



AMHERST COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Housing is THE Solution to Homelessness

The Magician in Residence



Whitney, bringing joy and entertainment to the ACC office

“Now this will totally blow your mind...” Whitney warned.

And he did. Whitney, a resident of Amherst, shared his magic with us at Amherst Community Connections. First, a sleight of hand faster than the eye could follow, then a math-based trick, followed by magic that made the cards seem to talk to each other.

Laughing at my amazement, he just said, “I’ve got ones even crazier than that one.”

However, he works his magic on more than just cards. “In video, I love to do the magic where you don’t know what’s going to happen,” Whitney says. On his Youtube channel, he has videos of all sorts: humor, nature, video games, etc. For me, the highlights are

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Amherst Community Connections

236 N. Pleasant Street, Amherst

(413) 345-0737

Walk-ins Mon.-Friday 8:30 am-12 pm; by appointment 12-5:30 pm

“To empower, advocate for, and assist those in need”

his anime music videos, where he transforms animated shows by remixing clips and adding music that matches perfectly with the scenes. What he produces is almost magical. It’s hard to believe the components weren’t together to begin with.

Like a true magician, Whitney never reveals his tricks. However, he shared his process for video editing. For the video to come together, Whitney says, “I watch the anime at home and replay the song over and over again... I have to memorize all of

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it." After the pieces all come together in his head, he makes the different apps on his phone all work together. Whitney says, "When every note or every sound is exact timing, I'm happy. I just love that part," as his eyes lit up.

In addition to his Youtube channel, Whitney manages a chat on LINE, a messaging app, where he puts his own spin on classic games. Taking the online quiz format, he livens up the game by putting a mole in to the chat – someone who knows all the answers to the questions. "By doing that, people get a little weirded out. Like there was a hard question and this guy was able to answer it." If players figure out who the mole is, they get bonus points. This concept inspired him to start a murder mystery chat, where players message each other to catch the suspect planted in the chat and solve the mystery. These well-done videos and novel ideas have attracted many subscribers to both his channel and chat, creating his own little community.

Beyond his many talents, what amazes me most about Whitney is his sense of humor and outlook on life. Whenever he comes in, he never fails to make everyone at Amherst Community Connections laugh. His reply to the classic, "How are you doing?" is usually upbeat and cheery. When asked how he does it, Whitney reflects, "The older I got, I understand there are many other ways to touch people. To make them feel happy – making them laugh, showing them different things about the world when I do magic tricks or film videos. It really helps out." Indeed it has. Thank you, Whitney.

To see Whitney's videos for yourself, here is the link to his Youtube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLWATf28Gz1zs7NRATvdq7Q/playlists>. Whitney is currently preparing a Magic show for April 21st to be performed at the Amherst Farmers Market. Prepare to be amazed.

Written by Emily Ma

As an advocate, I work with Whitney to secure housing and employment. For the past two months, he has been diligently working to achieve housing stability. If anyone has housing/rooms for rent on the bus route in Amherst or Northampton for under \$550, please contact ACC at accinamherst@gmail.com.

Meet the Team: Alex

I was immediately drawn to Amherst Community Connections as soon as Hwei-Ling asked two questions, "Do you like people and do you like to write?" Since I am a sophomore journalism major, I could not think of anything more suitable for me than interning at ACC. Amherst Community Connections advocates for people who do not have the ability to do so for themselves, and the basic premise of being a journalist is functioning as an overseer of those whose power or position most affect citizens. Journalists are even sometimes referred to as "watch dogs" because we try to provide a voice to the voiceless.



Alex does case work and social media at ACC

I was also drawn to ACC due to growing up in a family that is heavily involved in the foster care system through the Department of Children and Families. Through my family's involvement with DCF, I have had over 100 "foster siblings" and I also

gained two younger siblings through adoption. I have a passion for trying to advocate for the homeless because my youngest sister was directly affected by homelessness throughout her childhood before my family adopted her. Without my little siblings, I would lack some of the better traits that I have today, traits like my ability to be open-minded and my appreciation for the little things in life. Growing up in a multi-racial family I have learned how to face the true challenges of diversity, and I believe I can help others face their own challenges.

In my down time I enjoy reading memoirs because they always start with an author facing a challenge and then proceeds through the journey to a resolution of their problems, which gives me a certain drive and inspiration with each story I read. Along with being an avid reader, I enjoy street documentary photography. This style of photography is very similar to the case of “Humans of New York” but with a little less intensity. I enjoy going into big cities like Boston and Providence with my camera, snapping candid pictures of people. One of my favorite activities is participating in aerial yoga because in a world of chaos, it is nice to unwind.

Behind the Scenes of Housing First

So far, three participants have graduated from ACC’s Housing First Program, meaning they have transitioned into stable housing, while three are currently in the program and working toward moving into secured housing of their own and opening up the voucher for the next participant on the waiting list. However, this statistic alone does not do justice to all that goes on behind the scenes of the Housing First Program.

What some may not know is that we do not wait until a voucher opens to begin together with a participant to secure stable housing. In fact, our work begins during the earliest stages of the process – when an individual has been classified as “vulnerable” by our Housing First eligibility

checklist. From the time a participant is accepted onto the Housing First waiting list up until the participant has moved into stable housing, participation in programming is required. This involves engaging in pre-housing advising, incubator meetings, and post-housing advising.



While waiting for a Housing First voucher to be available, participants on our waitlist regularly meet with an ACC caseworker and begin addressing personal challenges that may make the transition into stable housing more difficult. The purpose of this pre-housing advising is twofold. Firstly, tackling substance abuse, mental health issues, and medical complications, for example, may add a complicating factor to an already complex transition from homelessness into housing. Additionally, once an individual gets off of the waitlist and receives a housing voucher, they are afforded the benefit of putting their full, undivided efforts into securing stable housing if they have already spent time committed to addressing other personal difficulties with the guidance of a caseworker.

The weekly Incubator Meeting at ACC is another tool offered to our participants, and any member of the community is invited to join as well. These meetings are led by an individual from the community and are designed to enhance the audience’s life skills and capacity to deal with challenges. Topics have ranged from how to apply for housing for individuals with challenging pasts to how embrace humor as a way to get through life’s difficult moments. An

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implicit benefit of the Incubator Meetings is the sense of community and support system that an individual gains through regular participation.

Finally, once a participant receives a Housing First voucher they are required to come into the office once a week to meet with their caseworker. During these meetings, strides are made toward developing a personalized housing and services plan, which establishes goals, objectives, and action steps. This must be completed in the first 30 days of engaging services.

Within six months, the participant is to have secured income through employment or public assistance. To ensure all is going smoothly and participants are staying on track, a monthly self-sufficiency evaluation is completed by both the participant and their caseworker and is discussed together.

As you can see, what allows the Housing First Program to run is the housing vouchers that we are able to distribute. The behind the scenes work, though, is the key to the Housing First Program's success.

Written by Daniella Colombo

PVRTA Cuts: Paying More for Less

The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority has proposed a 25% fare increase, as well as route cut backs by July 1 due to a projected \$3.1 million budget deficit. This means that the adult basic fare



will jump from \$1.25 to \$1.60 and a 31-day pass will rise from \$45 to \$56. The popular bus route B43 will also be reducing services, which will impact people going to and from medical appointments, Soboxin clinics, and catching other buses from Northampton. Public transportation is about more than just helping the environment or moving people from point A to point B. It is a system that can either limit or expand the opportunities available to people.

Hwei-Ling Greeney, Founder and Executive Director of Amherst Community Connections, anticipates that the individuals we seek to serve here at ACC will be greatly impacted if the proposed changes are implemented. "Given

ACC'S MISSION

ACC's mission is to empower, advocate for, and assist those in need. We strive to provide help with issues affecting individuals' abilities to lead a stable and productive life. We can assist in...

- Disability Applications
- Housing & Job Searches
- Free Cell Phone Applications
- Food Stamps & Fuel Assistance
- \$ for rent, meds, utilities, etc.
- SSI/SSDI Benefits
- Debt/Credit Issues
- CORI issues *and more!*

the fare increase and service reduction, our position is that this is a double whammy," said Greeney. "The people we serve are primarily people who have an extremely low-income of about \$700-\$800 a month, and this will make their lives very difficult."

One of the participants at ACC is concerned about what the fare increase means for her. She relies on the PVRTA to shop and attend doctor's appointments. "I am on a fixed income and can't drive. Therefore, I depend totally on public transportation in order to get where I have to go. The rate increase may seem insignificant to some, but for me it will be a hardship both financially and will impact life greatly." Another ACC participant says, "I take the bus daily to Holyoke from Amherst, and this

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depends on the money I make from panhandling. It is going to make life harder for me". People who live on a fixed income or social security often have a monthly budget, which will be strained by the proposed cuts. This is the case of one Amherst resident I spoke to who expressed, "I am on a very tight budget. My social security is hard to live on now! I understand the need for more funds, however, I won't be using it as often, and I have no car."

The fare hike and route cuts are an attempt to offset a budget deficit. However, the changes will not prompt more people to ride the PVTA – if anything, it is likely that the changes will lead to decreased ridership. We know that the PVTA serves a low-income population and, according to The Daily Hampshire Gazette, drops in ridership are estimated to be around \$454,000. The increased fare will impact most severely those that already face marginalization— the disabled, the elderly, and low-income individuals. The route cuts will have consequences on the accessibility of employment, health care, and education, particularly for these individuals. This limits the potential for social mobility, perpetuates the cycle of poverty, creates additional hardships for individuals, and could present novel problems for the community further down the road.

Why not strategically control the pricing and keep it at a price point that is receptive to the market? Asking riders for more money may be easier than asking for additional from the state and other organizations, but this comes at detriment to many members of the community. Could the PVTA implement a discounted fare for those who receive food stamps or MassHealth? Instead of going through a process to evaluate who is under the

federal poverty level, the PVTA could use food stamps and MassHealth as a proxy.

We witness the daily hardships that individuals struggle with at ACC. This hike may seem meaningless to some but to a huge portion of the community it will compound barriers they already face toward self-sufficiency, health, safety, and employment. We urge the PVTA to consider the effects that implementation of the proposed changes will have on the community.

We need to ask the state and the 24 towns involved with the PVTA for more funding. The state supplies 49% of the funding, the towns supply 19% and the fare box supplies 16%. The PVTA is disproportionately using the fare box to put the burden on low-income consumers. Based on our participants' description of the hardships they experience, it would be in the communities' best interest to contact your state representatives and lobby for the PVTA to receive more money. Amherst residents, reach out to Solomon Goldstein-Rose at 617-722-2582 and Stanley Rosenberg at 617-722-1532. Let your voices be heard!

Written by Alex Shore



Students fundraising for the campaign

Restoring Dignity Project Update

We have great news to share. The Restoring Dignity – Period campaign has raised over \$1,300! Thanks to the support of contributors to the effort, we are able to cover the move-in costs for one woman--getting her off the street and into safe, shared housing in Amherst. Homeless women disproportionately experience gender-specific conditions that make living on the streets and staying in shelters unsafe. With your help, we can change the life of another woman. Donations would be greatly appreciated and you can do so by visiting:

<https://www.gofundme.com/ladymammothscampaign>

Meet the Team: Mac

I first heard about ACC after joining the group of students surrounding Hwei-Ling at UMass' non-profit student job fair; however, I did not know I wanted



Mac does case work and research at ACC

to work with ACC until after I attended the organization's workshop "How to Be Funny" by Tim Lovett. Following this workshop, I realized that being an intern at ACC would be a rare opportunity that I needed to take. To me, ACC is an organization that seeks to empower vulnerable groups beyond helping them find housing and jobs. ACC's mission includes instilling a confidence within these groups that they can make it past the difficulties in their lives while also creating a support network to fall back on if they ever face difficulties again.

As a hopeful future social worker, I love that I am gaining experience in how to better the lives of others by designing weekly programs to engage them and show them they have a support network right here at ACC.

ACC is not my first experience advocating for Pioneer Valley's homeless population. Last year, I worked with a student coalition to prevent Craig's Doors from losing its state funding. We were successful, and along the way I learned the proper skills to advocate for vulnerable groups in the community. I have good communication skills, am an experienced writer, and am increasing my event planning and organizational skills with every opportunity I have.

When I am not working, I love any opportunity to decompress and be creative. I have been an active runner since high school and hope to run a half-marathon in 2018. For me, running is a way to forget about any stressors in my life and just go as fast as I can. I also am a novice yogi and have been trying repeatedly to meditate, but I can't seem to ever get my brain to focus on anything for longer than 10 seconds, which my mom keeps saying is a part of the process! In addition to that, I enjoy embroidery and writing

APRIL EVENTS



The following Incubator Meetings are on Wednesdays from 10 to 11:30 am at the ACC office

4/4: How to Tell Fake News? Steve Fox, UMass

4/11: Life is Like an EKG, Lynette Bloise, UMass

4/18: Pub Theology - What are Your Beliefs?
Pastor Christina Williams, First Congregational Church of Hadley

4/25: Painting for Fun and Joy, Bella Halsted

poetry when I am in the mood. I am also a rookie knitter and hope to one day be able to knit well enough to make an afghan as beautiful as the ones that hang on the ACC walls.

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**Amherst
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Housing is THE Solution to Homelessness

MAY 1st



**Help us raise \$5000
to get five homeless women
off the street and into stable housing!**



Donate at www.communityfoundation.org/valleygives