

Safety Net

The newsletter of Coalition for the Homeless

Spring 2005

Homeless and Working

As of February this year, Donna held two jobs, and worked roughly 60 hours per week. In addition to holding a full-time position as a security officer and earning \$7.57 per hour, she also worked the night shift at a convenience store two or three times per week. But making ends meet is tough considering she lives in New York City, where the cost of living is among the highest in the nation. "I'm just saving so I can leave the shelter," she says.



Sometimes a Job is Not Enough

A Letter from Mary

Usually when I tell someone I work at Coalition for the Homeless, the conversation veers towards mental health issues, or their perception that more homeless people are sleeping in our parks and other public spaces.

People are often genuinely shocked when I tell them that over 15,000 of the people sleeping tonight in public shelters are children, or that twenty percent of the adults are working but unable to afford a place of their own.

Everyday at the Coalition's headquarters, we meet working men and women, some parents, many single adults, who are trying desperately to both keep their jobs and stabilize their lives.

Harry and Sheila were given a month's notice that their landlord in Staten Island wanted their apartment for a relative. They both worked – Harry, full-time, making deliveries for a florist and Sheila, part-time as a waitress. Their son, Jared, was an honor student in the sixth grade and daughter, Jessica,



had just started kindergarten.

They tried to find an apartment on such short notice, but their meager savings were not nearly enough for either rent deposits or broker fees. Once they wound up at the Emergency Assistance Unit (the office where families apply for shelter) in the Bronx, they struggled to keep Jared in his school back in Staten Island and their jobs going. Sheila lost her's first, and Harry about ten days later. Remarkably, through their three month ordeal at the Bronx EAU, Jared kept going to his gifted children's program on Staten Island – such was the remarkable resolve of his parents.

Robert is another working person, who sought our help a few months ago. Robert lost the room he was subletting when his friend, who held the lease on the apartment, moved to Florida. Unable to secure another place, he wound up at the men's shelter on Ward's Island. Robert worked as an assistant manager at Radio Shack and the morning I met him, he had just been fired. He had been late

three times in the past two weeks, because the bus from Ward's Island had been late. He tried to switch to the late shift, but couldn't get a late pass from the shelter administration.

I'll never forget what Robert told me that morning – that he was so embarrassed to be homeless that he simply could not confide in his supervisor as to the real reason he was suddenly unreliable to open the store.

Robert's story has a happy ending – he was admitted to our Rental Assistance Program, rented a modest studio in Brooklyn, and has found another job.

People often ask Coalition staffers how we manage to do great work against great odds. It's our homeless neighbors who show us the true meaning of courage. And supporters like you, who make it all possible.

Mary Brosnahan Sullivan
Executive Director

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is published by

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CLARE MANIAS

Spotlight on the Board: Rick Roberto

By Adam Friedman

Ten years ago, when the Coalition needed a line of credit, EAB not only approved our loan application, but the President of their Community Development Corporation was so impressed with the Coalition's services that he joined our Board of Directors. Although his main experience is in the financial services industry, Rick Roberto is no stranger to the nonprofit world. He has served on the boards of numerous housing organizations including the Community Development Corporation of Long Island, the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation, and Neighborhood Housing Services of New York City – where he was Board President for 10 years.

As the Coalition's Board Treasurer, Rick's decades of experience in the banking industry are invaluable in overseeing the Coalition's finances. This is especially critical now as we have made the transition from tenant to landlord by purchasing and renovating our new headquarters at 129 Fulton Street in Lower Manhattan. Rick provided significant help with this project from start to finish. Although his professional experience has been critical, his commitment to our mission earns him the most plaudits at the Coalition. When George Delaney, our Deputy Executive Director for Programs heard we were writing about Rick, he charged over to gush, "His help with our finances is invaluable, but I am most impressed with the passion he reveals when it comes to fighting for justice and human dignity issues... While his guidance has been vital to our growth, he constantly challenges us not to forget our background as a grassroots organization."

Looking at his impressive resume – Rick is currently a Senior Vice President at BPD Bank, an affiliate of

Banco Popular Dominicano – one might expect an intimidating figure. However, his lighthearted sense of humor quickly puts everyone at ease. He immediately becomes serious, though, when discussing the issue of

Coalition to continue to grow to meet the diverse needs of more homeless men, women, and children.

"Government simply cannot do it alone," he asserts. "They need to work with a strong nonprofit commu-



Rick Roberto and colleagues at the eleventh annual Women Mean Business Luncheon

homelessness. Fully aware that 20 percent of homeless shelter residents are employed, Rick recounts, "Before joining the Coalition's board, I did not realize how complex the issue of homelessness is. The average person thinks that homeless people are lazy; nothing could be further from the

nity if we hope to turn the tide."

Unfortunately, changes in federal and City policy have halted the successful strategy of providing rental assistance to homeless families by enrolling them in the Section 8 Housing Voucher Program. This will transfer more of the responsibility for

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-George Delaney, Deputy Executive Director for Programs

truth. There are a lot of working people out there. I have known several people who lost their jobs and narrowly escaped homelessness."

As a long time board member, Rick has witnessed the homeless shelter population increase to record levels – over 36,000 people now stay in City shelters every night, more than at any time since the Great Depression. His vision is for the

helping our city's poorest families and individuals to an already overstretched social service sector. The Coalition is committed to continuing to work hard to meet the growing needs of our homeless neighbors. With dedicated board members like Rick Roberto, and the help of generous donors, we have the guidance and support needed to help us fulfill our mission.

Homeless and Working: Sometimes a Job is Not Enough

By Joshua Klinski

“I choose to work,” exclaims Donna, a 41-year-old woman who has been living in the New York City shelter system for the past fourteen months. After years of staying in an abusive relationship, she finally found the strength to flee, reluctantly choosing homelessness over abuse. Fortunately, Donna was not without career skills. Her educational background includes two Associates Degrees – one in Law Enforcement and the other in Child Development.

Navigating the shelter system was not easy at first. After receiving various placements, Donna found herself at a facility in Brooklyn that provided on-site job training and certification in various fields. There she renewed her interest in law enforcement, and became certified in security, fire safety, crisis intervention, anti-terrorism, first-aid, and CPR. She has since been transferred to a different shelter in Brooklyn.

As of February this year, Donna held two jobs, and worked roughly 60 hours per week. In addition to holding a full-time position as a security officer and earning \$7.57 per hour, she also worked the night shift at a convenience store two or three times per week. But making ends meet is tough considering she lives in New York City, where the cost of living is among the highest in the nation. “I’m just saving so I can leave the shelter,” she says.

Working the Late Shift Carries a Heavy Price

Donna is proud that she defied the odds and managed to secure employment while fighting her way through homelessness. However, she never expected that once she finally found work, she would be penalized so harshly by the shelter system. “I lost my shelter bed many times because I



Donna had to choose between a bed and a paycheck.

“They’re supposed to lift you up to independent living status, but that’s not always the case. All I want is to still have my job and be respected.”

was at work,” she says with frustration. Her security guard position required that she work from 4 p.m. until midnight, yet shelter policy requires all residents to obey a 10 p.m. curfew. Since Donna worked past 10 p.m., and often continued working at the convenience store after her security shift, she needed a special pass for employed residents who work late hours.

Unfortunately, Donna often found obtaining a late pass to be no small chore. While some case work-

ers at the shelter were happy to help, others challenged her on a regular basis. One worker “wanted to see proof that I had a job,” she explains. “And then when I showed them my work ID, they accused me of making it myself on a computer. So I showed them a copy of my work schedule, but that still wasn’t good enough.” When the shelter worker threatened to call Donna’s employer for verification, Donna resisted. She had not disclosed that she was homeless, and feared that her job would be jeopard-

ized if her employer learned the truth about her homelessness.

"It would compromise my whole respectability and believability as a security guard," said Donna. "The case worker told me 'If you don't let me call them, you won't get a pass.'"

Donna had similar difficulty getting permission to leave for her job at the convenience store. "They told me they needed a letter from the store, but since the store didn't have letterhead, we just used regular paper. The store owner also only spoke Spanish, so what he wrote was kind of messy. So I copied the letter over neatly and he signed it. But then my case worker wouldn't accept it."

Tough Choices

Ultimately Donna chose to go to work, with or without a pass. Her jobs were her tickets to self-sufficiency, and not showing up would surely cause her to be fired. However, upon returning to the shelter after her late shifts, she was continually told she had "lost her bed" for the night. "When you lose your bed," she says, "you can't lay down. The only place to sit is in the dining area, on a hard chair." Lack of proper rest took its toll on Donna. "I would be up late, having worked for twelve hours, and was extremely tired. And I had no place to rest. I kept saying, 'How many times are they going to do this to me?'"

In March, Donna decided to take a 60 day leave of absence from her security officer job. She is optimistic that during this time she will be able to transfer to a new shelter, one she says that will not compromise her ability to work. "It's very easy to get lost in the abyss of the shelter system," she says. "They're supposed to lift you up to independent living status, but that's not always the case. All I want is to still have my job and be respected."

Donna is Not Alone

Approximately 20 percent of adults living in New York shelters are employed. Donna's story illustrates just some of the challenges that thousands of working homeless people face. Many individuals living in shelters or on the streets who are actively seeking work find themselves at a disadvantage due to a lack of proper identification, professional attire, and a phone number or mailing address. Those who do have jobs run the risk of being randomly transferred to a shelter far from their workplace, making their daily commute more difficult and longer.

The staff at the Coalition for the Homeless meets several working homeless people each week in our waiting room. "They come to us for help with a number of different issues," says Tony Taylor, Director of the Coalition's Crisis Intervention Program. "People who begin a new job must usually wait at least two weeks to see their first paycheck, and for someone without savings, those two weeks can be very difficult. We provide subway fare, help people purchase work clothing – do what we can to help them start off on the right foot." The Coalition also offers free voicemail accounts and mailboxes for homeless individuals, which allow them to connect with potential employers and landlords.

Tony's stories about the struggles that our employed clients face while living in the shelter system echo many of Donna's difficulties. "One shelter told me that they wouldn't issue a late pass to a woman because they 'didn't think she was ready to work,' even though she had been working for three years prior," he says. "It didn't make sense." He points out the injustice of making someone choose between keeping their job and having a place to sleep.

Did you know...

- According to surveys, about **20 percent** of homeless people in New York are **employed**.
- Of these, **75 percent** work more than **20 hours per week**, and **11 percent** work more than **40 hours per week**.
- **One-third** of working homeless people are heads of **households with children**.
- **Nine out of ten** of these heads of households earn **less than \$10 per hour**.
- Single homeless adults with jobs who earn more than **\$442.10 per month** (\$5,280 per year, or about half-time at minimum wage) are **NOT eligible** for public assistance or new City rental vouchers.
- The number of homeless people has **increased 75 percent** over the past five years according to City shelter statistics.

"Either you lose your job or you lose your bed. In theory the shelters want you to work, but in reality, there are so many roadblocks in front of you."

Coalition for the Homeless regularly advocates on behalf of homeless people who work to help them secure shelter placements in which their work schedules can be accommodated.

Another First Step Miracle

By Adam Friedman

Judith-Anne Sadler-Bryan's story is a classic demonstration of how almost anyone's life can unravel into homelessness. She had been a successful corporate headhunter in Anguilla with a substantial nest egg. With the help of their savings, she and her husband had the uncommon freedom to travel for several years. Unfortunately, the marriage broke up

and she was then confronted with devastating health news: Diagnosis, leukemia.

Judith-Anne came to New York to seek treatment at Sloane Kettering, the world renowned cancer center. Although the treatment was eventually successful, Judith-Anne had no health insurance and the cost of treatment eventually depleted her savings. With no money or employment, she consid-

ered staying in a homeless shelter but the conditions scared her away. "I'd rather live on the street," she remembers with disgust. Luckily, she was able to avoid this fate as a friendly couple allowed her to sleep in an empty home they owned in Castle Hill.

After a long and unsuccessful job search, Judith-Anne received security guard training from a welfare-mandated training program. "That winter I patrolled dangerous demolition and construction sites from midnight to 6 a.m. for \$5.56 an hour," she recounts. "I was grateful to huddle in minuscule plastic huts usually with no light and often no heater." Of course this salary is nowhere near enough to afford housing in New York City's overpriced market.

First Step is a holistic job-training program for women that transforms not only a woman's job skills, but also her self-esteem and entire outlook on life, enabling her to undertake the arduous journey from homelessness to economic independence. Because First Step targets every single aspect of a participant's life, women often describe the program as a life-changing experience. Judith-Anne's reaction was no exception, "Quite simply, First Step saved my life. I was so sick and so depressed by the time I started the program that I'm not sure what would have happened to me without First Step... They had faith that I could make it, and because they believed in me, I came to believe in myself again. That was my first leap, and it was a leap of faith in myself."

"...I'm not sure what would have happened to me without First Step... They had faith that I could make it, and because they believed in me, I came to believe in myself again."

Fortunately, a compassionate woman she met at church rented her a room on a pay-when-you-can basis.

As is the case with many New Yorkers who qualify for welfare benefits, Judith's payments were inexplicably cut off by the City. However, her life began to turn around when she was referred to the Coalition's Crisis Intervention Department. As the only program in New York City that offers comprehensive walk-in emergency services without an appointment, Crisis Intervention provides assistance to 80-90 homeless individuals and families every day. Not only was her crisis specialist able to help Judith-Anne with her welfare benefits, but he also referred her to the Coalition's First Step Job Training Program.

After the initial four weeks of employment training, First Step women participate in an 8- to 12-week internship at a corporation or non-profit organization. This allows them to hone their classroom skills in a real-world environment while also giving them professional contacts and an employer reference. Like many First Step graduates, Judith-Anne was hired by her internship provider – first as a temp and then as a full-time Columbia University employee. She now lives in the Bronx. Far from where she was when she arrived at the Coalition for the Homeless, Judith-Anne looks to the future with hope. "I am in remission and employed in a field I enjoy. I plan to go back to school for a Masters in educational administration. Thank you First Step for helping me get my life back on track."



Women Mean Business: Renee Brown Inspires Luncheon Guests

By Jill Madeo

Supporters of the Coalition's First Step Job Training Program filled the ballroom at the Pierre Hotel on Wednesday, March 16, 2005, for the eleventh annual Women Mean Business Luncheon. The event raises funds for First Step and recognizes the corporations, individuals, and volunteers who dedicate their time and resources to helping the low-income and homeless women served by this innovative program.

The highlight of the luncheon was keynote speaker, Renee Brown, Vice President of the WNBA. She spoke about her own personal triumphs and the impact of her visit with First Step students during their training. Ms. Brown testified to the incredible strength and perseverance of First Step participants and urged them all to "keep on, keeping on."

Many of New York City's top business leaders joined the festivities. Among them were Todd Yannuzzi of Morgan Stanley, this year's Corporate Award winner, as well as representatives from Estee Lauder, JP Morgan Chase, Eileen Fisher, Newsweek, InterAsian Resources, and many more corporations and foundations. Debbie Harwin and Ann Sullivan represented Volunteer Award winner NAPO-NY (National Association of Professional Organizers). Since 2002, NAPO has provided First Step participants with invaluable classes on time, money, and paper management skills. Erin Camo and Amiyah Farrell represented Cutler Salon, which won a Volunteer Award for their generous donation of hair makeovers for First Step students.

Women Mean Business luncheon guests were deeply moved by a video featuring First Step graduate Laura McNeill. Laura told of coming to First Step as part of her rehabilitation after having been in prison for thirteen years. First Step's classroom training, her internship at Gay Men's Health Crisis, and the ongoing support of her mentor have radically changed Laura's self-esteem and led her to full-time employment with a well-known non-profit organization.

Those in attendance also had the opportunity to hear other stories of how First Step transforms women's lives as many of the program's graduates joined our guests for lunch. The event was a true success with business leaders and donors learning first hand how their generous gifts and volunteer efforts profoundly alter the lives of some of the most vulnerable women in New York City.



Top: Renee Brown delivers the keynote speech. **Middle:** Deborah Krulewitch, Jane Hertzmark Hudis, Sue Grundfest, Jane Lauder, and Phebe Farrow. **Port.** Above Left: Taunya Patterson-Rivera, Renee Brown, Lou Lowenstein, and George Delaney. Above Right: First Step graduate Cynthia Sparks speaks with a First Step supporter.

A Plea From a Fellow New Yorker:

Dear Coalition for the Homeless,

I am presently in a situation in which your help is needed. I am employed and very proud to have a job, but what I am about to present to you is driving me insane and stressful. I am blessed to have a job and am able to be free.

I have recently found a job in Brooklyn, which is the borough I know best, but I was transferred from the Bedford Mens Shelter in Brooklyn to Wards Island and it is now very difficult for me to make it to work because (1) I am presently under Parole and participating in drug rehabilitation program. (2) I have to get up at 5:00 A.M. in order to make it to work on time putting me in violation of my Parole curfew which is at 7:00 A.M.

It is very hard for me because this will cause me not be able to make it to my program or my job on time. Therefore, I am sending you this E-Mail so that you can see the situation I'm in and see if something can be done so that I can be placed in a Brooklyn Working Shelter before my job goes down the drain.

I pray that someone within this office be able to help me in finding a shelter in Brooklyn so that I won't have to lose my job down the road because of not being able to make it on time to work.

I will be contacting you soon! Please help me get to a Brooklyn Working Shelter!

Sincerely,
Manuel

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5:30-8:00pm

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