

Safety Net

The newsletter of Coalition for the Homeless

Summer 2009

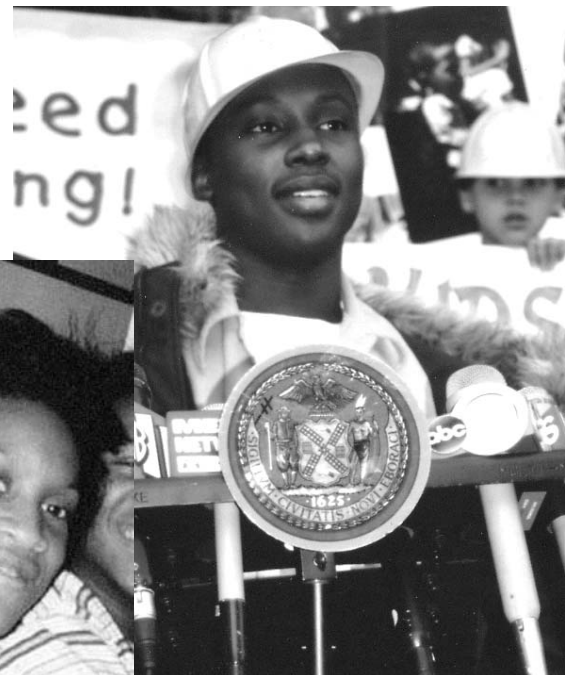
Where are they now? The Coalition's Kids Grow Up



Sheena



Francesca



JR

A Tribute to Coalition Board Chair, Lou Lowenstein

By Mary Brosnahan

Lou was one in a million. I had the chance to spend some time with him at the hospital on the Wednesday before his passing. His eyes were so clear and luminous. We chatted about a lot of things. The conundrum of whether Obama should reveal the results of the banks' stress tests. Taxpayer subsidies for the new Yankee stadium. My son Quinn's latest poem. Of course he asked, "So, what's doin' at the Coalition?"

I told him about how folks used to line up for our Crisis Services at 8:15 or 8:30 in the morning and now they start coming at 7. We were seeing more people getting agitated or occasionally even violent because they were so disappointed to not get in or not get what they felt they needed. That was one of the things that was great about Lou – he wanted to hear it all. The heartwarming story of the mom and adorable kids as well as the not so nice stuff and how it was affecting the Coalition's staff.

He asked about our litigation, because he knew unprecedented numbers of families are sleeping tonight in our emergency shelters. When I told him the City had stepped up its deterrent practices, which discourage people from using the shelters, rather than giving them a safe, stable place from which they could begin to put their lives back together, a look of



Helen and Lou Lowenstein

utter disgust came over his face – Lou always clearly let you know how he felt about things.

Then, I went on to tell him about our litigation strategy with Legal Aid and how we are trying to use the small opening of opportunity of this mayoral election year to persuade the Bloomberg Administration to restore federal housing voucher to the record number of homeless families who are sleeping tonight in our shelters. He tapped his head with his index finger, signaling, "smart" and then smiled that great smile and gave me two big "thumbs up!"

It was vintage Lou. Right up to his last breath, he wanted every detail of whatever was happening at the moment – large or small – to our homeless neighbors. For Lou, it wasn't about charity. It was about justice. He was fully committed, unlike anyone I've ever known, to the ideas that housing is a human right; that the playing field we operate on is not level; and that it's unconscionable that we not do more to provide a roof over everyone's head.

He was able to take in the suffering we see each day on the streets of NY, and yet not be intimidated or overwhelmed by the multitudes of people who need help. He came out frequently to help deliver hot meals to street bound homeless men and women. He loved to come to our job training program for homeless women and up to the sleep away camp for homeless kids in Bear Mountain. At board meetings, he would say to other board members, "You gotta get out more and see this stuff up close – there's no substitute!" His enthusiasm was infectious.

Lou was refreshing to be around, because there was nothing maudlin about

him – every challenge he took on was with good humor and upbeat compassion. He truly felt that every person he met was really an equal and you knew that just by the way he interacted with everyone – the janitors, the receptionists, a homeless guy in our waiting room. Yes, he cared about the issue, but first and foremost, he cared about the people. What made him an inspiration was that just being around him made you want to be more like him.

I was also, and always will be, inspired by his love for Helen. So often he would comment on his unbelievable luck of finding someone so perfect for him – smart, funny, insightful, beautiful – in the words of Lou "and, and, and!" I remember when he was first started his chemo treatment, chatting with him on the phone, and he said that the gift of his having Helen sustained him through everything. Knowing her and loving her for all these years was his greatest joy and how he was astounded that they continued to grow closer and closer through his illness, even though he didn't think two people could be any closer.

Helen and Lou have done so much for homeless people through the Coalition and never for acclaim or acknowledgment. They simply did it because they felt it was the right thing to do.

When I heard the news that Lou had passed away on Saturday, I took a long walk home through this city he loved. The sunset over the Hudson was breathtaking, but also heartbreaking to know it was the first in ages without Lou. For his family and loved ones, each day will be, above all, a day without him.

When I got home, my six-year-old son said, "Mommy, I'm SO sorry about your friend, Lou." And I said, "Thank you, sweetie." And then he asked, "Mommy, did he die of age or bullets?" And I said, "Well, I'd have to say age." And he said, "Well – I have an idea. Why don't you pretend I'm Lou and you can give me a great big hug!"

And so I did. That's the one thing I know for sure. Lou gave us all so much love and what he would want most is for us to try each day to spread it around as much as we can.

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is published by

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Lou Lowenstein, a close friend to the Coalition, passed away April 18, 2009.

Charging Homeless Families “Rent” for Shelter: Coalition Fights Back with City and State Leaders

By Giselle Routhier

On May 1st of this year, the Bloomberg administration and State officials launched the latest in a series of deeply misguided homeless policies when, to the amazement of many New Yorkers, the City began charging working homeless families “rent” for emergency shelter. Homeless families with employment income were ordered to pay large portions of their meager incomes – in some cases well over 50 percent – towards the cost of shelter. In addition, under the City’s new rules, vulnerable homeless children and families could be ejected from shelter to the streets if they failed to comply.

Coalition for the Homeless and many others immediately and strongly criticized the new policy, noting that it will only result in homeless families staying in shelter for longer periods of

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time by taking away financial resources the families need to move to permanent housing. Many elected officials also condemned the punitive new rules, including New York City Comptroller Bill Thompson, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, and New York City Councilmember Bill de Blasio, who chairs the Council committee with oversight of homeless services.

In addition to being counterproductive, the new policy was implemented in a harsh manner with numerous bureaucratic errors. Homeless families were ordered to pay effectively every penny they earned over the poverty line. Akilah Seaborn, a part-time child care worker and single mother of a two-year-old girl, was told to pay \$336 of her roughly \$800 per month income to her shelter in Hell’s



Assemblyman Keith Wright, Comptroller William Thompson, and State Senator Daniel Squadron (pictured left to right) speak out to reverse this deeply misguided policy.

Kitchen. When she challenged the order, the shelter changed the locks on her shelter unit. Martha Gonzalez, who lives with her 19-year-old son in a run-down, City-operated shelter in Fort Greene, was told to pay \$1,099 of her estimated \$1,700 monthly income. Both families, along with many others, were threatened with ejection from shelter if they did not make shelter “rent” payments, even when the City failed to provide legally-required notices to many homeless families. The Legal Aid Society and Coalition for the Homeless began helping Ms. Seaborn, Ms. Gonzalez, and many others contest the City’s erroneous orders.

Amid a huge public outcry and serious implementation flaws, after three weeks, the State ordered the policy temporarily suspended. However, the City and State officials still defended the program and intend to re-establish it in the near future, posing a continuing risk to vulnerable homeless children and families. Indeed, New York City Department of Homeless Services Commissioner Robert Hess told the *New York Times*, “I think it’s hard to argue that families that can contribute to their shelter cost shouldn’t.”

The misguided policy is rooted in a 1995 State regulation, but which had not been enforced until now due to longstanding litigation involving home-

less families – litigation that was settled last December, triggering a new wave of flawed policies from Bloomberg administration officials. The rules represent a punitive approach to homelessness, and are part of the ideological, and ultimately failed, policies of the Pataki and Giuliani administration which resulted in record numbers of homeless families and children in New York City.

Responding to the recent fiasco, New York State Assemblymember Keith Wright and State Senator Daniel Squadron took the lead in introducing new legislation that would end the practice of charging homeless families “rent” for shelter. At a press conference announcing the legislation, Assemblymember Wright said, “In the midst of the Great Recession, the last thing New York State needs to do is to punish the most vulnerable of our society. Charging the homeless rent is preposterous and deleterious to the mission of our State’s social service safety net.”

In order to protect homeless children and parents from misguided “rent” rules and potential ejection from shelter, Coalition for the Homeless urges the State Legislature to overcome its recent distractions and pass this important legislation at the earliest opportunity, and we urge Governor David Paterson to sign the bill into law.

Where are they now?

The Coalition's Kids Grow Up

Inspirational Stories of Success from Three of our Young Clients

By Sarah Murphy, with help from Lindsey Davis



Francesca Smith

Francesca's story is one of growth. With the help of a strong system of support, she was able to gain strength amidst the negative experiences of her childhood and become a determined, caring, and thoughtful individual.

Francesca spent the early part of her life watching her mother in an abusive relationship and struggling with drug addiction. One day, her mother got the courage to leave. She had no one to turn to and no where to go, but she knew she needed out. With the Coalition's help, she found a shelter that would accept her and her eight children, as well as a program to get clean.

When Francesca's mother learned about Camp Homeward Bound (CHB), the Coalition's summer sleep away camp for homeless youth, she enrolled her for the next session. The eldest in her family, Francesca was the primary

caretaker and rarely had an opportunity to play or just have fun like other kids. She relished in her time at Camp and returned every year, looking forward to seeing her new found friends and participating in the many activities.

"Camp allowed me to see peace, beauty, and respect in so many ways." It also gave her the will and confidence to be the strong, independent woman she is today. Camp helped her funnel her natural desire to help others and was instrumental in her decision to become a teacher.

Francesca currently works at the International Pre-School and is pursuing her bachelors in Education, while studying Children's Literature, Computer Science, and Social Studies. This year, she is returning to CHB as a counselor, hoping to give back the same self-assurance and life lessons camp instilled in her. "The Coalition helped me realize my potential for greatness, no matter what my past held." Francesca is living proof that no matter how rough it is in the shelter system, you can rise above it.

JR Bennett

JR Bennett's experience is one of those all too rare stories of a young man who has single handedly made his way from a childhood marred by years of homelessness, to college, graduation, and an incredibly bright future.

JR recalls sleeping in office buildings, social service centers, and homeless shelters more nights than he had a stable home. As most homeless youth do, JR missed countless days of school and was mocked by his peers when they found out he had no home.

We first met JR at the Emergency Assistance Unit in the Bronx in the summer of 2002. Amongst the sea of children, all struggling to make it to school, eat regular, nutritious meals, do their homework, and still patch together some semblance of a childhood, JR stood strong. His precocious articulation of the problem of homelessness and his natural ability to use his own experience

to educate the public and influence change galvanized the Coalition to create an outlet for the ideas and energy of homeless youth.

“I thought it would be exciting to get involved, and soon, I became the leading child advocate.”

Over the next few years, JR worked with the Coalition’s Advocacy Department and a core group of homeless boys and girls to develop what would become Youth Against Homelessness (YAH), a youth advocacy

“I thought it would be exciting to get involved, and soon, I became the leading child advocate.”

project run by and for homeless children. YAH developed into a cohesive group that held training and youth summits, made videos, and facilitated countless presentations on the experience of homeless youth in New York City. They marched in and spoke at rallies and forums before hundreds of people, and organized other homeless young people, empowering them to get involved and advocate for change in the systems that affect homeless children.

While still a member of YAH, JR graduated from high school and won a full scholarship to Connecticut College, from which he graduated in May with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. JR recently reflected on how far he’s come, while moving into his first apartment over the summer. He is working with kids at the local YMCA and looks forward to one day becoming a teacher.

All of us at the Coalition have been privileged to get to know and work with JR over the years. His ability to adapt and find a way to not only make it through difficult times, but also excel inspires us all. We wish him the best and expect big things for him in the future.



Sheena Buitrago

Sheena is another shining example of the hope and resiliency of our homeless youth. Sheena is the daughter of Diana Olaizola, the Coalition’s Shelter Specialist. From the time she was born, she was shuttled back and forth between living with her grandmother and in a shelter with her mother. By the time she was six, she saw her mother rise from sleeping on the streets in a cardboard box with a paralyzing addition to crack, to completing our First Step Job Training Program, and gradually getting back on her feet as a volunteer and later staff member of the Coalition.

Having had the Coalition play such a large part in her life for so many years, Sheena was eager to participate with YAH. She was on the frontlines at the rallies, speaking out on behalf of homeless kids, and becoming a close friend to JR. She remembers she felt

like she was really making a difference and wanted to continue to raise awareness about homelessness.

“I’ve been walking the halls of the Coalition for as long as I can remember. It is my home, my second family.” Sheena now works part-time at the Coalition as an assistant in our Advocacy department. The opportunity has given her a chance to put herself in her mother’s shoes every day. She has learned about the frustrations in dealing

Sheena graduated from high school in June as valedictorian of her class.

with the complicated shelter systems, as well as the positive impact made by advocating for homeless rights.

As for her future, Sheena graduated from high school in June as valedictorian of her class. She will be attending the College of Staten Island on a full four-year scholarship where she hopes to major in Business Management.

Dedicated New York Cares Volunteers Organize Fundraisers, Food and Clothing Drives to Support Coalition

By Derron Lee,
New York Cares Team Leader

New York Cares has been sending volunteer teams to the Coalition's Grand Central Food Program (GCFP) for more than a decade. Despite having full-time jobs or school work, volunteers distribute food, clothing and blankets to hundreds of homeless people each night. In 2008, we also launched a volunteer group with the Coalition's First Step Job Training Program, working with graduates on job search counseling and computer training.

Many volunteers develop a strong connection to the Coalition's work, and this past fall, we decided to supplement our volunteer efforts through outside activities to better help the hundreds of people we serve on the feeding vans every day.

Arvind Singh, a New York Cares volunteer team leader, organized a happy hour fundraiser in October, raising nearly \$10,000 for GCFP. Arvind also coordinated a winter clothing drive in December, collecting enough items to

fill five feeding vans to the roofs. We were able to get this warm clothing into the hands of the GCFP clients on the nightly routes to help them battle the cold weather.

Another volunteer team leader initiated a food drive in April. We collected 1,500 food items over five hours, and delivered the food on the GCFP routes that night. We recently held a successful happy hour fundraiser in June, raising \$2,100 for the Coalition's First Step Job Training Program and New York Cares, with the remainder being used to purchase canned goods for distribution on the GCFP routes.

We've raised more than \$20,000 for the Coalition over the past year, in financial donations, food, and warm clothing. **Our next fundraiser for the Coalition is scheduled for Thursday, August 6 from 7 - 10PM at the Gael Pub (1465 Third Avenue , between 82nd and 83rd Street).** We're eager to continue supporting the efforts of the Coalition!



Volunteers from New York Cares have proven to be some of the Coalition's most steadfast and dedicated supporters. In recent months, volunteers have organized numerous fundraising, clothing, and food drives to support the Coalition's work.

Thank you, New York Cares, for the hard work and dedication of the many volunteers who donate their time and energy each week.

Win One For The Shareholders! Book Launch Benefits Coalition

The Coalition recently collaborated with Al Angrisani, former President and CEO of Greenfield Online, with the launch of his new book, *Win One For The Shareholders!* The book launch event was held at the Harvard Club on April 21, 2009, and raised almost \$30,000 for the Coalition.

Guests received a complimentary copy of the book, and learned more about Al's model for turning around troubled companies and increasing accountability to shareholders. Attendees also learned more about the Coalition's programs and advocacy efforts. In addition to the event, profits from the book's sales will be donated to the Coalition.

Thank you, Al – your generosity makes a huge difference in the lives of our homeless neighbors.



Al Angrisani addresses attendees at the launch of his new book.

If you are interested in hosting an event or learning more about these programs, please contact Rachel Edelman at redelman@cfthomeless.org.

Women Mean Business Luncheon Raises \$150,000 for First Step

By Rachel Edelman

More than 300 guests attended the 15th annual Women Mean Business Luncheon at the Pierre Hotel on Tuesday, March 31, 2009, raising more than \$150,000 for the First Step Job Training Program.

The Coalition honored **Time Warner Cable** with the Corporate Service Award, recognizing their long-time commitment to providing internship and job opportunities to First Step graduates. **Pam Grove**, the Coalition's outgoing Director of Programs, was awarded the Distinguished Service Award for her years of dedication on behalf of First Step and the Coalition.

Comedian and actress **Caroline Rhea** wowed the audience as Mistress of Ceremonies. First Step graduates spoke eloquently of their experiences in the program, including keynote speaker **Cathy Brown** and Time Warner Cable

employee **Robin Rose**.

Wanda Lawrence was featured in a video presentation about the program.

The Coalition is grateful to the First Step Advisory Board and Luncheon Committee for their support and guidance. Special thanks to our corporate sponsors – Helen Lowenstein & Family, Terry L. Andreas & John A. Hewig, Drafftcb, The Estée Lauder Companies Inc., Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP, Burke & Company LLC, Fross Zelnick Lehrman & Zissu, P.C., Sony Corporation of America, Time Warner Cable, Candice Bergen & Marshall Rose, and Morrison & Foerster Foundation.



Top: First Step graduates **Cathy Brown**, **Lovette Gall**, and **Elis Acevedo**

Bottom: Executive Director **Mary Brosnahan**, Board member **Michael Friedman**, **Caroline Rhea**, and **Victor Ozeri**

Carnival Night for Kids Raises Funds for Camp Homeward Bound and Youth Service Programs

By Rachel Edelman

More than 400 guests enjoyed an evening of rides, games, and summer fun at Victorian Gardens on Thursday, June 4, at Carnival Night for Kids. Carnival Night raised more than \$100,000 for the Coalition's Youth Service Programs – Camp Homeward Bound and Bound for Success.

Kids of all ages had a fantastic time as they played on rides, got their faces painted, and were treated to magicians and stilt-walkers. Guests enjoyed delicious barbecue food, as well as our new Cupcake Frosting Station, where guests frosted their own cupcakes, donated by Crumbs Bake Shop and Elizabeth and Adam Gold.

Our new 'Storytelling Stage' was a huge hit, and featured readings and skits by well-known children's book authors. Jane O'Connor read from her



Children and adults enjoy a summer evening of fun and entertainment at Carnival Night for Kids.

Fancy Nancy series, while Nancy Krulik entertained guests with a reading from her Katie Kazoo book series. Boys and girls also enjoyed arts & crafts activities, and created a banner to be used at

Camp Homeward Bound.

Many attendees tried their luck at our popular balloon raffle, with prizes including a stay at Trump International Hotel, Mets and Yankees tickets, watches courtesy of Fossil, and more. Kids also took home a gift bag filled with items including CDs, stuffed animals from GUND, sweets from Nickelodeon, and copies of *Time Out Kids*.

The Coalition extends our sincere thanks to our Event Chairs, Elizabeth and Adam Gold, and our dedicated Benefit Committee, for their hard work, great ideas, and dedication in planning the event. We are appreciative of our generous sponsors, who helped make the evening possible! Special thanks to Helen Lowenstein & Family, Terry Andreas & John A. Hewig, Elizabeth and Adam Gold, Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP, Nardello & Co. LLC, Julie & Andrew Kramer, and Jane Orans.

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For more information,
please contact Rachel Edelman, redelman@cfthomeless.org

Coalition for the Homeless

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