at first subconsciously) the most crucial thing to me. So I applied to college, got a scholarship to UNC-Chapel Hill, and graduated with a B.A. in English. After a brief but meaningful move to San Francisco to take care of my best childhood friend who was dying from AIDS, I chose to go to grad school and graduated with an M.A. in English with a Journalism minor. Nobody in my family had ever gone past 9th grade.

"I've been to rehab more times than I can count, but it's the John Graham Shelter I credit with saving my life. It doesn't feel like a shelter, it feels like a home."

I became a journalist, beginning as a freelance writer/reporter, and then quickly moving up the ladder from staff writer to arts editor to managing editor at a variety of newspapers from Asheville (100 miles from the town where I grew up) to New Orleans to Boston to San Francisco and several stops in between. I interviewed lots of famous people, including some of my music idols, got backstage passes to all the big concerts, won some awards for my writing. I had arrived and was living the life.

But all the while, I had a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. I felt like a fraud, a poser. I still felt like the hillbilly, unwanted bastard child. So I began to get fired from jobs. I was drinking in the morning before important interviews. I was out of hand and out of control, all the time.

Always the wanderer, I eventually landed in Burlington, where I wrote for Seven Days until I couldn't. I went on disability. I moved from town to town, sometimes living in nice apartments, other times living in cheap motels.

Domestic violence was what directly led me to homelessness, leaving an abusive man with just the clothes on my back from a beautiful home I had managed to rent. But my addiction was the root cause. I would never have become involved with a violent man if I hadn't been drunk when we met. I've been to rehab more times than I can count, but it's the John Graham Shelter I credit with saving my life. It doesn't feel like a shelter, it feels like a home. The people here (including the staff) feel like family. Kate, Pete and my caseworker Ellen have supported me through my struggles with sobriety and my at-times deep depression. Even though I have bad days, in my heart I feel I can truly start over.

John Graham Welcomes Ellen Repstead, Clinical Case Manager



I feel passionate about John Graham’s mission. The first thing I noticed when I first arrived was the incredible staff and the supportive working environment.

Being homeless is traumatic enough to begin with, so it’s not surprising that nearly everyone we work with has a medical or a mental health challenge. When a person is in crisis symptoms can go unnoticed or untreated. But because we have a wrap around program we help

people identify these issues and connect them to mainstream resources in the community. People who struggle with physical and mental health issues do face numerous obstacles. For example it’s not practical for someone with social phobias to be asked to take the bus to see a doctor or a therapist. So you arrange transportation. Wait lists and access to care are issues. People just don’t have enough access to providers to get the kind of support they need. We have someone who is ready, willing, and able to begin therapy, but too often there is no one to connect with. So it’s great that we have the capacity to offer some of that support in-house.

This summer I complete my Masters in Social Work with a strong clinical focus and an emphasis on social justice. My studies have provided important skills in motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, and play therapy. We have so many children here and I’ve been able to use these skills immediately. For example it’s difficult raising small children in a shelter. I work with a large family and when we get together it gives each of the parents time to play with their children in a positive way. I look for ways to model behaviors, to speak with the child in a way that I’ve suggested is effective, for example, to calm her when she is upset.

“Advocacy with schools is key. The school sees one child; the counselor sees another. When a mother is alone it’s hard to advocate, but when someone is backing you up it can be effective. Mom and I are like wait: this is the child we see. Together we got a lot put in place for him.”

There are 101 reasons that people become homeless, and I’ve noticed the younger folks often lack skills to be independent. I spent 20 years in leadership in public schools and have a Masters in Education. Being able to teach another person skills comes in really handy. I enjoy helping a new mother give her son

his first bath. I'm teaching a woman to build credit. I just started working with another mom in outreach who had a difficult past. We spend most of our time talking about how to be an adult. How do I open a bank account or buy a car? How do I do my taxes? How do I apply for a job? Help me negotiate the system! And from working with seniors, I've learned so much about insurances, benefits, and ways to provide access with community partners. That comes in handy and makes a huge difference.



I love being able to work with whole families. We are in a unique position because we see people in their homes. It's an amazing opportunity to work with both parents and children at whatever capacity they are available for. Advocacy with schools is key. I recently went with a mom to a team meeting. The school sees one child; the counselor sees another. Mom and

I are like wait: this is the child we see. When a mother is alone it's hard to advocate, but when someone is backing you up it can be effective. I was able to say, "I'm a professional. I see him in his home and this is what we are seeing." Together we got a lot put in place for him that way.

I'd have to say that working at John Graham is like nothing else I'd ever experienced. I love the variety of people we work with, and how we are able to come from the place of "what does the person need to move forward."



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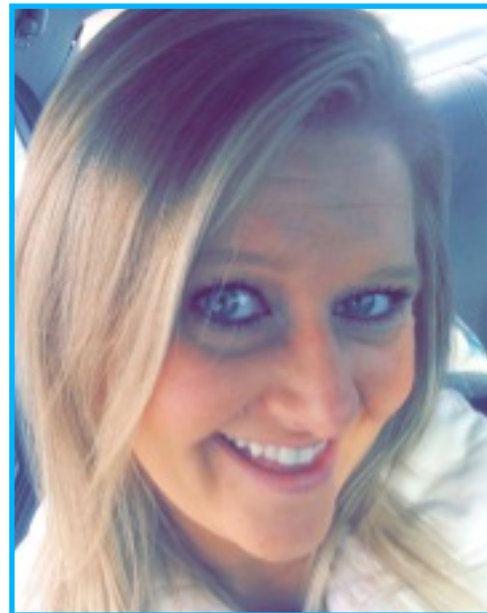
Celebrating Recovery: Virginia's Story

On Nov. 14, the Vermont Eagle published an article announcing my citation for operating a motor vehicle while under suspension. When I was made aware of this front-page article, I felt like I was punched in the stomach. I felt embarrassed and humiliated. I felt discouraged and helpless.

I am certainly not perfect. Clearly, I make mistakes. I am human, but I have worked way too hard and accomplished far too much to allow my flaws to publicly drown out my accomplishments and the value of my journey. So, when asked how they could rectify the situation, I asked for a front-page article again, but this time, I would be the author.

For those of you who do not know who I am today, please let me take this opportunity to re-introduce myself. My name is Virginia and I live in Waltham, Vermont. I have three amazing, talented, brilliant and caring children that I love more than anything in this world.

The gratitude I feel being able to be their mom again is overwhelming. I have a great relationship with my family and never take a minute of life for granted. My parents have been the legal guardians of my three children since 2013 when I was not healthy



enough to care for them. I am so incredibly grateful for them both and what they had done for my children when I was not able to. I could never possibly repay them or show them enough gratitude. My children have been very safe, loved and well taken care of while under my parents' guardianship. They are growing into intelligent, vibrant and capable young people and I do owe so much of that to my parents. They have never given up on me, even in times when everyone would have understood if they had.

(Continued on page 3)

Sean's Story: A New Hope

I grew up in Ferguson Missouri. My family didn't have much but my grandmother operated a church during the first 10 years of my life, and I learned from her that it's important to be helpful. My mother was also a great example and the idea of helping people is something that has stayed with me. She was always donating clothes and toys so they could have a chance to be used and cherished. Following her example, I raised money for Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, volunteered at a homeless shelter, and became an ESL tutor for immigrants. I always thought of these things as extracurricular activities and never thought of being helpful as a potential career. That sentiment changed last September when I was an overnight volunteer at a homeless shelter nearby my college.

“Talking and sharing meals with the families and individuals is something that I'll always cherish.”

One of the residents was having a rough week and I stayed up until about 3 am talking to him. When he ended the conversation in order to get some sleep before he had to get his daughters ready for school in four hours, he said that it felt good for someone to just listen to him, and he thanked me. The gravity of that moment didn't hit me immediately, but a week later that moment had changed my thoughts of my upcoming career plan. I was no longer leaning towards a career in a museum or an art gallery. That conversation opened my eyes to the pressure that homelessness can



have on a person. My advisor was very supportive, and she told me that AmeriCorps would be something worth looking into.

I did just that, and a little less than five months later I began serving at the John Graham Shelter. It has been a wonderful experience and although I'm not even halfway done with my service, I believe that I made the right decision to come to Vermont from Missouri. The staff has created a nurturing and trusting environment that allows me to feel confident, while at the same time not scared to ask for help. I'm extremely proud of the events I've helped plan at the shelter, and I enjoy getting to constantly try new things. Working with the residents has had some speed bumps, but it has been so rich and rewarding. Talking and sharing meals with the families and individuals is something that I'll always cherish. Who knows what the future holds but coming to the John Graham Shelter and the experiences that I've had here is something that I'll always carry with me.

Virginia's Story, Continued

I am part of a community that supports one another, a community that is understanding and believes in the idea that it takes a village. I have made so many great friends and built countless everlasting relationships since I moved to Vergennes in June 2017. I have regained my confidence and am proud of who I am. I have my dignity back. My sobriety has blessed me with a life that at one point I didn't believe was possible.

In the past I struggled with drug addiction, which led to many serious legal issues ranging from retail thefts to prostitution charges to drug sales. I continued to attempt recovery while battling my struggle with relapse. There was a point in 2013 during my active heroin addiction that I believed I would never survive. I was living like a wild animal, feeding my addiction by whatever means necessary. I was alone, running from the law, having warrants in multiple states, bad decisions upon more bad decisions, selling my body, risking my life.... just to feed my addiction.

The thought of life ever being normal again was a fantasy. If it wasn't for my mother calling the state police daily, begging them to find me, I am not sure if I would be alive today. I was arrested in Burlington and so began a roller-coaster of short bits of sobriety and multiple trips to rehab. Finally, in 2015 I found a program that I will be forever grateful for. After completing the Phoenix House Tapestry Program in November 2015, I returned to the community with 11 months of sobriety and began rebuilding my life.

I felt like I was on top of the world, that there was no looking back. I had beat my addiction, and I could close that chapter. That is where I made a crucial mistake. I

told myself I got this and lost focus on the importance of my recovery supports. In August 2016, I experienced some unexpected, life-changing events and found myself spiraling out of control at the mercy of a relapse. I again found myself at rock bottom, living in a homeless prevention center apartment in downtown Rutland, failing miserably at maintaining my sobriety. How was I going to stay sober and get my life back when I was immersed in the very things that were killing me?

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I have forever changed the lives of my children by my selfish choices. I own all of it, every little last thing. Yes, I own it. Yes, I own my past, but more importantly, I own who I am today. Today, I am proud of the woman I am when I look in the mirror.

In June 2017, I successfully completed treatment at the Serenity House in Wallingford, Vermont, promising myself this would be the last time I would go to rehab. Since my discharge on June 22, 2017, I have worked incredibly hard toward the goal of maintaining my sobriety, rebuilding my life and my relationships with my children, family and community. While the article in the Eagle publicized my flaws, this week I would like the opportunity to publicize my accomplishments and my strengths. My life has been everything but easy over the last

18 months. Upon my discharge from the Serenity House in June 2017, I swallowed my pride and came to Vergennes to reside at the John Graham Shelter. At that point, I really had nothing to lose. Within four days, I was employed full time at 3 Squares Café as a barista. I developed everlasting relationships with both co-workers and customers. I received a promotion at the café and soon moved into my own space at the Emerson House in Vergennes. The staff at John Graham were and still are monumental in my recovery. The patience, empathy and compassion I was shown during my four months at the shelter is something I will forever be grateful for.

I attended AA meetings regularly and met so many wonderful, supportive people. The camaraderie I felt from the strong women I began to meet was so inspirational. The love and support I felt from the people around me continued to motivate me through the hardest times of my life. I am so grateful that I am still here today. I value people and relationships, not stuff and things. My journey has humbled me to the core and created a spark for genuinely being a good human.

My story represents commitment, patience, hard work and dedication. I have regained my confidence, self-respect and dignity as a mother and as a woman. It has been a long, painful journey, but by trusting the process and being my best me every day, I have accomplished so much. I am an active mother in my children's lives daily and am currently in the process of regaining legal guardianship. I am an active, educated member of a community that I love. I have a stable, loving, structured home that I plan to grow old in. I make mistakes; I am only human, but today I have so much more to celebrate than my flaws.



A Joyous Holiday!

Families and individuals at John Graham's five houses celebrated a safe and happy holidays together. Board Member and chef Rux Martin served up prime rib and local churches donated turkeys and all the fixins for three seatings on Christmas Day. The children especially enjoyed the trees at each house and the many gifts beneath them.

Deep gratitude to the hundreds of individuals, churches, community organizations and businesses who made this a special day for so many.

There is so much more to me than a court citation. I see the world in color again. I am proud of who I am. I am sober. I am me. I would like to challenge you to join me in celebrating recovery and building each other up, rather than finding flaws and passing judgment.



5th Annual Sleep Out Helps Families Move Home

MIDDLEBURY — More than 50 people braved the snow elements near Middlebury’s Otter Creek falls on the night of Dec. 1 for the John Graham Housing and Services fifth annual vigil and sleep out to end homelessness, an overnight camping event to support housing for homeless families.

A cold, heavy snow fell throughout the night, sometimes nearly collapsing the tents, but more people than ever made it through until morning. They were greeted with snow and freezing rain, a warm fire and enjoyed coffee and doughnuts knowing they had raised more than \$54,000.

John Graham Housing and Services Co-directors Kate Schirmer-Smith and Pete Kellerman thanked all who slept out, donated, sponsored and attended the vigil. Supporters pitched more than 20 tents — each with one to six sleepers —

on Marble Works commercial district property above the falls. Participants converged on the scene after having participated in a candlelight vigil on the town park and having dined on a home-cooked supper at St. Stephen’s Church.

More local businesses than ever sponsored the sleep out and more young folks got involved — including large contingents from the Walden Project, Vergennes Union High School Honor Students, and the Champlain Valley Unitarian Universalist Society’s Youth Group. It was great to see young and old alike becoming involved so that no one is left outside. All funds go to provide housing to homeless families and individuals.

It’s not too late to help. People who would like to donate can do so at johngrahamshelter.org/sleepout.

Fifth Annual Sleep Out to End Homelessness



Thanks to all who slept out and donated so that homeless families can move home in 2019!

