



What's Up?!

WHAT IT TAKES TO GET A JOB

BY ALLISON BROWN

Alex knew getting a job would be challenging as he started the process of job hunting. He didn't realize just *how* challenging and frustrating it would be until after he had already had many doors slammed in his face.

In December of 2014 Alex was working at a temporary position in the Amherst area and came to be acquainted with the town. He had been living with his sister in Springfield since 2009, but he felt a strong need to be more independent. When the position ended, it left Alex in further need of independence. He wanted his own place to live and a job that could support that. He knew it would not be an easy journey, but he was sure of what he wanted and he was determined to get his independence by whatever means possible.

That spring, Alex made a decision to move from Springfield to Amherst despite knowing that the move would leave him homeless. His voluntary displacement led him to stay in local shelter, Craig's Place. There he met one of our advocates, who noticed him right away, recalling that he was "calm and collected." Alex's mellow presence contrasted sharply with the noisy chaotic environment that can be expected in wet shelters such as Craig's Place, where guests are allowed to stay regardless of sobriety. This atmosphere would have been enough to deter most others, but Alex was determined to do what it was going to take to find a job and housing of his own, "I got there motivated because I knew what I was aiming for, I wasn't giving up."

On Alex's first day at Amherst Community Connections he immediately began applying to jobs, filling out 2-4 job applications daily. A staff member connected Alex to a possible housing opportunity. It didn't work out due to the cost, but it connected him to a second opportunity that did. He continued applying to jobs and working with ACC advocate Anna Chaiken to build a resume. Alex's search for housing and employment exposed the first hurdle and "catch 22" of being unemployed and homeless; you need a job to have housing, but additionally you need housing to get ready for a job. (continued on p4)



Alex, pictured, is rarely without a smile.



Join us for our Fourth of July lunch!

What's New?!

July 4th, 11-1:00 pm,
ACC's *Celebrating July 4th Lunch* @ UUSA. Free food, games and crafts... fun!

Wednesday, July 6th, 10-11:15 am @ ACC office, *Applying for Social Security Disability 101*, a talk by Jane Braaten, ACC. Free!

Thursday, July 14th, 7-9 pm @Town Hall, *Amherst Homelessness Forum*, by Housing and Sheltering Committee. You are invited!

Wednesday, July 20th, 10-11:15 am @ACC office, *Sorting Your Stress with Sorting Drawer method*, a talk by Donny Ybarra, Springfield Partners for Community Action. Free.

Wednesday, July 27th, 10-11:15 am @ACC office, *Kidney Health Screening and Awareness*

COLLABORATION FOR BETTER KIDNEY HEALTH

On April 30th, 2016, 24 Amherst College students associated with the national *Kidney Disease Screening and Awareness Program* (KDSAP) held a free community-based screening at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst. Collaborating with *Amherst Community Connections* (ACC), the program saw the successful screening of over 30 participants between the ages of 24 to 65, consisting of 30% men and 70% women. In addition to checking blood pressure, blood glucose, body mass index, and analyzing urine samples for indicators of kidney disease, each participant had the opportunity to have a free consultation with physicians from Brigham and Women's Hospital, Pioneer Valley Nephrology, and Mason Square Neighborhood Health. The physicians provided each participant with detailed information about their results, the condition of their kidneys, and answered other desired questions.



Amherst College KDSAP members.

Niyi Obafemi Odewade, founder and president of KDSAP of Amherst College chapter, said, "I decided to bring KDSAP to the Amherst community because of the impact it had on my life when I volunteered for the event in Boston, MA." He continued, "Specifically, the program taught me the meaning of true service, of actively placing the needs of others before your own and being able to make an immediate difference by doing so."



KDSAP members pictured helping participants.

Amherst Community Connections is very proud of its collaboration with KDSAP of Amherst College Chapter and thank Niyi and his fellow students for serving those in need in the community. Niyi will be doing a presentation at 10:00 AM on Wednesday, July 27 at ACC office during our Weekly Incubator Meeting. For more info about future kidney screenings, please attend the event or contact ACC's office.

ACC would like to thank Niyi Obafemi Odewade for his generous contribution to this article.

SORTING YOUR STRESSORS

BY ABRA LIPTON

1.4 million veterans are at risk of homelessness, while almost 48,000 veterans are homeless on any given night in the United States, according to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. Donny Ybarra is a local veteran who works for Springfield Partners for Community Action as a case manager. His role is helping fellow veterans with rapid rehousing efforts and homelessness prevention. His work includes helping veterans and their families with funding to keep them in their current residence or to move into new housing. The goal of Donny's work is to ensure that everyone who comes through his door has safe, secure housing.

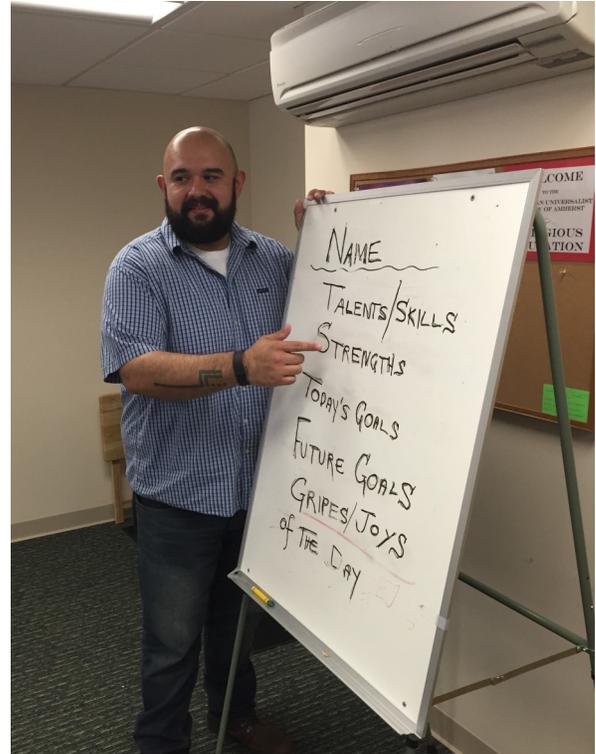
Before he moved to Massachusetts, Donny was living in Indiana and working as a counselor for clients with HIV and substance abuse problems. This is where he first invented the Sorting Drawers. The idea behind it was to help his clients reduce and manage their stress, in a way that everyone can visualize and understand. In the support groups he facilitated among his clientele, he wanted people to be able to cope with their stress. He would tell everyone to sketch a dresser and then would guide them through sorting these thoughts into each drawer of the dresser by importance and immediacy.

Donny's ultimate goal for the Sorting Drawers was to allow people to reflect on their lives and manage their past and present so that they can move on to their future. He said, "I want them to think critically about themselves and about their stress." The Sorting Drawers can be used by everyone, but are especially helpful for people with anxiety, PTSD, and significant barricades in their life.

A hypothetical example Donny gave was if one of his clients was HIV positive, but also dealing with alcoholism and a crack addiction. "How does he deal with HIV, but also alcohol and crack?" Donny questioned. He explained that there's no clear solution, but if he gave his client the tools to break down his stressors and priorities and then guided him through organizing them, that was a good start.

Donny wants everyone to be able to conceptualize their stressors as an abstract thought. Many of his past clients have told him that when they wake up in the morning and go to their dresser, they're reminded of the Sorting Drawers. This reminder every morning, to sort their stress and to focus on the goals and things they want to achieve and reflect on for the day, is important in keeping up with their goals. Donny believes that, "The sorting drawer is something that everybody can use, because everybody starts their day at their own sorting drawer."

To learn more about the Sorting Drawers from Donny Ybarra himself, come to Amherst Community Connections Wednesday Incubator Meeting on July 20 at 10am.



Donny, pictured at our Weekly Incubator Meeting.

A JOURNEY WITH HORSES: UPDATE

BY KYRA SIMPSON

Last week, ACC's staff attended Bella Halstead's art exhibit, *A Journey with Horses*. The pieces in the show progressed from more peaceful paintings featuring horses overlaying calm seas, to more violent paintings showing storms raging inside the eyes of horses. Halstead expressed that the world is a mysterious, sad, and happy place all at the same time, and that she wanted to convey that through her paintings. This sentiment reflects what many of our participants experience; people often overlook the beautiful things in life—such as being given a second chance to find housing—because the discouraging parts of being homeless are so prevalent. The progression of darker paintings to lighter ones in Halstead's exhibit expressed the transition our participants experience very well. In the words of the artist, "I hope that those who view my pieces will come away with a sense that they've been taken out of this world by looking at the world".



WHAT IT TAKES TO GET A JOB

CONTINUED FROM P1

The second housing opportunity also gave him his first job; a temporary position fixing things and caring for the property in the house of an older gentleman, paying a little bit each day to stay at the man's house. About a month later he found housing of his own in a nearby town. Lucky to have a car, he continued working a side-job and also picked up another part-time job. None of the jobs were ideal, but he approached them with dedication and a positive attitude, "If you have a job, you might not like it," he said, "but if you stick with it and work hard you might get something better. You won't leave empty-handed."

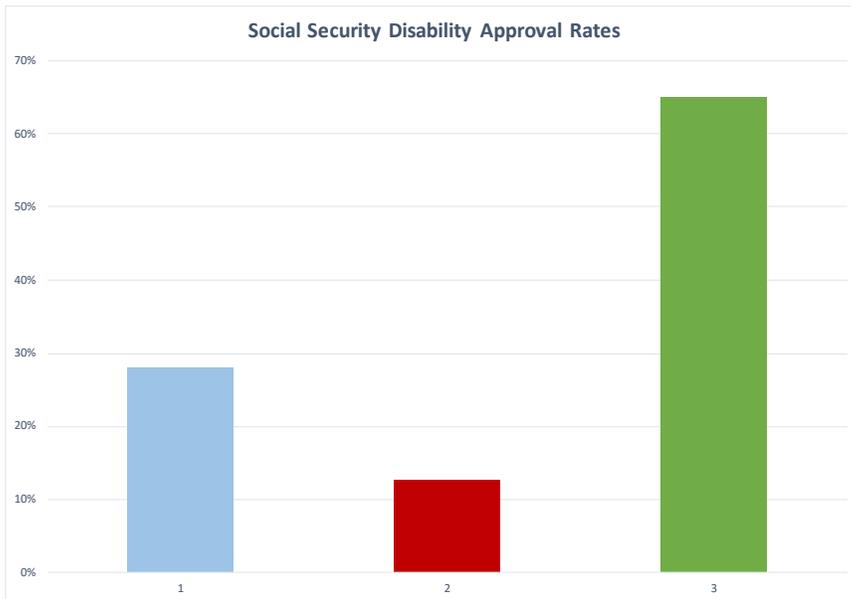
Alex's approach worked. Each job served as a stepping-stone that led him to his next opportunity. In each position he gained valuable experience and references; impressing his employers with his accountability and strong work ethic. In July he switched to a full-time seasonal job, which ended when winter approached leaving him unemployed once again.

Alex's return to unemployment didn't discourage him and he continued job hunting at Amherst Community Connections. By the time he was done, he had filled out close to thirty job applications. Of all the applications he filled out, he was only granted interviews by two of the prospective employers despite his best efforts to follow-up. Of the two interviews he received a rejection from one and the second he never heard back from. Alex still persevered despite the numerous rejections and silences. Then by chance while at the Amherst Survival Center one day, one of the staff members referred Alex to a job fair at temporary agency. Attending the job fair is where Alex found his current job working for Yankee Candle.

Reflecting on the past year and his experience job-hunting makes Alex very appreciative and grateful of his journey. He is especially appreciative of the help he received from advocates at Amherst Community Connections in building resumes and of the notifications he received from friends and family about job ads and places that were hiring. "I think God put some grace in them helping me out," he said. Help from others played an important role in finding the jobs that he worked, but Alex's own efforts and determination played an equal role in his success.

Alex's story is one that demonstrates the powers of positivity, patience, and determination in working towards achieving a goal. The most powerful lesson that I take from his story though, is the humility he demonstrated in his decision and willingness to ask for help. People across all economic classes struggle to ask for help daily, whether it's on a difficult project at work, or struggling with substance abuse. Asking for help makes us feel vulnerable, and opening ourselves up to vulnerability is counter-intuitive to our natural instincts. Thus, it is understandable when we make asking for help a last resort. Alex's humility can serve as a reminder to us that it is okay to ask for and accept help, and additionally to reserve our judgement for those who seek and accept it. Asking for or accepting help does not make you weak, it only proves your strength in your willingness to admit to the very natural and *human* vulnerabilities we all have; which lie in our individual limitations that can best be overcome with the compassionate and willing helping hand of another.

THE STRUGGLES OF OBTAINING DISABILITY BENEFITS



Key:

1. **Blue Column** - national average approval rate
2. **Red Column** - approval rate for homeless individuals without the help of a SOAR certified advocate.
3. **Green Column** - approval rate for homeless individuals with the help of a SOAR certified advocate.

Statistics from: <https://soarworks.prainc.com/content/what-soar>

Recently, we at Amherst Community Connections heard about SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery)—a program that trains advocates to help others fill out applications for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). We were interested in this, because this course is specifically designed for assisting people who are at risk, or are homeless. This is a group that ACC serves regularly.

Due to the complicated process, on average only about 28% of applicants succeed in first try and the appeals take about one year to complete. For those who are homeless, with mental health illness, substance abuse issues, or returning to communities from institutions such as jails, prisons or hospitals, the initial approval rate is only 10-15%. It makes sense for ACC to devote resources to have our workers SOAR-trained to assist those who ACC works with—the people who are at risk, or are, homeless.

Eligible applicants for Social Security benefits have often failed to obtain them because their applications were incomplete or they didn't spell out the connection between their disability and their inability to

work. It may seem obvious to the person with the disability, but Social Security needs it spelled out in detail, in writing.

This is a daunting task for anyone with a disability, but especially so for a disabled person who is homeless. When you are homeless, there may be no permanent address to send documents to, no phone number at which you can be reliably reached, no filing cabinet to store documents, no desk suitable for spreading out the sheets of paper with the information you need to fill out forms, no access to information about past residences, employment or medical care.

It has been found the approval rate for initial SOAR applications averages 65% in an average of 81 days --from application submission to date of decision/approval.

With such a dramatic improvement in both approval rate and time, Jane Braaten from Amherst Community Connections, has been working hard to get SOAR certified. After diligently completing her online training and having passed the final test, she is now certified and is able to provide representation and advocacy in applying for Social Security (SSI & SSDI).

By taking this course and becoming a SOAR-certified advocate, you can be a big help to people who are eligible for disability benefits but might otherwise never obtain them. The course takes about 20 hours to complete. You can take as long as you need, and work whenever you like. The coursework involves completing five forms, and writing a narrative report of the applicant's disability. Take a look at the SOAR Works website:

<https://soarworks.prainc.com/course/ssissdi-outreach-access-and-recovery-soar-online-training>

To learn more about the SOAR program, join us at ACC on Wednesday, July 6 during our Weekly Incubator Meeting for a talk by Jane Braaten!

ACC would like to thank Jane Braaten for her contributions to this article.

SOUNDS OF YESTERYEAR

BY DAVID ALLAN BRYANT

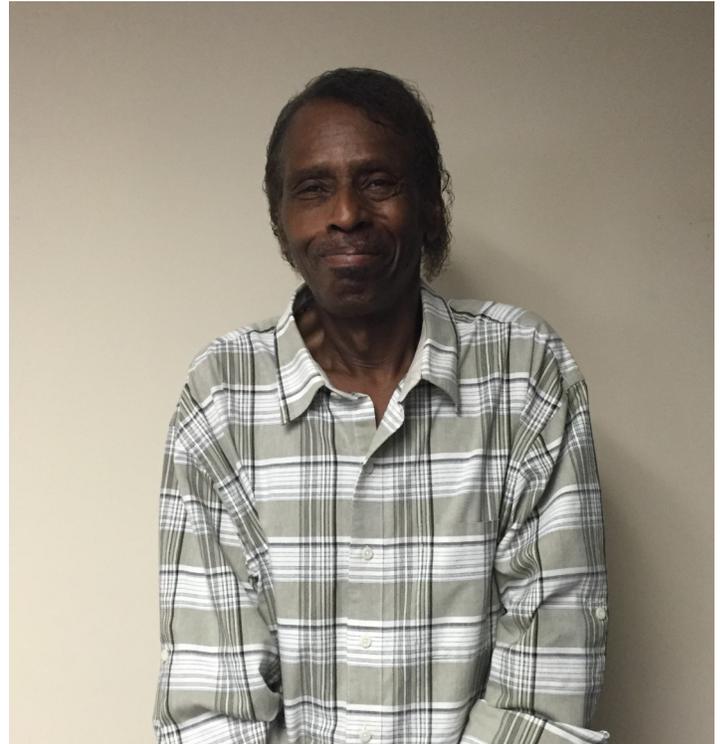
I can still hear the sounds of yesteryear
Fun we had as children.
The sound of my mother's voice calling *Get up!*

There were more sounds at the swimming pool
When on those hot days you could hear us
Getting ready to head for the pool.
The sound of all of us kids running
Excited
To get bathing suits, and towels.
The sounds of everyone talking
As we walked together
Through the shortcut down the wooded hills.

I can still hear the sounds of
crickets singing
birds chirping
bees buzzing
branches being broken
as we got closer to our destination.



David Allan Bryant, pictured below, is a local musician, writer, and artist. Although David considers himself an artist, he is following his dream of attending medical school at Tufts University. David is a kind and generous man who frequently brings in treats to our staff members to thank them for their service.



Once there I can still hear the crowd
yelling
calling
splashing
screaming.

I can still hear water running.
Once I was submerged underwater
The sound of someone calling by name
From across the swimming pool.

I can still hear the sounds of soda tops popping
Lunch boxes closing shut
Finally someone calling to me
Time to go home.