

THE Quarterly

Spring 2025

In this issue, we share inspiring stories about the struggles, opportunities and successes of those we serve.

1 Claudia, who became homeless after being robbed and beaten, now speaks on behalf of those experiencing homelessness.

4 The unprecedented surge in homelessness required adding new space and new staff this winter.

5 Camara, who had to come to The Shelter earlier in his life, was able to return with a donation from where he works.

8 Charlene, who needed to come to The Shelter "for some time and support" now works here helping those in their time of need.



Shortly after being robbed and beaten near her apartment in Princeton, Claudia became homeless.

Rising From Ashes That Are Still Burning

On a dark, sweltering summer night, just shy of two years ago, Claudia Moeller was walking home to her apartment in Princeton when, out of the shadows, she was attacked, robbed, and left thrashed on the sidewalk.

Dazed and shattered, she could not call for help because her phone was stolen, along with her wallet, including a lot of cash she was carrying, along with her credit cards.

"It gives me the opportunity to shed a light on homelessness – so that more people may, hopefully, be able to see themselves in those of us who are living in a homeless shelter."

"I was robbed of everything," she recalled, definitively, including her sense of safety and her belief in herself.

Disoriented, she got lost trying to find her way home. The police and her landlord were helpful in the beginning, she remembered. Most of her savings were missing, though. And trying to straighten out the debacle of her stolen credit cards became an overwhelming nightmare. "By the time I was through, I was left with nothing," she said.

Claudia didn't know where to turn for help. Her landlord said he would forgive her rent for the first month. "Then a

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Rising From Ashes That Are Still Burning

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church helped me with the next month of rent," she said. Holding her thumb and forefinger apart, she added, "I couldn't believe that I was this close to being homeless."

As her options disappeared, police officers in Princeton offered to take Claudia to an apartment on Escher Street in Trenton, which she temporarily shared with three other women. "I didn't stop crying for the entire month I was there. I was so sad, and shocked beyond belief. All I could think was, *How could this happen to me so quickly?*" Then she reflected, "It took me quite a while to realize that it could happen to any one of us."

Shortly afterwards, police officers in Trenton safely helped Claudia move to The Mission's Shelter. "At that point, I was traumatized," she said, remembering like it was yesterday. "There was a toughness to some of the people who were staying here at The Shelter. And I wasn't used to it. This was a whole new world to me. There are a lot of people staying here with very strong personalities. There was shouting and occasional fighting. And I was scared. It was very overwhelming," she paused, then added, "But as I got used to their tough exteriors, I came to learn so many important lessons from so many people staying here. Most importantly, they taught me how resilient I can be.

"They also taught me that we are all here together. In the same place. We all have stories. Some are more tragic than others. I now have so many people who are friends from so many different backgrounds and cultures and countries – and they have taught me not to give up. And how to keep on going – and believing. They have such honesty, depth and conviction." Tears welled up in her eyes, as she added, "I've become friends with women who have been



Claudia with "Blue Iris," which she painted in an art class at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen.

assaulted and raped. My story seems like nothing compared to what they've been through. They inspire me every single day."

She mused, "Sometimes I go back to Princeton, and it seems like it was another

"Before coming to The Shelter, I lived a comfortable lifestyle, in a bubble. I never thought this would happen to me. Yet, somehow, being here has made me stronger."

lifetime. Before coming to The Shelter, I lived a comfortable lifestyle, in a bubble. I never thought this would happen to me. Yet, somehow, being here has made me stronger.

"After I move on from The Mission," Claudia added, "I know that I will be ready to overcome anything. For that, I am grateful."

She keeps a rigorous schedule at The Shelter. "Our mornings start with getting

up at 4:45, and having breakfast at 5:30. Lights are out at eight o'clock each night. In between, I know I can have warm meals and a safe place to sleep. I have a permanent bed because I am working. Knowing where you are going to sleep is important for your sense of yourself. Until you lose everything, you can't imagine how something as simple as a hot shower can make you feel human."

As she learns to accept and find meaning in what she called "my new reality," Claudia keeps extremely busy. The therapy sessions she has at Catholic Charities, she said, "help immensely as I sort through my thoughts and feelings." Looking down at a fleck of blue paint that was still on her right hand, she added, "I've also found time to paint and to write poetry. I find being creative to be very healing." She is taking classes in creative writing and fine arts at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, where some of her pieces are displayed and several have been sold. Her paintings can also be seen at Studio 51 on Stockton Street in Trenton.

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Retiring From a Job That Saved Him When He Was Younger

It was in the early 90's, Dusty Ross remembers, when he first came to The Mission seeking help.

"I stayed in The Shelter," he recalled, "then I went through The Mission's recovery program. And for a while I was doing well." He nodded, as if in agreement, then added. "But I relapsed.

"It took a while for me to work up the courage to ask if I could come back again. But Mary Gay and Barrett were very encouraging. And they let me go through the program again.

"So, for a while, I was doing well again. Then I relapsed one more time."

Several years later, Dusty asked, for what would be his last time, if he could go through the program again. "And that was what I needed." He paused, then added, "Or maybe that was when I was ready."

After succeeding this time, he had a job and a sober living house to call home.

Soon, however, he sensed that he needed a change in scenery – in the *continued on page 7*



Dusty, who just retired as a peer recovery specialist, has an innate ability to connect with and inspire people in earlier stages of recovery.

Since last September, Claudia has also been the Co-Chair of the Advisory Board to the Trenton/Mercer Continuum of Care Program, which was created to promote a community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness. In this capacity, Claudia said, "I try to shine a light on how homelessness affects us – as individuals and as a society. For those who are currently struggling, abandoned, mistreated and misjudged...for the unseen that deserve to be seen...for the unheard that deserve to be heard...for the unhoused who deserve to be housed...I'm speaking for myself and for all those who are homeless."

Providing an unflinching glimpse into what it is like to become homeless, Claudia reminds us how it feels to lose all hope – then to find yourself again.

"I am inspired that a few times each week somebody is helped to move from The Shelter to their own home, so they can turn their lives around."

"Losing everything," she said, "is like a thief attacking you in the night. When you are homeless, you feel desperate, lost and alone. Your life is filled with uncertainties. The struggle to get my life back still haunts my daily existence. Part of me will always carry this experience with me – in so many negative and equally positive ways. Through it all, I've emerged eternally grateful to have a caring place to stay, for a safe place to sleep, to receive warm meals, to be able

to take hot showers, to store my belongings, and to receive counseling to help me become even more resilient."

As she awaits the opportunity to obtain her own subsidized apartment, Claudia emphasized the sense of purpose and belonging she has to be working part-time on the Advisory Board to the Continuum of Care. "It gives me the opportunity to shed a light on homelessness – so that more people may, hopefully, be able to see themselves in those of us who are living in a homeless shelter," she explained.

Then smiling, she added, "I am inspired that a few times each week somebody is helped to move from The Shelter to their own home, so they can turn their lives around." Pausing, she said, "I have found many new reasons to be hopeful."

Unprecedented Surge in Homelessness Required New Space and Staff This Winter

To safely accommodate an unprecedented surge in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness who are seeking shelter and emergency services, The Mission dedicated additional space and added staff to serve up to 85 more people a day.

"In just the past two years, there has been a 90 percent increase in the number of people asking to come to our Shelter. And that need becomes life threatening for those living on the streets during the below-freezing temperatures of winter," said Barrett Young, Chief Executive Officer of The Mission. "So, we knew we had to do something different to respond to this urgent need."

To accommodate this need, a new Comfort Center was housed where The Mission's Thrift Store is currently. (The store size and operations were reduced until March.) In 2020, during the onslaught of the pandemic, that space was converted in a similar fashion to address the need for social distancing to safely accommodate more people who were seeking refuge.

The Comfort Center was open seven days a week from 3:00 pm until 7:00 am, serving breakfast and dinner, through March.

In addition to meals and a respite from the cold, individuals were also able to engage with The Mission's professional team to gain access to healthcare, behavioral health counseling, addiction treatment, financial assistance, and the possibility of obtaining housing.

James Rein, a Trenton native, who just turned 60 and has been periodically coming to The Mission's Shelter for more than a decade, said, "I've known I can always get a warm meal and a safe place to sleep here. This year, though, I am very grateful for the additional space that has been added. The Shelter has always been crowded when the temperatures turn below freezing in winter. But this winter,



James Rein, a Trenton native, who just turned 60 and has been periodically coming to The Mission's Shelter for more than a decade, said he "grows a beard in the winter to help keep warm."

"This winter, with so many more people coming to The Shelter, there just was not enough room for all of us."

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Alyese Patterson, a Case Manager in The Shelter, described James as "a seasonal guest, who likes to stay to himself, and is a joy to be around." Smiling at her description of him, James said, "I grow a beard in the winter to help keep warm. Then when the weather gets warmer, I stay with my brother or friends or I'll put up a tent. After this winter, though, I know I'm getting too old for this. I want to work with Alyese on how to find my own subsidized

place to stay."

Three additional full-time employees were added to operate this center. Including food, the additional costs were over \$170,000.

"While we did not anticipate these additional expenses, we knew that this need could not wait," emphasized Barrett. "So we moved ahead – with the belief that, through the compassion and generosity of our donors, somehow, those expenses would be met."

He added, "Ultimately, at the end of this long winter, we will know that we did the right thing by an increase in the number of clients we serve, by a lack of reports of frostbite or death, by the number of meals we serve and clothing we provide, and, ultimately, by the number of individuals who we can help obtain permanent housing," Barrett added.

Fulfilling a Vow to Come Back and Help

A few years after graduating from Trenton High School, Camara Wilson fell upon some hard times and, as he said, "I needed to spend a few months at The Mission's Homeless Shelter. I was greeted there in a way that was warm and welcoming, when I needed it most. I knew I was capable of better, but I had lost my way. And the staff there helped me get my legs back under me. It was a turning point in my life. I saw it as a test. And it made me a better person. I'll never forget the care and support I received when I was there. It was my safety net. I had a safe place to sleep, warm meals, and they even helped me put my resume together and apply for jobs."

When he was finally able to leave The Shelter for his own apartment after becoming a sales associate at the retail store Forman Mills, he said, "I vowed to come back and help in some way."

Fast forward and two years ago, Camara started working at Presto Tape, a manufacturer of protective adhesive films and specialty tapes, where Rich Speeney, the President, created a culture of innovating, excelling and giving back. Deeply caring about everyone who works there and their families is a core value that permeates the organization. In addition, Rich said, "We share a portion of our profits with those outside our four walls."

In addition to being a machine operator, Camara was also selected to be on the company's Core Value Team, a small group that, he said, "meets twice a month to share ideas about how we can make the team better inside – and outside." That was where Camara saw the opportunity to complete his vow of coming back to The Shelter and helping in some way.

He shared with Robyn McCloskey, Presto's Care Team Coordinator, about how earlier in his life he had stayed at The Shelter, and she encouraged him to create a coat drive. So, just before the

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freezing temperatures of winter set in, Camara brought nearly 300 coats from his colleagues, along with a donation of \$10,000 from Presto Tape.

As he brought the coats to The Mission, Camara said, "It took a while. But I'm so glad to be back." Then he smiled, and added, "And I look forward to coming back again."



Camara needed to come to The Mission's Homeless Shelter earlier in his life when he fell upon hard times.

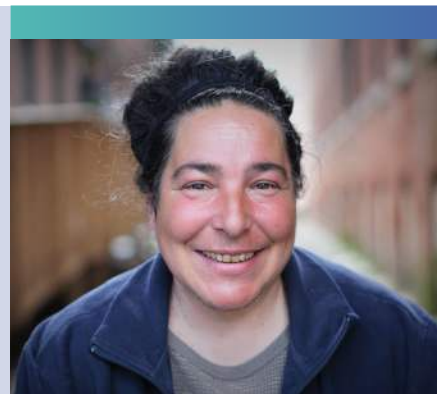
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Finding Hope After It Was Lost

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her, though. I remember her trying to encourage me that she would be a better mom. And that felt good, at the time. Knowing that she cared really mattered. It was something I could hold on to.”

In between the visits, Charlene and her brother would receive letters from her mother. Inside of each envelope, “there were promises from my mom about of how things would be better when she got out of prison.” Charlene paused, then added, “For a while, I believed in ‘better.’ Then, eventually, I got used to things being what they were.” Sighing, Charlene said, “My mother lived her life.”

Meanwhile, her great aunt, who was a former teacher, raised Charlene and her brother, providing guidance, hope and love. “She stayed on us about school,” Charlene said. “Learning, she repeated to us often, was the key to unlocking our future.” She also insisted on having the siblings share responsibilities, including cleaning the house and shopping for groceries. I learned to cook by the time I was ten,” Charlene added. “I also knew how to iron by then.”

After high school, Charlene became a security guard, which she did until 2019 when she had to resign to take care of her mother. “For too long, she had ignored her health. She was diabetic, and, at that point, she was an amputee.” Charlene tried to be encouraging. But it was disheartening. Her mother was still struggling with heroine. Charlene got her to try methadone to ease the painful withdrawal symptoms. “We would argue a lot about her health,” Charlene said. “She was a tough cookie. But there were times when she could make me laugh.”

Then, all at once, in a short period of time, it seemed that Charlene’s world collapsed. Her mother died, then her father and brother were both killed.



Alyese, a Case Manager in The Shelter, described Charlene as having “an aura. And an eagerness to get on with her life.”

With nowhere else to turn, she came to The Mission’s Shelter. “I didn’t want to be here,” she said. “I’d always been able to sustain myself financially before. I had no choice but to come here, though. I was depressed. I had run out of means

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to support myself. I was heavy with emotions. Vexed. What I wanted did not go the way I expected it to. I knew I had to come to terms with the struggle I was having deep within me. I just needed some time and support to get myself back together.”

Reflecting on that sweltering summer day in August of last year when she had run out of choices and had to knock on The Shelter’s door, Charlene said, “The pandemic got me thinking a lot about life. Since being here, I’ve been working on what’s next for me.”

Soon after arriving, Charlene met Alyese Patterson, a Case Manager in The Shelter. “Charlene came with an aura,” Alyese said. “She had an eagerness to get on with her life.”

Smiling, Charlene replied, “Since being here, the first thing I did was get my license reinstated to be a security guard. Then I started bugging Alyese to help me research apartment vacancies.”

“I would give her leads,” Alyese said, “then she would do the legwork. I was impressed by her motivation. My motto is that I will work as hard for you as you do for yourself. Charlene had already overcome so many struggles. I knew she just needed an opportunity to open up for her.”

That opportunity opened in the

heart of Trenton at 300 South Clinton Avenue, where, several years ago, The Mission bought and refurbished an historic, but abandoned, house, which became the home for five women who were formerly homeless. Fortunately, someone had just moved from there, allowing Charlene a new place to call home.

To move in, Charlene was able to receive temporary rental assistance from the Mercer County Board of Social Services, while she found new employment. "I believe it is your time to receive," Alyese told Charlene. "And the road ahead will be bright for you."

Shortly after moving in, Charlene applied for and was offered a position as

an Emergency Shelter Associate in The Shelter, where she started helping individuals experiencing homelessness with their needs. "Having been there myself," she said, "I know what someone can be going through. So I am grateful to be helping someone else in their time of need," she said, adding, "And I'm all about positivity. So, I hope my vibe alone will be uplifting."

Retiring From a Job That Saved Him When He Was Younger

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people, places and things that he knew could draw him, like a magnet, back to his addiction. So, Dusty left Trenton for North Carolina. There he worked at FedEx until he had a heart attack.

That was when he came back home to Trenton.

Soon after, Dusty said, "I was walking downtown, and Mary Gay rolled down her car's window and called out, asking how I was doing. I told her I

"You never know how or when you can help someone. Sometimes it's just by being yourself and being there when someone needs to talk."

needed a job. And she said, 'OK.' Then, a few days later, Barrett called and asked me to stop by. And they hired me to be a Peer Recovery Specialist."

That was in 2016.

And Dusty just retired from that job, where he's been helping people in earlier stages of their recovery, through the example of his life, by encouraging them to believe in themselves.

"You never know how or when you can help someone," he reflected. "Sometimes it's just by being yourself and being there when someone needs

to talk. "I let them know that I have been clean for a decade now. And I still have my struggles. I let them know that I still go to meetings. And I pray. I always tell people when they get here that I know many people who went through this program and who are now successful. They have jobs. And they turned their lives around. And you can be one of those people. You just have to give yourself a chance.

"Everybody's story is different, I tell them. You just have to stay focused on yourself, on your own recovery. Then you will succeed."

The hardest thing Dusty said he had to learn at The Mission was how to use a computer. "My mentality before was that I would always work in a factory. But I saw that by learning how to use the computer, I could think differently about myself, about what I was capable of. It took a while. But I mastered it. And now I have a different sense of who I am." Reflecting on his job, Dusty said, "What I always liked about working here was the atmosphere. The way we all work together. And the ability to help someone. You can't help everyone. But you can help some people. And you never know who that person might be. So, you keep trying. And believing."

Smiling, he added, "My job is to give someone some hope."

As he reflected on his retirement, Dusty said, "I would reminisce, and remember when I first came here looking for help. I was in room 14. Then I was in room 36. And then I was working here," he said, shaking his head, as if in disbelief. "And now I'm retired."

He added, "I also keep thinking about how Mary Gay and Barrett always believed in me. And how grateful I am to them for never giving up on me. And how I want to believe in others that same way."

Dusty will continue as the House Manager at one of the rooming and boarding houses owned and operated by The Mission. "The place is comfortable and cozy," he said, "and the other

"I tell people when they get here that I know many people who went through this program and who are now successful. And you can be one of those people. You just have to give yourself a chance."

guys and I, who are all in recovery, help each other on our journeys."

He is also a talented singer, who is looking to spend more time with The Chosen Disciples, a gospel group that performs locally, has recorded several CD's, and will be touring in the South this summer.

Having retired only a few days when he gave this interview, Dusty added, "I'm not sure I can get used to this. I decided to retire because I was at the age I could do it. I just want to take some more time to enjoy life a little bit. In a few months, though, I could see myself going back part-time."



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Finding Hope After It Was Lost

When Charlene Rowe was six years old, living in North Trenton, she knew her mom was struggling, trying to keep it together. She imagined a thin rope that her mom was somehow barely holding onto. "My mom was around," Charlene recalled, then looked off, as if in the distance. "But she was caught up in drugs."

Then something happened. As often happens in the aftermath of a trauma, Charlene said, "I can't remember the full story. But my mom was hospitalized, and me and my brother Maurice were taken to live with our great aunt, who was my grandmother's sister."

That was followed by "a lot of back and forth," Charlene said. "My mom got custody again for a year or so. Then we went back to living with my aunt. There was a lot of jail time."

Charlene remembers visiting her mother at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Clinton, New Jersey. The huge brown brick buildings seemed to go on forever.

"To see her, we had to go through a lot of security gates." And the sound of



"After having no choice but to seek help at The Shelter, Charlene is now working in The Shelter, helping people in their time of need."

"I didn't want to come to The Shelter," Charlene said. "I'd always been able to sustain myself financially before."

each of those gates closing was ominous. Eventually, Charlene, her brother and her great aunt would arrive at a huge, open room that felt like an empty, old gym. "There were lots of other families there," she recalled. "My mom was in her orange uniform. My brother and I were able to see her and talk with

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