



Newsletter January 2018

Celebrating 20 years of rebuilding lives

Vision: Formerly homeless seniors will obtain and sustain safe, appropriate, and affordable housing.
Mission: To empower older men and women who are homeless to restore their lives and to live independently. We do this by providing transitional housing, case management, counseling support, and life skills enhancement tailored to the unique needs and aspirations of each resident.
Values: Empowerment, respect, resiliency, client self-determination, and self-advocacy.
Beliefs: Homelessness is a solvable problem. Decent and affordable housing is a basic right. With guidance and support, older men and women who are homeless can and will have the strength and skills to rebuild their lives.

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- Carolyn Marston is retiring and passing the baton to Marlene Moore-Callands
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RUTH

Ruth was the inspiration for Karen Messina to become the founder of Shelter of the Cross, which is now known as Renewal House.

Ruth was 78 years old. She was legally blind and had been homeless for 5 years when Karen met her at the City Shelter. Ruth had traveled by bus and train, from Chicago, IL to Hartford, moving from shelter to shelter. Ruth did not wish to return to a nursing home environment.

One evening, Karen saw her walking down the street; it was freezing cold and sleeting out. Karen knew Ruth didn't have a place to go, so she took her home with her. That's when Karen decided she needed to do something for the elderly homeless. Karen envisioned a place that would offer transitional housing for the elderly 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. She wanted each person to receive the help that they needed to be able to live on their own. The residents would be able to live in the house as a family. They would take turns cooking meals and they would sit down as a family to eat. Taking care of the house would be their responsibility.

Renewal House is celebrating 20 years of helping elderly people. It is a great program and it really works.

- Beverly Anderson

SAVE THE DATE

Wednesday, May 2, 2018

7:30 – 9:00 am

Join us at our Annual Breakfast

as we celebrate

20 years of empowering formerly homeless older men and women

to restore their lives and return to independent living

A baton is being passed at Renewal House....

A special thank you to Carolyn Marston for her years of service to Renewal House. We wish her all the best as she heads toward retirement!

AND WHAT A JOURNEY IT'S BEEN!!

As many of you may know, I am working (no pun intended) on retiring from my position as Program Manager at Renewal House. The residents of Renewal House are a wonderfully diverse population with many talents and abilities. This house represents hope and strength. It is an opportunity to connect to the community and the services provided and regain an independent household.

Our community connections are the heart of the program. They support our program financially as well as giving donations of goods and time. Our community supporters also give residents opportunities to participate in community volunteer efforts. This is a reminder that we are not the situation we find ourselves in at the moment, but conscientious members of the community joining in the circle of giving.

The opportunity to be part of this organization for the past 7 years or so has been eye opening and very gratifying. I have met many wonderful members of our community on this journey and appreciate each one. Our transition begins with the addition of our new case manager, Marlene. She begins this work with good knowledge, good energy, and a good heart.

Retirement from the workplace does not mean retirement from participating in the Renewal House program! I hope to see you all at our breakfast in the Spring. Our silent auction will be amazing as usual and look for our new cookbook! Thank you for your support over the years.

- Carolyn Marston

And introducing Marlene Moore-Callands, our new Case Manager...

My name is Marlene Moore-Callands. I am the new Case Manager for the Renewal House Program. I earned my Bachelor's degree in Social Work at Western Connecticut State University and my graduate degree, a Master's in Social Work, from Fordham University. In October of 2016, I obtained my LMSW from the State of Connecticut. I am "home grown" as some might say, a Danbury, Connecticut native. I have been working full-time for the City of Danbury for almost 30 years.

I never gave up on my dream, to one day attend college - the dream I had "deferred", as Langton Hughes might say. Almost eight years ago, I decided to pursue and commit to that dream, with the sole thought that I could continue helping others.

I chose to wholeheartedly pursue Social Work, as well as Behavioral Science, because of the constant and traumatic environmental issues that many others, like myself, have faced. One of the many reasons I decided to go into the field of Social Work was to help populations that are at risk. For 19 years, I was a mentor for at risk teenagers/adolescents in the Danbury Public School system, mentoring middle and high school female students.

As a result of a number of negative exposures and influences in my own life, I believe that in this field, the field of Social Work, I will be able to help turn those sometimes traumatic experiences into something truly positive: the understanding and the helping of others.

I would like to thank Renewal House, their many supporters, and all the Board members for this great opportunity.

- Marlene Moore-Callands

RENEWAL HOUSE THEN AND NOW

I have been serving on the Admitting Committee for Renewal House since the early 2000's, when it was known as Shelter of the Cross. In those years, social services agencies such as the Department of Social Services had funding and services to assist clients who were faced with homelessness. With our current economic state, those funds have dried up or they have been greatly diminished. Previously, I was able to contact shelters directly when a homeless family came in for help, and I was usually able to find a place for them. When we saw clients experiencing chronic homelessness, factors such as substance abuse or mental health often disproportionately played a role, and we were able to build supports around these issues to overcome housing obstacles.

After the economic crash of 2008, more and more people fell into poverty in Connecticut while wages and disability payments remained stagnant. It is not uncommon today to see people in their fifties who worked their whole lives facing dire economic circumstances due to job loss and/or major health issues. We now have people utilizing our shelter systems with canes, walkers, or wheelchairs. People with learning or developmental disabilities, displaced parent caregivers, victims of financial exploitation and job loss have spiraled into economic devastation. I now find myself forced to tell my clients that I don't have a better choice for them than living in their car. Fortunately, for the past twenty years, Renewal House has been a beacon of light to those faced with homelessness.

I referred many older adults to Renewal House over the years, many of whom who have moved on to permanent housing. This used to be a fairly quick process in earlier days. Today, there are waitlists for virtually every public housing site in the greater Danbury area - some as long as five years. This creates a challenge for older adults who depend on a fixed income, which is often less than \$1000 a month. The area shelters are often full and to find a room to rent is nearly impossible.

Renewal House is unique in that the residents can stay in a safe environment for up to two years while they build on their strengths and pursue independent housing. They don't have to line up for shelter at 8:30 pm in the cold and leave at 6:00 am with only the clothes on their backs. They can store their medications safely and not have to worry about lack of refrigeration or worse - being robbed of them. They have access to services and supports and enjoy meals together. They are given an opportunity to pursue their goal of independent living in a dignified and comfortable home environment. We need to ensure that Renewal House perseveres in its mission to provide hope and compassion to older adults in dire need of housing. The program has a proven track record of success in addressing one of the most serious problems faced by older adults, one that is only going to increase as the population ages.

- Valerie O'Rourke

Social Work Supervisor, Danbury Department of Social Services

"The success rates for Renewal House graduates who regain and maintain their independent living status for 18 months or more is over 95%"

The Beginnings

Our founder, Karen Messina, was a graduate student at Western Connecticut State University when she first recognized that a different kind of help and shelter was needed for older homeless men and women. The Renewal House program was developed by her in collaboration with some of her fellow WCSU alumnae, some of whom are Epy Lawson and Lydia Kehl. Her professor Dr. Dan Joynt was also in on the "ground floor." His connections with volunteers at Habitat for Humanity helped bring more volunteers to restore the house that was to become a temporary home for homeless people 58 years old or more, who are willing and able - with the development of skills and community connections - to regain and maintain independent living. The success rates for Renewal House graduates who regain and maintain their independent living status for 18 months or more is over 95%.

The restoring of the house and support for the residents was and continues to be a community effort. This effort was joined by residents as well. Our first resident, Tim, worked with Dr. Dan Joynt to build a deck on the side of the house. There were many others who came as well, some of them retired and finding a purpose for themselves in the helping of others.

Western Connecticut State University continues to participate with the Renewal House program, as it does with other community programs. We have WCSU Counseling practicum students and interns as well as Social Work junior interns come to the program to assist. Renewal House gives the students an excellent opportunity to work with and become acquainted with the difficulties of homelessness and aging. The students provide counseling and social work services for our residents. These services are often much needed, and always highly appreciated. We hope to continue with WCSU as a partner in assisting this vulnerable population to meet their goals.

- Carolyn Marston



HOLIDAY THANK YOU'S

We all know it. Holidays can be times of great joy. They can also be reminders of great longing for what you once had or what you wish you could have had. During these times, the connections and the kindness of others can help.

And help we had! Our thanks to many kind and generous faith communities for remembering Renewal House as 2017 came to a close!



- St. Rose of Lima Church in Newtown and St. Edward the Confessor Church in New Fairfield for bountiful food drives
- St. Stephen's Episcopal Church of Ridgefield for preparing a delicious holiday dinner for residents and graduates
- St. Peter Church in Danbury, St. Edward the Confessor Church in New Fairfield and St. Francis Xavier Church in New Milford for making sure that every resident and many graduates had gifts to open on Christmas morning

Our thanks to all for making sure so many were remembered and were reminded that others do care.



As you do your online shopping this year, we want you to know that Renewal House is now registered with Amazon Smile. If you do not already have a charity of choice that benefits from your amazon.com purchases, we would love to fill that role! Just go to the smile.amazon.com website, select "Shelter of the Cross" (which remains our corporate identity) as your charity of choice, and return to smile.amazon.com for all of your amazon purchases. Amazon Prime is available for Amazon Smile purchases.

We thank you for considering this way to support Renewal House and would be happy to have you share this news with others who may consider supporting us as well.

As we reflect upon 20 years of Renewal House, the breakfast committee members shared their stories of how we got involved. We will continue to share these stories in the next edition of the newsletter. Here is a preview....

"My simple comment is just knowing that, at the latter stage of life, you can lose your home and income with no way to navigate through social services; Renewal House provides a safe place for people, who have been victimized by circumstances, to get back on their feet".

– **Peggy Katkocin, New Fairfield**

How I Found Renewal House

"I volunteered with Karen Messina at Dorothy Day Hospitality House for their 'Shelter from the Cold' program. It was while I was working with Karen there that I heard her dream for Shelter of the Cross, now known as Renewal House. She wanted the elderly homeless to have a place to stay so that they could learn how to put their lives back together again. I watched her dream become a reality. Karen's faith saw her through many obstacles! Renewal House is everything she hoped it would be".

– **Beverly Anderson, Danbury**