

FINDING THE MOTIVATION TO DO MORE

From the Safety of Linkages

Ruben DeJesus knows too well how the tentacles of a troubled childhood can strangle you for life. Raised by a single mother in a drug- and gang-ridden North Jersey city, Ruben started smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol when he was just 13.

“As I got older, marijuana was no longer doing anything for me so I began using harder drugs like cocaine, and I started stealing to support my habit,” Ruben said. “I was always in and out of jail, and that put a hold on my life. I wasted a lot of time in jail.”

Tired of disappointing both his mother and himself, he vowed to fight his addiction, and enrolled in a recovery program. At first, it went well. He landed a job as a warehouse supervisor in Long Island, and it seemed like his troubled past was behind him. But sobriety is a lifelong commitment, and relapse can be part of the recovery process. “When work seemed a little overwhelming, I’d feel like I needed a break. So I’d have a beer or two - and that woke up the beast inside of me. I picked up again with the drugs,” Ruben remembered.

One night when he was drunk, he encountered an armed robber.

“He pointed a gun at me and demanded money, we exchanged words - and he raised his hand and shot me, point blank in the chest,” Ruben said. The December 2019 incident was a turning point for Ruben, in both a good and a bad way.

“It was a miracle from God that I made it through this. I was so close to dying. It was a wakeup call, that I was given another chance to fix my life up,” he said. But it took him so long to recover from the injury that he lost his job, couldn’t pay rent and had to move in with his mother. Just a few months later, he lost her to COVID-19 - but



▲ Ruben DeJesus and his children Jazleen, 11, and Elijah, 10

Ruben remained committed to his sobriety, even as life’s challenges continued. Last April, child protective workers called from Virginia. They had removed his two children from their mother’s custody and wanted him to take them. His joy at being reunited with his children was tempered by his housing situation: He was living in a halfway house, which is no place for children.

DREAMING OF THE FUTURE

Ruben knew he needed help. He reached out to Monmouth County social services and learned about Catholic Charities’ Linkages program in Tinton Falls.

Linkages is emergency transitional housing for individuals and families exiting homelessness. The program provides residents with supportive services



A Message from the EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As the summer comes to an end and we continue to do our part to stay safe and healthy, I can't help but wonder - how did we get through this? The two words that come to mind are at the core of who we are - kindness and generosity.

The kindness we show to our neighbors is part of our mission and the generosity we receive from those who support us makes our work possible.

During difficult times, sometimes it's easier to focus on what's wrong instead of what's right. But as we continue to provide life-saving services to our community, it reminds us that being good, helping one another and keeping the faith is the inspiration that guides us on our path to serve the most vulnerable among us.

I recently re-read Ephesians 3:20, a prayer from Paul on behalf of the Christians of Ephesus. Part of

the prayer says, "Even a seemingly small act of generosity can grow into something far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine." Our humanity towards others, no matter how large or small, is an essential part of our duty to continue God's work on this earth.

Although we don't know if we are out of the woods with this pandemic, we do know that we will not stop restoring dignity and giving hope to those who are struggling or have fallen on hard times. We will always be committed to our call to service, and we are eternally grateful for your continued and unwavering support.

My sincerest gratitude,

Marlene Laó-Collins
Executive Director



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FINDING THE MOTIVATION TO DO MORE

From the Safety of Linkages *(continued from cover)*

and time to help them get back on their feet and into permanent, stable housing. Linkages apartments have multiple rooms and kitchens, and residents have laundry facilities, a playground, a community room, 24-hour staff and other amenities on-site, all of which create a more home-like atmosphere than a motel.

“It may have been a bullet that woke Ruben up, but it is the love for his children and the commitment to his sobriety that keeps him moving forward one day at a time,” said Stacey DePoe, Linkages program director. “I could see the determination in his eyes the day I met him.”

Ruben and his children moved to Linkages in April. “I like the environment and the structure here - it’s safe and clean, and the staff are great,” Ruben said. “The kids love it, and they’ve made friends here.”

In July, Ruben began pursuing his high-school equivalency degree at Brookdale Community College. Once he has that in hand, he plans to go to cosmetology school, get his barber’s license, and ultimately open his own barber shop. He’s now job-hunting so that he can save up for an apartment and a car.

As Ruben works to ensure a bright future for his family, his children daydream about the home they hope they will have someday soon.

“My dream house is a big house with stairs, and a nice room, a nice rug, a nice TV, and a pool,” said Jazleen, 11, her smile as sparkly as the glitter stuck to her arms from summer camp.

Ten-year-old Elijah chimed in: “I want a lot of rooms where we could stay in, a lot of good furniture, a park across the street, and a garage with a nice car.”

“My kids are a great motivation to me - they motivate me to want more and to do more, and they help me to get focused,” Ruben said. “I don’t want them to go through what I did. I know I have to do nothing but the right thing because their lives are on the line.”



▲ Ruben and his children at the playground at Linkages



▲ Ruben is showing off the haircut he gave his son Elijah. Ruben used to work as a barber and wants to open his own barber shop someday.

FOR INFORMATION about Linkages, call Program Director Stacey DePoe at (732) 922-0400 or sdepoe@cctrenton.org.

PEERS HELPING PEERS

At the Riverbank Self-Help Center

Five years ago, Jaime Hooker needed help. She'd struggled for a long time with depression and anxiety, caused in part by bullies who tormented her through childhood because of her cerebral palsy. If she wanted to feel better, she knew she needed to move somewhere with more mental health services and better public transportation than rural upstate New York, where she lived.

So she moved to New Jersey for a fresh start in 2016. A few Google searches later, she found Catholic Charities' Riverbank Self-Help Center, located in a historic mansion just steps from a postcard-pretty stretch of the Delaware River in Burlington.

"At first, I checked it out, and I didn't feel it was for me. So I left," she said. But a few years later, she trained to become a peer specialist, which is a professional with personal mental health experience who helps and encourages others in earlier stages of their wellness journey. When a job opportunity at the Riverbank Self-Help Center arose, she took it, becoming a peer facilitator and leading discussions and support groups there. It was only after she began working at Riverbank that she realized many of its services would benefit her too.

"The way I became a client was backwards," she said with a laugh.

All Riverbank services are intended to help people with behavioral health challenges live successfully and independently in the community. In the Supported Employment program, clients learn how to build resumes, practice interviewing, and otherwise land jobs. Riverbank's transportation program provides rides within Burlington County to ensure clients can get to and from their jobs, while Roads to Recovery provides clients with safe transportation to anonymous recovery meetings. Support groups tackle subjects as varied as wellness recovery action planning, finance management, and coping skills for anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. Riverbank organizes free recreational and cultural outings, providing clients an opportunity to attend events that otherwise might be inaccessible to them. Yoga, tai chi and other opportunities for movement are also taught on-site to further promote wellness.

"Most services here are client-run, so it's peers helping peers," said Cindy Gambrell, Riverbank's program coordinator. That means, for example, that clients staff the transportation program as drivers, delivering other clients where they need to go. And peers run most of the support groups.

"That's a really effective way to provide services because peers have a unique understanding of the feelings and behaviors people who struggle with mental illness face," Cindy Gambrell said. "Trained peer providers can also lead groups on evidence-based practices such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Dialectic Behavior Therapy, coping with trauma, and hearing voices."



▲ Jaime Hooker is a client and peer facilitator at the Riverbank Self-Help Center in Burlington.



▲ Jaime's boyfriend, Michael Olshansky, is also a peer facilitator at the Riverbank Self-Help Center in Burlington.

LIVING THE DREAM

Jaime used the employment services, which helped her land a second job in case management at an area nonprofit that serves people with disabilities.

"There had been big gaps in my employment history due to having mental illness and struggling, so that was a really big help," she said.

She also regularly uses Riverbank's transportation services, because she finds them cheaper and easier to schedule than public transit. "Riverbank's transportation costs \$2 a ride - anywhere (within the county) - where Uber might cost me \$12, or more, depending where I go," she said. "It really gives you peace of mind, for sure."

Further, Riverbank offers a sense of community Jaime said she hasn't found in other programs: "It feels so friendly and supportive, almost like a family. We all have personal experience and can share our experience with each other. The groups and services here have been better than what I've attended in hospital-based programs, because they're coming from people who truly understand and get what it's like, living with mental illness."

Jaime also met her boyfriend of three years, Michael, at Riverbank. He's a Riverbank peer facilitator too. She considers Riverbank so pivotal in her progress that she recently brought her mother, who was visiting from upstate New York, for a tour. Looking toward her future, she jokes that she's living her dream now.

"My 20s were rough," said Jaime, who's now 35. "I feel like these are my prime years. I'm having a good time. The Riverbank Self-Help Center has really helped me maintain my recovery and given me a sense of purpose. I feel like I owe a lot to Catholic Charities, because they really got me back on my feet and helped me reach my goal of being employed. I'm not sure I would be as successful and content as I am today without them."

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FOR INFORMATION on the Riverbank Self-Help Center, contact Program Coordinator Cindy Gambrell at (609) 480-6845 or cgambrell@cctrenton.org.

DELAWARE HOUSE

Providing Healing for Over 50 Years



In the 50 years since Delaware House began, it has grown into a broad range of programs for individuals with mental illness and substance use issues. In 2020, it delivered counseling and mental health services to over 3,500 people, addiction-focused treatment to over 500 people and housing to over 350 people. Let us look back at how this comprehensive system of life-saving services began.

In the early '70s, Catholic Charities hired Frank Helverson to oversee its operations in Burlington County. A recently decommissioned Army officer with a master's degree in social work, Helverson supervised a handful of counselors, the adoptions department and volunteer services. Their office, a 9,000 square-foot Victorian mansion in Burlington City, provided plenty of room for new programs and Helverson knew of a population in dire need of support.

"At that time in the early '70s, there really was a dearth of services in Burlington County for anyone coming out of a state (psychiatric) hospital. The only service available was a once-a-week clinic in Mount Holly," said Helverson. So, in June of 1971, with a \$15,000 demonstration grant from the NJ Department

of Institutes and Agencies, a day program for individuals with serious mental illness was created.

"The community mental health movement was just getting rolling then," said Helverson. "We modeled our services on day programs that were being offered in New York and Philadelphia at the time." The program, which needed a name that wouldn't alarm neighbors or stigmatize participants, was called Delaware House – for the river flowing along the front of the property. Clients benefited from the structured environment with activities tailored to an individual's needs and interests. Activities included pre-vocational training, counseling, recreational pursuits, and education.

"We were trying to provide a place for former patients to recover and restore their lives after leaving a public hospital," he said. "We wanted to help them grow and avoid hospitalization in the future." Initially, the day program was offered three days a week. By 1972, the program was being offered five days a week and new services were being added. That year Louise Loza was hired to create a vocational program. Driven by the progress of the clients, Loza stayed for 38 years. "The clients kept me going. When I saw them being successful – handling their illness, making strides, it kept me going," she said.

"We tried to create a sense of community," said Loza, who said staff referred to the clients as 'members.' "It felt like a club back then." She also noted that Delaware House kept adding new programs. "We strived to meet all the needs of the people we served. What they needed, that was what mattered."

Back then, just as it does today, reliable transportation represented an essential need for program participants. In 1972, Fleming Motors of Conshohocken, PA, donated a 12-passenger Checker limousine, a great, green beast with a manual transmission, that became the cornerstone for a fleet of vehicles transporting clients from their homes to Delaware House and back. Clients also received rides to medical appointments, school, job interviews, grocery stores and various 12-step programs.



▲ Delaware House started at a beautiful 9,000 square-foot Victorian mansion in Burlington City.

GROWTH CONTINUES

In 1974, Delaware House established a group home for four men in Burlington Township and that project sparked a period of growth. The next year, with federal and state grants and matching funds from the United Way and Burlington County, a transitional residential program was established. “One of our greatest challenges was developing residential services,” said Frank. “We ran into some NIMBY issues. Not in my backyard. But we were one of the first organizations in South Jersey to be providing residential programs for people with mental illness.” By the end of 1976, clients had housing opportunities in three supervised residences and eight semi-supervised apartment units. Long-term housing and a residence for individuals with mental illness and developmental disabilities were also established. Delaware House recognized having a wide range of housing options was key in preventing homelessness among the mentally ill.

As the number of clients increased, so grew the number of people with substance use issues. In 1988, the Personal Recovery Program delivered

substance use treatment in conjunction with mental health services. Group counseling, peer support, and opportunities for social and recreational activities provided clients the opportunity to openly discuss addiction issues with peers who also understood the impact of mental illness.

Helverson said he appreciated Catholic Charities’ ongoing commitment to creating services for people with mental illness. Eventually, Delaware House, ever expanding, outgrew the mansion on the river. “We had satellite offices all over Burlington City,” said Helverson. In 1995, Catholic Charities broke ground on a new 23,000 square foot building in Westampton and a year later, as Delaware House was celebrating its 25th anniversary, it moved into its new headquarters. “Tune in” to the next issue of *The Spirit*, to see how things unfolded over the last 25 years at Delaware House.

FOR INFORMATION on Delaware House, contact Alicia McNeil, Interim Director of Partial Care Services, Director of Psychosocial Rehabilitation at (609) 267-9339 ext. 5129 or amcneil@cctrenton.org.



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