Fall/Winter 2018

On October 27th at 5:30pm, our 15th shelter season began when our female guests walked down the ramp of the bottom level of the Haven. We always sign our ladies in first, followed by the men who quickly filled the walkway. The line snaked out the door. By 7pm, our homeless guests were settled at their respective sleep sites, the same congregations that have graciously opened our season for years: City Church for the men, Church of Our Saviour for the women. Overall, we had 28 male guests, 10 females. By the following weekend, we were averaging 35 men a night, and 10 women. These are roughly the same numbers we saw at the beginning of last season, when we ultimately experienced our highest total of guests ever—243!

To every one, we offer a hot meal and a warm place to sleep. Then, through the kindness of volunteers and shelter staff, we begin to build our guests back up. Finally, our case management meets with each guest to address the factors that got them to our door. From there, we create a plan of attack to climb out of homelessness. For some, the barriers may be clear cut and relatively simple to combat. Others, not so simple, but all receive the individual attention that it takes to get them rolling on the right path.

As always, thank you for the support that allows our shelters to open for yet another season, one that will see us cross the threshold of having provided more than 100,000 total bed nights to our area’s homeless. We value your contribution!
One day in early September, I was walking on the downtown mall when I encountered John, one of our guests from last season. John is an older man with a shock of white hair. He reminds me of my grandfather. This particular day, he sat on a bench near Heather Heyer Way. “John,” I asked him, “where are you staying now?” It had been awhile since I had last seen him. “Outside,” he said, waving his hand over the mall, indicating he was living on the streets. “Well, have you heard about our Secure Seniors Program?”

I explained the basics. $500 for first month’s rent, $500 for security deposit. The only catch is a guest needs enough income to be able to carry it forward, but John was potentially good there. He received over $700 a month in disability benefits.

Was he interested? “Oh yes,” he exclaimed. “I will get on this right away.” He held true and by the end of the week he had located a room for rent. Thanks to the generosity of the landlord, John moved in right away, even though he had no money in hand. The timing was fortuitous. A hurricane was on the way.

Less than two weeks later, John secured his housing by signing the paperwork at the offices of the Alliance for Interfaith Ministries (AIM). AIM is a local faith-based non-profit that holds and disperses the SSP housing fund while we find eligible candidates and shepherd them through the process of hurdling any housing barriers. We are also working hard to find quality, affordable housing in Charlottesville, not the easiest task.

A week had passed when Brenda walked through our office door. 71-years-old, Ms. Brenda was also out on the streets; as she later told NBC29 News, her address was the second bench at Booker T. Washington Park. Then she hit the jackpot. Her number came up at the Crossings at Fourth and Preston. Her rent would only be $575 a month for an efficiency. To move in right away she needed the security deposit, plus the last week of the month for rent, to move in that day. We could help. Another meeting at AIM and she was housed.

A toothy smile that stretched across her face said it all.

In August, we were so thrilled to learn that Billy had been awarded disability and he is now safely housed in an assisted living facility. After more than a year of effort, Billy finally has the care he needs.— Liz Nyberg

**A PACEM Success Story**

Billy came to us during the 2017-18 shelter season significantly worse for wear. His family had been evicted after his post-stroke medication brought on hallucinations and paranoia. He was just beginning to feel the full effects of this disabling experience: loss of job, loss of identity. A stroke had further impaired his speech and mobility, and disrupted his ability to care for himself. Without hesitation we submitted an APS report to city social services and began our collaboration to see Billy get the care he needs.

We sheltered him all season while awaiting a disability determination that progressed slowly. Finally in February a new social worker for Billy picked up the ball and ran all the way to the finish line, with PACEM providing critical nightly support and case management assistance. We helped with applications, confidentiality forms, and other paperwork, which sometimes was as simple as locating Billy in his usual spot (asleep in the library computer lab during the afternoons).

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**Art for the Heart**

On a cold night last December, four high school students set up at a table in the lower level of Belmont Baptist Church. They assembled an assortment of art supplies as our female guests busied themselves—some rested on cots, others stood chatting, while a couple watched TV. The students’ plan was to provide art therapy through a partnership with the Rotary Club’s New Gen Peacebuilders Initiative.

“We were very nervous at first,” says Emma Hitchcock, currently a first year student at UVA. “We sat there wondering how we would get people to come.” Then a few of the homeless women wandered over and sat down.

“It was so powerful,” says Emma. “We got to really talk with them and have a conversation about their lives and our lives. I got to help a woman draw a picture for her grandson. It was a very moving experience.”

Two more visits to our women’s sites followed. Then Emma and another student, Zadie Lacy, took their experiences and pitched Art for the Heart at the Tom Tom Founders Festival where they won the top prize in the social innovation category. That earned them a spot in the University of Virginia’s iLab for the summer. A subsequent grant has allowed them to continue to develop the project with the idea of it becoming long-term. In the meantime, Emma and Zadie plan on bringing Art for the Heart back to PACEM this winter. We recently caught up with Emma by phone. The following are excerpts from our discussion.

**How the students settled on art as a way to interact with the homeless:**

“Obviously we weren’t going to be able to solve the housing crisis. But one thing we could do was make an emotional difference. So we came across art therapy for people who have experienced trauma. We thought: Charlottesville is an artistic town that claims to have artistic opportunities for everyone but that’s not necessarily true. Art’s a good connector and a good way to start a conversation between people that is low stakes. It’s easy, fun, and something that anyone can do.”

**How her preconceptions melted away in our shelters:**

“Homelessness is such a dehumanizing situation and people are often judgmental and have stereotypes. I thought we were going to change other peoples’ minds but I hadn’t thought about my own. I thought, ‘Oh, they’re not going to want to talk with me. They’re going to be standoffish, or rude,’ things like that—which is so wrong. We sat down and immediately two women started talking with us. They were people who had normal lives outside of homelessness. It wasn’t the only facet of their personality, just the situation they’re in. The ladies were so well-rounded, they were just normal people you would see anywhere. So that first evening totally crashed all my stereotypes.”