



What's Up?!

ORGANIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT

BY ABRA LIPTON

Over the summer, Amherst saw a surge in the chronically homeless population left on the streets after the shelter closed for the season. Amherst Center turned into a bedroom, a living room, and a home for many of these individuals. With the students back, there is more of a commotion around town, but it's still hard to ignore the panhandlers around every corner. This article's aim is not to criticize our homeless citizens, but to shed light on an issue that many residents would prefer to ignore. Rather than penalize these people and criminalize their only survival tactics, Amherst community members need to step up. We must demand that the town build affordable housing options that include support services, so these people have a real chance of getting off the streets before next summer.



Shelter Sunday has been a great way to rally Amherst residents into action.

A chronically homeless individual is defined as one who has been homeless for a year or more with a disabling condition. Although Mental Illness Awareness Week was from October 2nd to the 8th, we still forget the consequences—socially and financially—that come with mental and physical disabilities in our society. The people we leave behind may have mental and physical conditions that could have very well caused them to become homeless. They may not have the money and support needed to take care of themselves. Amherst has many different service providers for low-income and homeless residents; including Amherst Community Connections (ACC), Craig's Place, Not Bread Alone, the Amherst Survival Center, local churches, etc. However, ACC staff believe there is still a gap in the services needed to get these people off of the streets and into permanent housing. Staff member Jane Braaten reminds us that, "Homelessness can make it harder for a person to appear human to some others; like 'one of us.' This is pure illusion, and we need to be vigilant against falling into a stigmatizing mentality."

During an average summer, only three or four people would be left without a place to live during the shelter's off season. The number of chronically homeless people left without a place to stay rose dramatically this summer, which has impacted us as a community. Recently, service providers and Town of Amherst staff members working to help solve the communities growing homelessness crisis came together to find solutions. This will be a monthly occurrence, and ACC would like to commend the organizations, people, and town for taking the time to discuss these issues and look for solutions. ACC's executive director, Hwei-Ling Greeney, expressed that she hopes for the goal of the meetings to be better collaboration and bridging gaps within the service provider community, as well as working to find permanent, supportive housing solutions for these people (cont. on page 4).



Come to our Wednesday Incubator Meetings for mini seminars all month long!

What's New?!

Monday, October 31st, 2 pm
@ Bangs Community Center,
Housing First Lottery.

Wednesday, November 2nd,
10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Mental Health Services During Hard Times*, John Schmitt, ServiceNet.

Wednesday, November 9th,
10-11:30 am @ACC office, *Consumer Empowerment*, Hwei-Ling Greeney, ACC.

Wednesday, November 16th,
10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Creating a Positive Experience in Daily Living*, Casey Attebery, Entrepreneur.

Saturday, November 19th,
6:30-9:30 pm @Unitarian Meetinghouse, *Celebrate the Harvest—A Night of Theater and Dance*, Ezzell Floriana, ACC.

Wednesday, November 23rd,
10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Free Money for College*, Hector Santiago, Holyoke Community College.

Friday, November 25th, 12-1 pm @ Unitarian Meetinghouse, *Free Community Lunch.*

Wednesday, November 30th,
10-11:30 am @ACC office, *Good Info for the 55+*, Maura Plante, Amherst Senior Center.

GIVING BACK AND NEVER GIVING UP

BY ANNA CHAIKEN



Lynne is a survivor of domestic abuse, as such we respect her privacy.

A mother of five, an avid cook in her spare time, and an advocate for pertinent issues in the local community. Lynne plays many roles in her life, and whether it's preparing a steak or sitting down with community members in need she always puts her best foot forward. Lynne sought out our help about 4 years ago after suffering multiple years of domestic abuse. In need of a place to stay and in a devastating financial situation she has worked hard to be the exceptional team member, advocate and survivor she is today. "You can't help the whole world" she says, "but it's nice in the community to know you helped at least one person, you feel good". For those fortunate enough to know Lynne and hear her story of distress and pain it is incredibly inspiring to see that it is not that darkness that defines her but rather her passion to help and open heart.

Originally from Massachusetts, Lynne got married and started a family, when she was very young, before the abuse began. She tried to flee more than once, called the police, went to a battered women's shelter, but ended up returning to her situation. It wasn't until her kids were fully grown that she was finally able to escape the violence of her husband. She recalls her first trip to the shelter, "I left it for my kids" she says with a nod, and I can tell it's not a decision she would change. "You take them out of their environment and routine. It's not fair, it's not their fault. They don't have their toys and they don't have their friends and you end up balancing in your head what's worse. Seeing that or dealing with abuse. So I went back." She pauses and beams to tell me that today she is a grandmother of 13, and they are all still very close. It is this sense of selflessness that shines through in each of her endeavors. She looks at me and says, "Why do my kids not get to be home and he does?"

When Lynne came to us, she was facing a great deal of financial issues that had been maliciously created for her by her now incarcerated husband. She fled her situation with only the clothes on her back, she was in trouble with her bank, and had a warrant issued for her arrest. She worked tirelessly at ACC to get to the place she is today... happy. When she talks about the shelter she stayed at while working to pay off her debts, she says, "It was a Battered Women's Home, I can't call it a shelter, it was home". She has never however had a living space she can call her own, a place for her to put her things, her space she says. Currently living with her landlord, an elderly man who lets her use his vehicle and the downstairs living space, Lynne hopes to be able to purchase her own vehicle and place soon. Her face lights up when she tells me she wants a truck so she can hopefully start her own business, wreaths for all occasions. It is one of her favorite aspects of the area, the traditional qualities and how at any point in the year she can look out the car window to see welcoming homes sporting wreaths.

Today Lynne continues to apply herself to people in need through casework and potential work with future inmates. She explains that just because her husband hurt her and is currently behind bars, doesn't mean she has given up on second chances or giving her assistance to those in trouble. Although Lynne has removed herself from her toxic situation she knows there are still many women stuck and feeling destitute and she wants them to know they're not alone. It is estimated that 1/4 of women will experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives. There are resources out there she says, it's hard but once you get out, there's so much help for you, and we at Amherst Community Connections hope you know we are one of them.

ACC'S MISSION

ACC's mission is to empower, advocate and assist those in need on housing, employment, Social Security Disability application, financial emergencies, and issues affecting individual's ability to lead a stable and productive life. Assistance with...

- Disability Application
- Housing & Job Searches
- Free Cell Phone Applications
- Food Stamps & Fuel Assistance
- \$ for rent, meds, utilities, etc.
- And more!

HOUSING FIRST LOTTERY



An ACC staff member explaining the Housing First program to a participant.

Thanks to the generous funding by the Amherst Community Preservation Act Committee, Amherst Community Connections is pleased to announce that its Housing First Program has completed the application review process. Five of the eleven applicants are determined to be eligible.

At 2 pm, on Monday, October 31, 2016, ACC will be holding a lottery-drawing event at the Bangs Community Center, Amherst. Paris Boice, chairwoman of the Community Preservation Act Committee, will be conducting the lottery drawing.

Three vouchers will be awarded. Support service will be offered to the voucher holders to assist them to locate employment, build strong housing and credit histories and become self-sufficient.

The Housing First Program will pay for first, last and security, plus the finder's fees—if there are any. If income is available, tenants are required to pay 30% of it toward the rent.

“Amherst Community Connections is grateful to Amherst CPA Committee for funding this Housing First Project”, said Hwei-Ling Greeney, the executive director of the agency. “This is the first housing program in Amherst that provides on-going support service to the tenants who have experienced chronic homelessness. We are committed to being part of the solution to address homelessness in our community”, she continued, “Please come and help the Town of Amherst celebrates its achievement.”

MEET OUR TEAM

ABRA LIPTON

Abra, a senior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, began interning at Amherst Community Connections after finding out about the opportunity through UMass's Career Connect portal. She was drawn to an internship at ACC because she hopes to one day have a career in the field of social service, working with non-profit organizations. She's not set on her career path, but enjoys work with marketing, business operations, and web design—however she would prefer to work in an organization doing good rather than a large corporation. She considered other internships, such as working with a large marketing firm, but chose to intern at ACC to gain more real, hands-on experience. Abra is pursuing a major in Communication and a minor in Sociology at UMass, her studies focus on marketing, the media, and activism. She is contemplating many options for jobs after UMass, such as a career in a creative marketing firm, at a non-profit, or joining Americorps after graduation. Abra's main vision for her career is to do work that makes a difference and helps people, and to not be sucked into the corporate world. Abra's responsibilities at ACC are mainly behind the scenes; they include creating and editing this newsletter, managing the website and Facebook page, and casework when time permits.



Abra, pictured, has edited 6 issues of *What's Up?!*

When Abra first started college, she was planning on becoming a veterinarian. Although her career goals have changed, she still has a strong connection with animals. She enjoys dog sitting when she has the time, is a vegetarian, and is part of P-NUT (Plant Based Nutrition), which is a vegetarian/vegan and nutrition club at UMass. She also labels herself a feminist and is a member of USRJ, which stands for UMass Students for Reproductive Justice. USRJ is an organization whose goal is to educate the university community about reproductive health and rights. Abra enjoys being creative, especially painting and writing.

Abra's birthday is this November! She will be turning 21, ACC wishes her a happy birthday!

UNTANGLING SAM AND BILL

BY ABRA LIPTON

“It is what it is” is Samantha and Bill’s motto. They’re a pleasant duo, who make and sell their art right in Amherst Center. They craft jewelry; including necklaces, bracelets, and chain crowns that are sold in Head Games Beauty Supply. They sell their jewelry in front of Stackers and usually set up their table at around noon. You can often see Sam making jewelry right there at the table or writing on the sidewalk in chalk. Sam and Bill value positivity, humor, and try to have fun with whatever they’re doing. They try not to stress too much about things that are out of their hands and enjoy focusing on things like friends, family, and their art.

Sam and Bill both grew up in Springfield and went to Springfield High School of Science and Technology, often referred to as SciTech. They started making art in High School, but didn’t start crafting jewelry until a few years ago. Originally, they sold their jewelry in Northampton, but moved to Amherst two months ago. They make jewelry out of different stones and gems—including agate, quarts, tiger gems, amethyst, turquoise, and more—but also out of trinkets they’ve accumulated over the years. Sam and Bill buy some of their supplies from wholesalers, but also trade with locals to find original materials.



Sam, pictured, says her pet peeve is having to untangle her jewelry.



Pictured are pieces of Sam and Bill’s jewelry!

Their necklaces are made with chains or leather cords, each chosen for the specific pendant, and changeable upon request. Sam and Bill explained that many people around town often urge them to raise their prices, but they want their jewelry to be accessible to everyone regardless of their income. Their jewelry make wonderful gifts for friends and family during the holidays, for birthdays, or just for random acts of kindness.

Outside of jewelry making, Sam and Bill expressed that they work at music festivals, mostly EDM music, but also blue grass as well. They enjoy being involved with local art communities. Their family has a cabin in New Hampshire and they enjoy traveling there and to Virginia for music festivals. Now that music festival season is over, their focus is on expanding their business, they hope to put their pieces on Etsy, which is a website where people can sell handmade or vintage items. An ACC staff member introduced herself to them a few weeks ago, and we hope to give them access to the internet and any other help they may need to expand their business. We wish them the best!

ORGANIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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Another important thing to consider, is for the Town of Amherst to hire a staff person to work specifically on homelessness and housing issues. As of right now we have many different individuals concerned and helping to end our challenges with the growth of the chronically homeless population, which leaves everything a bit disorganized between them. According to an article in The Boston Globe, the Mayor has appointed their first advisor who is tasked with working towards housing *all* of Boston’s chronically homeless men and women by 2018. By appointing one person to help lead and organize this mission to support and house their chronically homeless population, Boston is making a huge step in the right direction. Amherst is a small town but we do have significant homelessness issues, we can learn from Boston in a way that is tailored to the size of our town.

THROUGH HER HEALING HANDS

BY KYRA SIMPSON

Talya Solomon has been a masseuse in the Amherst area since around 1982. She first became interested in massage during high school, when she befriended someone who was in a wheelchair. Talya began massaging her friend's back and shoulders, which helped him with the pain that he felt due to his injuries. She also would massage her mother to help her with migraines, and her friends and family. She discovered that she loved massage, because she was able to help other people by doing something that comes naturally to her and that she enjoys doing. After college, Talya decided that she wanted to pursue massage as a career, and she studied at the Stillpoint School of Massage in Greenfield. After that, she worked at Kripalu Bodywork and Backstop Seated Massage, before opening up her own private practice in Amherst, which she currently still runs.

Over the summer, Talya was struck by the magnitude of homeless individuals who had nowhere to go in Amherst. She identified with these people, because she realized that anyone could become homeless depending on the circumstances. So, Talya decided that she wanted to help in some way, but was not



Talya, pictured, giving an ACC staff member a massage.



Talya, pictured on the right, raised \$60 for ACC's mission in only a few hours.

sure how. She decided to come into ACC to talk to Hwei-Ling about the best way that she could help the homeless, and Hwei-Ling explained that instead of giving money to the homeless directly, in which case you do not know whether or not the money is spent on essentials, it would be better to donate to an organization that is dedicated to helping the homeless and providing them with resources that they need.

So, Talya decided to offer 10 minute massages for \$10 and donate the proceeds to ACC at this year's Block Party in downtown Amherst. In a few short hours, she helped us raise sixty dollars! Additionally, Talya pledged to donate to ACC half of the cost of the first massage for anyone who read this article or learned about her services through ACC. If you would like to relax, unwind also help the homeless, give her a call at (413) 256-8225. Her specialties include Swedish massage, deep tissue massage, foot reflexology, hot stones, and aromatherapy.

We are extremely grateful for Talya's contribution to ACC, and we hope that you choose to support her business as well as the homeless community in Amherst by going and getting a massage. Talya will also be going to public places when there are holiday fairs or gatherings to do chair massages to help ACC and the homeless. Watch for her in the upcoming fairs at various churches in Amherst during the holiday season!

Talya can be reached at (413) 256-8825, or by mail at 31 Salem Pl, Amherst, MA 01002. Her website is <http://massagewithtalya.com>.

SAVE THE DATE!

Saturday, Nov. 19, 2016- U. U. Amherst. 121 Pleasant St.; Doors open 6:30 p.m. Theme: "Celebrate the Harvest- A Night of Theater and Dance" 7:00 - Shift The Mindset - Truth or Reconciliation?: a staged reading of excerpts from a new play by Ezzell Floranina, with actors from The Rainbow Players and guests; 8:00 - 5 Minute Improv Cabaret - bring a song, poem, story or act- solo or group -no more than 5 min. long! And then, stay to dance the rest of the night away with live music and the tunes of DJ Maria! Register early for the Five Minute Improv Cabaret by emailing Ezzell at ezzellfloranina@gmail.com .

Sliding scale Donations go to support Amherst Community Connections Programs: One Stop Resource Center; Wed. Incubator Meeting; Dinner On ACC. Questions? Contact Ezzell at above email address or leave a message at ACC!

OUT OF THE DOG HOUSE

BY ABRA LIPTON

Rick Dresser is well-known by much of Amherst's community, he's an exceedingly positive and social guy. He can have a conversation with anyone and knows how to brighten your day. However, many people don't know about Rick's past. He's been through a great deal, but has always persevered with a smile on his face.

When Rick was nine-years-old he was sent to Belchertown State Hospital, which was a school for children with developmental disabilities. He remembers the exact date he arrived—July 10, 1962. Rick's memory is very good, he says that, "I remember what it was like to be there and the problems we went through." He remembers his first night there, walking into a huge room filled with 32 metal beds—each bed neatly covered in the same white sheets. His bed was in between the fire escape and the "the dog house"—a room where kids were put when they acted up. That first night Rick was nervous, one of the other boys forced him to cover his head with a sheet, but he had no idea why. Rick stayed up and waited till the boy left the room and then asked another boy why; the other boy told him that the older kids had nothing better to do than pick on the little kids.

Rick soon learned that he hadn't seen the worst of the bullying. The older kids only got meaner with time. They would hit the younger kids across the bottom with baseball bats and old fashioned hay brooms. They would taunt the younger kids whenever they had the chance, even in the bathrooms. Rick figured the right thing to do would be to talk to employees about what was happening, but the employees brushed him off. Rick explains that, "they didn't believe us because they didn't see the abuse."

Rick makes it a point to tell me that it wasn't all bad there. There was a carousel in the yard and on the days that they ran it all of the kids from all of the buildings would go. Rick compared the line to the length of Amherst Center. Over 300 clients lived there, so it's easy to imagine a line that long. He also gained some valuable work skills. Rick tells me that once he was old enough, he volunteered to do a variety of jobs. This helped him stay away from the bullies and kept him busy. He worked with the younger kids, teaching them their colors and letters, as well as a lot of manual labor—driving trucks, carrying milk cases, washing dishes, and more.

When he turned 18 and left the Belchertown State Hospital, he moved back in with his parents until he moved into a halfway house a few weeks later. He learned more skills there, like sewing, cooking, and cleaning. He

says, "it was kind of a hard thing to adjust back into society and get used to being back involved with people, like my family and friends." He ended up getting a job from an old teacher at a paper mill later on.

Now, Rick beams about the work he does at the breakfasts every Wednesday in the Unitarian Meetinghouse. He volunteers washing dishes, cooking meals, and cleaning up. He tells me that he started working the very first day he came to the breakfast, in November of last year. Rick excitedly came up to me after his interview telling me about the new apartment he's moving into, after living in his current apartment for over a decade. While reflecting on his past, Rick says, "I kind of struggled, *but I made it.*"



Rick, pictured, working at the Wednesday breakfast!

ACC'S OFFICE HOURS

- Monday—Friday: 9am—12pm walk ins, 12pm—5pm by appointment at ACC's office
- Tuesday & Thursday: 2pm—5pm at the Jones Library
- Contact us at (413) 345-0737
- Located in the Unitarian Meetinghouse
- 121 North Pleasant Street, P.O. Box 141 Amherst, MA 01004