

# THE Quarterly

Spring 2024

In this issue, you will read inspiring stories about overcoming enormous odds to create hope and opportunities.

## Trying To Fill Those Holes In My Soul



Beaming, Eileen said, "My daughter gets to see that there is another way to live."

Swaying, as if in the wind, holding her daughter Ellyanda in her arms, Eileen Linke said, "I was raised to be an addict."

"Where to start?" She asked, as if there might be more than one beginning.

"My mom had me when she was young. She didn't know me. She only knew drugs and gangs in Trenton. And she was in way over her head," Eileen remembered.

"My mom introduced me to opiates when I was, let's see, twelve years old." Pausing, she added, "It was on July 4th."

**"When you are early in recovery, you still have holes in your soul. And there are not enough relationships or money in the world to fill those holes up."**

Was that her mother's skewed way of sharing part of her world with her daughter? Or just her natural way of celebrating the holiday?

"No," Eileen said, definitively. "It

was more like, 'Here. Take this. And get out of my face.'"

A year later, her mother's boyfriend overdosed. "I found him dead," Eileen winced, recalling the moment. "For years, I held a lot of guilt and shame for not having done something to save him—although I haven't the faintest idea of what I would have done."

"The Division of Youth and Family Services intervened, making sure I was no longer in that home," she added. She was sent to live with her father, "who had been out of the picture," as Eileen said. "So, I ended up still surrounded by drugs

1 Together, Eileen and her daughter Ellyanda will create new possibilities for themselves.

4 Donell, who lost his eye after being shot by a drug dealer, now inspires others to overcome their addictions.

5 As Tara prepares to leave The Shelter for her own apartment, she remembers her inspiration.

8 How something like a cup of coffee or a knit hat can be so appreciated by someone living on the streets.

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## Trying To Fill Those Holes In My Soul

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and abuse. They just switched the scenery on me."

Focusing on school, she found she enjoyed learning, even skipping a grade before graduating from Pemberton Township High School. Meanwhile, "my father and his relatives introduced me to selling drugs."

When she graduated, "I was kicked out of my father's house. So, I became homeless. Living in abandoned buildings. Eating out of dumpsters. I tried crack and heroin. I was selling drugs. Spiraling down. And I didn't know how far down could take me," she said.

"Meanwhile, since the age of twelve, I was taking Percocet regularly. It was all around when I was growing up. Like aspirin. So, I didn't think of it as a drug. It was just something that made me feel better."

**"Through the darkness, she saw the faintest glint of light, and, as she said, 'I finally got honest with myself.' Only then could she reach out for help."**

"I didn't know what love was." She considered that thought, then added, "So I kept looking for it, always trying to please people, doing whatever they wanted me to do."

What finally seemed hopeful was when she met a young man, became engaged and moved in with him. "His mom was great. She got me a job at a law firm, where I worked as a legal secretary. I learned a lot. It was really nice. At this point, though, I was still taking Percocet. And I could not admit that I had a problem. Things kept getting worse because of the severe mood swings I'd get from the Percocet. He tried to help me. But he couldn't. And I couldn't see I had a

problem. When I was 25, we broke up."

From there, she "got involved in a relationship where I was getting beat up all the time. I went back on heroin. Then on July 15, 2019 at 8:00 pm, I overdosed. I woke up in a hospital. When I got out,

**"Before, I just wanted to run away from myself. I now see a whole different future."**

that was the first time I went to rehab." But it took another year for me to "literally run away from that abusive relationship." She was living in her car, until it was repossessed.

Resigned to what she believed was her fate, Eileen went to see all the living members of her family and she gave each of them a single white rose. "Then I got a brick of heroin. And started sniffing." But even suicide did not go her way. She was shaken awake by a police officer.

"But it wasn't until December 9,

2021 that I became sober. And I have been ever since. My Higher Power came in. That was when, for the first time that I can remember, I woke up without the desire to get high. I never had that feeling before. It felt very different. And I was curious. So, I said, 'OK. Let's see how this plays out.'"

Eileen had moved into a Sober Home, where she was surrounded by a supportive community. Committed to her sobriety, she was feeling hopeful about her future, for what she considers to be "the first time ever."

"Then I became pregnant," she said. "And the young man I was with could not handle it. So, he disappeared." She felt like her world was caving in. "I felt like a failure. I didn't know what to do. The last thing I wanted was to be in a shelter with my baby. I thought I had no way out. I was afraid I would revert to my old ways. Taking drugs to escape. That was my SOP—the only thing I knew how to do when things got rough. I was lost, afraid,



*Together, I know, we will create new possibilities.*

**“The last thing I wanted was to be in a shelter with my baby. I thought I had no way out. I was afraid I would revert to my old ways. I was lost, afraid, alone, hopeless.”**

alone, hopeless.”

Through the darkness, Eileen saw the faintest glint of light. “I finally got honest with myself. And I reached out to my friend Stacy, who was there for me. And she gave me Thomasine’s number.”

Thomasine Gaines is the first person that a pregnant or postpartum woman who is struggling with addiction speaks to when she calls for help to *For My Baby and Me*, an innovative program in which the Rescue Mission of Trenton has partnered with Capital Health, HomeFront, Catholic Charities and Trenton Health Team to provide long-term recovery as well as ongoing medical care and support for

women and their children. “I called Thomasine,” Eileen said. “And just hearing her voice, I somehow knew that everything would be alright. I remember I was crying hysterically. And she calmed me down. Said she would come to meet me. And she assured me I would get through it – and be stronger for it.” Thomasine has lived experience in overcoming poverty and addiction that she draws upon daily to compassionately connect with, support, and, at times, challenge women who are pregnant and seeking help.

Eileen said, “Thomasine was there for me, providing emotional support, advocating for me, connecting me with medical treatment, introducing me to HomeFront so I had a place to stay, being my rock, my role model, and so much more.”

On November 18, 2022, Eileen gave birth, “a joy that is beyond what I ever thought was possible for me,”

she said, beaming.

Looking out a window at HomeFront, where her one-year-old daughter is now in day care, Eileen reflected, “When you are early in recovery, you still have holes in your soul. Then you try to fill those holes up with relationships or money. And there are not enough relationships or money in the world to fill those holes up.”

“I like who I am today,” she added. “Before, I just wanted to run away from myself. I now see a whole different future. It is a blessing to be on the other side of all that turmoil. I get to be a woman of honor, dignity and grace, which I was not before. And my daughter gets to see that there is another way to live. While my daughter is truly a motivation, I didn’t get sober for her. I had to get sober for myself – so that we could have the life that we now have together. And together, I know, we will create new possibilities.”

## Your Gently Used Clothes Can Make a World of Difference for Someone in Need

We gratefully accept donations of gently used clothes - which will immediately help someone who knocks on our Shelter’s door – because they have nowhere else to turn.

Your donations also provide a very affordable way for our patrons to find clothing of great value in our Thrift Store, which they could not find anywhere nearby.

And we make it convenient for you to donate clothing in our drop-off-boxes located throughout our community.

Another way you can support those we serve is by hosting a clothing drive through your company, business, school, faith-based organization, or civic group.

### HOW TO DONATE

For more information, call **David at (609) 695-1436 ext. 306.**

You can also find a Clothing Donation Box near you by clicking on our website: **RescueMissionOfTrenton.org** – then slide down to the bottom of our homepage and click on **Clothing Box Locations.**



Hasly and her mom Angelica found a vast array of choices for school shopping in our Thrift Store.



# How A Former Resident Started Working In The Shelter

**G**rowing up in a very bleak section of Newark, Donell Whitley remembers, “My family was poor. We had no money.” In his neighborhood, there were no executives, construction workers, or firemen coming home at the end of the day. And the only salespeople he saw were selling drugs. “There were dealers on every street corner,” he said, “and they were the ones with the fancy cars, flashy jewelry, and loads of cash. As a kid, to me, it looked

**“I tell people, if I can do it, while being legally blind – imagine what you can do.”**

like they were the only ones in my neighborhood who were thriving. So, I saw what was happening.”

He remembers, “I was 11 years old, and my sister and I were starving. I knew my mom had spent all the food stamps. So I went to Les, who was always on our street corner. And I told him we were hungry, and he gave me a few dollars. The next day I asked him again, and he asked me if I wanted to make some easy money. I said sure. So he had me standing on the street, asking people if they wanted any coke. They’d give me ten dollars, and I’d call up to Les, who was in his apartment. He’d drop a bottle on a string down to me, I’d put the ten dollars in the bottle, he’d pull it up, then send the bottle back down with a dime’s worth of coke.” At the end of the day, before he was a teenager, Donell was making twenty dollars a day.

“So, I figured out how to provide for myself and my family,” he said. “In my neighborhood, this was all normal. And that lifestyle became a strong addiction.”

Beyond the easy money, what he didn’t see at first, Donell said, “was when the dealers were arrested and sent to



*Donell lost his eye after being shot in the head by a drug dealer.*

prison or killed by each other.”

The first time Donell was shot was when he was 15. That time, it was just in his leg. By another dealer. As a warning.

Twelve years later, the warning was more dire. “I got shot in my head. Left on the street. I lost my left eye. And 50% of the vision in my right eye.” Now, with his glasses on, when he needs to read something, he holds it very close to his face. And the letters are blurry on the periphery.

When he was 36, he went to prison for the third time. “When I got out,” he said, “I was still planning on going back to the street, feeling: What else can I do? I’m legally blind. How can I make it in the regular world with no vision? Who’s going to hire me?”

When Recovery Court gave him the opportunity to come to The Mission in March of last year, Donell said, “I didn’t want to be here. I thought I’d just

bide my time.” Then he heard about The New Direction Program, a transformative course to help formerly incarcerated individuals to see their real potential and to create a plan for their future – with an emphasis on changing their mindset, exploring training opportunities, developing their own career path, and learning from role models who served time and are now succeeding.

After applying, being accepted and being one of twelve students to complete the program, Donell said, “I thought, I could have a career in selling. I’m good at it. I just need to redirect my energies in a more positive way.” Pausing, he added, “Then I realized, that’s not what I’m here for. I was not put on this planet to sell. I’m here to inspire other people to overcome their addictions.”

So, after completing The Mission’s

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## Getting Ready To Leave The Shelter

**W**hen Tara Brown, who grew up on South Logan Avenue in Trenton, came to The Mission's Shelter just shy of a year ago, she had nowhere else to turn.

*What is it like when coming to The Shelter is your only option?*

"Depression brought me here," she said. "I had just lost my partner of eight years. Unfortunately, he was abusive. But it was all I knew. For a while I rented rooms from place to place. Then I didn't have any choice but to come to The Shelter." Pausing, Tara, added, "It's been a struggle. It's not how I saw my life going. Since I've been here, though, Keara has been a bright light in my life."

Keara Davis, a Case Manager in The Shelter, "has been there for me in so many ways," Tara said. "She has helped me to believe in myself. And to realize that this is a temporary situation, not a defining moment in my life. She has helped me to get counseling and therapy. She has also helped me to apply for jobs, and to prepare for interviews. And she has connected me with the CEAS Center (operated by the City of Trenton's Department of Health and Human Services), so I will soon have my own apartment."

Keara shared, "Tara has done an enormous amount of personal work. I am so proud of her. And I will miss her.

She is intent on making her life better. She is a survivor."

Smiling, Tara said, "Keara has helped me to have faith, and to trust again. The way she listens and is there for me." Looking away, she added, "My mother was the only other woman that I had that kind of relationship with, and she is gone now."

**"She has helped me to believe in myself. And to realize that this is a temporary situation, not a defining moment in my life."**



*Tara described Keara as "a bright light in my life."*

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Behavioral Health Program, Donell earned a certification as a Peer Recovery Specialist, which qualifies individuals with lived experience to help others in recovery. During that time, he stayed in touch with several of the instructors in The New Direction Program, who gave him advice as well as character references.

Then he applied for and was hired in January as an Emergency Shelter Asso-

**"I believe that everybody is special. We just need to realize what we are special at – and pursue it."**

ciate, where he is learning the ropes, as he works closely with the Case Managers and Counselors, helping people experiencing homelessness.

"I feel like I know what I'm here for

now. I want my life to have meaning. I want to have an impact. And I want to help people get back to where they belong. I'm encouraging people to get back to themselves. I tell people, if I can do it, while being legally blind – imagine what you can do. I know I can inspire others – because I am them and they are me. I believe that everybody is special. We just need to realize what we are special at – and pursue it."



## A Previously Homeless Mom Gives Back

**H**omeless, while still a teenager, with a new baby, Camisha Wescott, who is now an assistant general manager at a Cheesecake Factory, remembers moving from shelter to shelter.

"While still in high school, I became a mother at the age of 16," she recalled. "My mother, who was very upset with

**"While still a teenager, with a new baby, Camisha remembers moving from shelter to shelter."**

me, said I had to figure this out on my own." For a while, Camisha and her daughter stayed with a family member.

Then, her circumstances changed, and with no place to live, she found herself going back and forth between a shelter in a church in Willingboro and another shelter in Medford.

While staying in the shelters, she got her first job at a McDonalds, which gave her enough money to buy diapers, wipes, clothes and food. "When I applied for public assistance, though, I was told I was making too much money working at McDonalds."

Trying to support herself, she earned a license as a Certified Nursing Assistant, then started working overnight at a nursing home.

Soon, though, she had another daughter, whose father was "very abusive." Letting out a huge sigh, she said, "He would get very violent with me. Then one day, he locked us in the house and said he was going to burn the house down with all of us in it. I had no choice but to run for my life with my kids."

For several years, she would find one-bedroom apartments they could



*Camisha's son Gabriel said, "Mommy, you know what it's like to have no food. I wish I was there to help you."*

afford, in areas where she did not feel safe. "But, after a while, I would lose those places because I could not pay for rent, childcare, electricity and food. I didn't mind the struggle. And I didn't mind those days when I would personally go hungry. But those days when we would lose our apartment, those were the days that tore me apart."

She added, "I would lose so many things along the way. Furniture. Clothes. And it was embarrassing for my daughters to be picked up from a hotel by the school bus, because we were temporarily living there. One time, I would leave my daughters with a baby sitter, then I would go and sleep in the car. But I never lost my will to keep my family together, or my belief that things would somehow get better."

"When I got a job offer at Virtua Hospital," Camisha said, "life finally

became easier."

"Then, wanting to provide more for my family, I took a second job as a server at The Cheesecake Factory. I like

**"I never lost my will to keep my family together, or my belief that things would somehow get better."**

people, and found that I actually had a passion for working in the restaurant. After a year, they asked if I wanted to be in management, which I've enjoyed."

Camisha, who is now an assistant general manager, said, "Up to that point, I always did what I had to do. But I never knew what I wanted to do. Now, I want to give back. I am fortunate to be enjoying what I'm doing, I'm able to provide for those I love, and to see

a positive future." She paused, then added, "My son, Gabriel, who will be 8 this year, will never experience what my daughters endured."

**G**abriel, along with her daughters, other family members, friends and colleagues from The Cheesecake Factory

**"Now, I want to give back. I am fortunate to be enjoying what I'm doing, I'm able to provide for those I love, and to see a positive future."**

came to The Mission's Shelter for what she called *A Giveback*.

Camisha took a bonus she had just received and decided to spend \$750 buying food to feed people who were staying in The Shelter. "I cooked it all," she said. "And it felt great. Then, on a cold day this winter, we all served the home-cooked meals, letting everyone know that we cared."

Her son, Gabriel, said, "Mommy, you know what it's like to have no food. I wish I was there to help you."

She added, "Now, whenever he sees someone who is homeless, he wants to buy them some food."

Thinking back to the day of her *Giveback*, Camisha said, "It occurred to me that, while some things in our lives might not start off perfect, it can still all lead to something that feels right."

She added, "You never know what other people are dealing with, but a warm smile can go a long way."



Family, friends and colleagues served meals that Camisha cooked for those staying in The Shelter.

## Giving Love To Our Neighbors Living On The Streets

*continued from back cover*

addiction are known to congregate. Then they'll see someone, pull over, and offer a cup of coffee. And what happens next is amazing to see. Others start to gather. Hugs are exchanged. Trust opens, as gratitude is shared. Sipping coffee, receiving a sandwich and some new clothes, sometimes a Narcan kit, you hear lots of people echoing, "Thank you, very much."

Through such deep connections, since starting in August of 2022, The Mission's Outreach initiative has provided coffee and food 5,829 times, 1,150 items of clothing, 1,172 Narcan kits, addiction treatment for 81 individuals, medical treatment for 28 individuals, and brought 21 homeless individuals to The Shelter.

And behind each of those numbers is a personal story – like Coffee's.



Chalia and Coffee hugged tightly before saying, "goodbye."





Please  
donate  
now.

Feeding those who are hungry, housing those who are homeless, counseling those seeking recovery, and providing life-changing opportunities.

## Giving Love To Our Neighbors Living On The Streets

**G**reeting the sunrise on a raw winter day, Chalia Perry and Jose Caraballo quickly pulled The Mission's Outreach van to a halt, hopped out, and warmly greeted someone they have become very familiar with, who is living on the streets, and goes by the name of Coffee.

"Coffee," Chalia called out, "I have something beautiful for you that'll also keep your head warm." Then Chalia showed her some of the nearly 200 hats that were hand-knitted by Anita Brady and her family and friends. Coffee's eyes lit up, as she saw a dark green hat that matched the coat she was wearing. Each of these hats, Anita shared, is created as a unique expression of love – to let their receiver know how valued they are. Some of the more intricate designs take days for talented knitters to create.

As Coffee pulled the hat snugly around her ears, she genuinely expressed thanks. "Wow! This is beautiful. Thank you." Then, catching herself before becoming tearful, she quickly shifted gears, and, with an uncanny sense of timing, pretended she was modeling the hat, posing, laughing, saying, "Yes! This is the one. Definitely! This is me."

As more people gathered around



*Coffee's eyes lit up, as she saw a dark green hat that matched the coat she was wearing.*

Photo by Michael Mancuso

the van, calling out each other's names, asking what was going on, Coffee took center stage, as if she was hosting a television talk show. Teasing, she started hitting on Jose, saying, "I'm going to get cleaned up by Wednesday and marry him." Then she insisted to others who gathered,

**"Their 'usual' is unlike anything that most of us have seen in our lives."**

"You stay away from him. He's going to be my husband." Meanwhile, Jose was just sitting with a huge grin on his face.

For Chalia and Jose, who are both Certified Peer Recovery Specialists, special moments like this are business as usual. Except their 'usual' is unlike anything that most of us have seen in our lives. They navigate through the city, knowing where people living on the streets who are struggling with

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