



# What's Up?!

## HONOR HER

BY ABRA LIPTON

Shakusky is a local band with a large following among the younger Amherst crowd. The original lineup met at UMass in 2012, they were all sophomores who lived in the same residential area. They also helped to form a club together called SALT--students for alternative music--which is still around today. SALT's goal is to support UMass alternative bands and to book alternative bands to play at UMass.



The members of Shakusky.

Liam Cregan and Kira Mattheson sat down with us for an interview to talk about their new album, upcoming tour, and the benefit concert they will be playing for ACC this month.

Their new album, titled Honor Her, was inspired by another tour they did. Kira says that while on tour she felt uneasy with the masculine vibes of the alternative scene. She explained that it wasn't the men around her specifically, but the fact that there were barely any other women around at all. In general, most of the people are men--the band is full of men, the audience is men, the houses are owned by men, the people booking the gigs are men, etc. Women are often times seen as "groupies" in the alternative scene rather than members of bands or even real fans of the music. This mentality had a big impact on Kira's time on tour and on the lyrics she wrote for Honor Her. "I felt like I was filling the expected stereotype of a woman singer, I just didn't feel at home." Kira tells us.

They have done concerts in the past at the Unitarian Meeting House, which is a great space for them, along with many other different groups that rent out the space (including ACC!). Many alternative shows are hosted in houses, which can be cramped, hot and sometimes don't even have a clean bathroom. The Unitarian Meeting House allows them ample space, air-conditioning, and clean bathrooms. The people working at the Unitarian Meeting House are also very accommodating and are very open to the alternative scene. Judi Metroka, who works in the UUSA office, says that she was surprised by how wonderful and polite not only the members of the bands were, but also the audience members. (cont. on p.5)



Come to our Incubator Meeting on Wednesday, October 12<sup>th</sup> to learn more about our HOUSING FIRST PROGRAM!

## What's New?!

**Wednesday, October 5<sup>th</sup>**, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Fair Housing Training: Know Your Housing Rights*, Margaret Curran, Massachusetts Fair Housing Center

**Wednesday, October 12<sup>th</sup>**, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Housing First Program: Know someone who has been chronically homeless? ACC might have housing for them!*, Hwei-Ling Greeney, ACC

**Wednesday, October 19<sup>th</sup>**, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Local Government--What works? What hasn't?*, Meg Gage & Mandi Jo Hanneke, Amherst Charter Commission

**Wednesday, October 26<sup>th</sup>**, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Eat Smart: Nutritional Workshop*, UMass Amherst Food Science

**Thursday, October 27<sup>th</sup>**, 5-6:30pm @ ACC's office, *Dinner on ACC: Celebrating the Entrepreneurs Among Us!*

### **OFFICE HOURS:**

M-F 9am-12pm (walk-ins) 12-5pm (by appointment) @ ACC's Office.  
Tu & Thu 2-5pm @ Jones Library.  
Contact us at (413) 345-0737.

# THE UNEMPLOYMENT CYCLE

BY ABRA LIPTON

Tisha Walker is an ACC participant who has been struggling to get a job since she was fired in July. Her previous place of employment was bought out by a larger corporation and when her and her new boss didn't get along, she was let go. Before that, she had spent a year there doing great, but when she had a falling out with her boss, who she said made up lies about her, she knew her life was going to change drastically.

Tisha is the mother of two teen boys, which in 2016 means that she has to pay for the newest technology and clothes. After being fired, she felt depressed because she couldn't afford to pay her bills, let alone new iPhones for her boys. Tisha explains that providing for her children is so important to her. She went through the foster care system and when she was their age she had to panhandle and fight for what she needed. She never wants her kids to have to do that.

Tisha didn't know what to do or where to go, her son told her to go apply for a job at UMass, because that had been her best place of employment. She was hesitant because she thought that UMass wouldn't hire her again, as she was fired by them a few years prior. That's when she came to ACC for help.

ACC got her the emergency funding she needed to pay off her bills and started her on the path to employment. She went to the UMass job fair, even though she was nervous that they may not hire her. At the job fair, she was surprised to find herself seated at table number 13, which is her lucky number. She didn't have a resume or cover letter, so the job fair allowed her to have that face to face interaction that is uncommon in the technological era.

Tisha had dealt with a high stakes interview in the past, but that didn't change the fact that she was nervous. Years ago, when her sister died, she became severely depressed and lost her will to live, let alone work. When she finally moved forward out of that depression, it had been years since she had been employed and she wasn't sure what to put under the job skills section of her applications. Then she realized, she had been a mom for years—which meant she could include her “mommy duties” on her application. Cooking, cleaning, organization, team work, staying cool under pressure, and many other different skills are all a part of being a mom.



Tisha, pictured, is determined to support herself and her kids.

## 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!

This time around, Tisha knew exactly how to fill out her application and how wow the person interviewing her. However, when the interviewer wanted to call her back to schedule another interview, she was reluctant to tell him that she didn't have a phone. Instead, she managed to schedule the interview on the spot and agreed to come back in that Monday.

Tisha was nervous throughout the weekend, she needed this job so that she could get back on her feet and continue to pay her bills that were once again piling up. “I just gotta fix now and then I'll deal with the future,” Tisha tells us. She lived one day at a time this summer, and just wanted to go back to being comfortable with her money situation like when she had worked at UMass before, “it felt good to not have to worry about things being shut off or being evicted, while having extra money to do things.”

She was hired on the spot when she went in that Monday! She explains that her faith is what helped her through this rough and scary summer and what has gotten her through so many other hardships. Tisha is now working at UMass and focusing on her job and her family.

# COMING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE

BY JANE BRAATEN



Yvonne Freccero, pictured, is an advocate for local homeless population and the founder of Yvonne's house.

The hardships that people are experiencing around housing have a larger context. Understanding more of the context can help us come together to find solutions. Many people around the world are finding that the economy has not been working well for them, and are endeavoring to find ways to overcome difficulties by joining together locally. More possibilities are opened up by sharing resources to enhance local economic self-reliance, as much as possible without bickering, or getting lost in ideological fine points.

The first World Social Forum (WSF) took place in 2001 in Brazil, to bring together people from around the world who are finding local solutions to economic and social hardships, based on solidarity, respect and sufficiency. This year it took place in the 'Global North' for the first time, in Montreal, Canada.

The topics that people bring to the WSF range far more broadly than the economy alone, encompassing concerns over climate change, over-reliance on mass extraction of materials from the environment, women's issues, unethical bio-technology, human rights, environmental justice, techniques for participatory democracy, peace movements, racism, migrant issues, and the 'food system'. An over-arching theme is the building of networks in order to generate creative exchange of ideas and resources.

Why bring up the World Social Forum in a newsletter for people with housing issues? One of the things that the Forum does well is remind us that practicing democracy can be an effective way to work out the means to meet common needs, whatever they are. Practicing democracy is not just voting in elections. It's recognizing that solutions that work for everyone are based on everyone participating in finding them. It's coming together with others to articulate the needs and solutions that we ask our elected leaders to stand up for. It's cultivating the self-reliance to use what we already have to make more resources available to everyone.

One of the big ideas at the Forum is the idea of a 'solidarity economy.' Instead of requiring everyone to compete for scarce resources as isolated individuals, a solidarity economy develops ways for people to use their existing skills and resources to generate goods and services for exchange, with or without currency transactions. A big part of this is the idea of sufficiency, the recognition that living simply is enough, when one is a contributing member of a mutually beneficial community. Solidarity economies can take as many shapes as there are locales; there's no one form. Nor is the idea to 'overthrow capitalism;' rather it's to meet needs that the existing economy is failing to meet.

There are many ways to apply these ideas to housing. The way that the housing market works often doesn't serve everyone's needs. In a wealthy country especially, many agree that housing should be considered a basic right. So, different kinds of groups, from churches and private nonprofits, to collaborations between private groups and town, state and federal agencies, have been formed to create housing for people who find local housing unaffordable. For example, voters in the city of Seattle will vote soon on an initiative to raise their own property taxes in order to fund affordable housing. The most important common denominators in such efforts are public awareness, willingness to participate, and political will.

Although the term 'solidarity economy' may be of recent vintage, the practice of it is not new. It has ancient roots in artisan- and farmer-based local economies. Nor is it so unfamiliar. There are many examples of it right here in the Valley, including community cultural groups (theater, music, community radio stations), farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture, and co-housing initiatives. Housing for some people without housing has been created by private groups and nonprofits in Northampton, shortcutting the long process of working through state and local governments. When people who care about something get together, great things can happen!



Yvonne's house permanently houses six previously homeless individuals.

# WHEN YOU NEED A LITTLE PUSH

BY DYLAN KAZMIEROWICZTRIMM



Dylan, pictured, says her time at DIAL/SELF was an invaluable experience.

When I applied for DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services, I was living with my disabled moms in their apartment, where I spent most of the day browsing the internet and never leaving the house. I was nineteen years old, had lost contact with all my old friends, and still had no idea how to live independently. My first attempt at a college ended with me dropping out after the first semester, due to depression and anxiety. With my parents' guidance, I found a therapist I worked well with, started going to Greenfield Community College, and got back on my medications which helped to keep me functional.

It was around this time that I learned about DIAL/SELF, an organization dedicated to helping teenagers and young adults get the help and resources they needed. Whether that be in terms of food from their food pantry, filling out application forms for jobs and colleges, or helping them get housing. I started simple. I went to their Teenline drop-in center in Greenfield, but my anxiety was making it difficult.

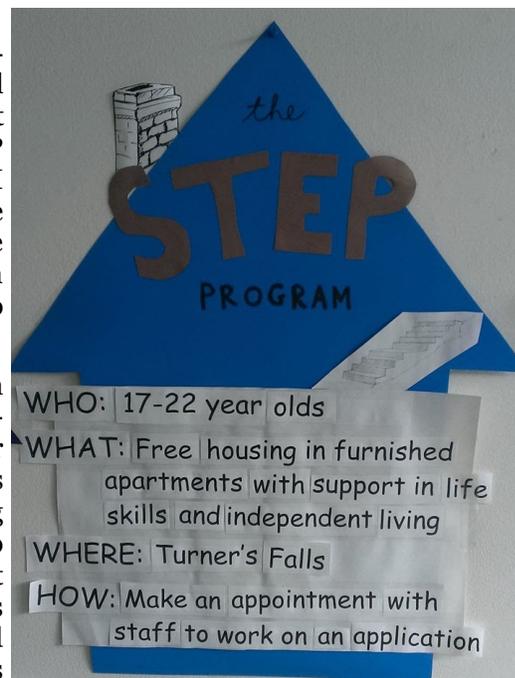
While there, I hung out with and talked to the people there. Some were teens who just wanted a place to go during the day where they could socialize in a substance-free environment, others were caseworkers—in their twenties and early thirties—who were more than willing to watch Saturday Night Live or doodle with us. Everyone I met there felt open and welcoming.

The intake form was easy—they asked about my living situation, if I had SNAP, where I was in terms of employment and education, and if I had any income at the time. With that said and done, I got a caseworker who worked with me on a weekly basis to help me get the important tasks done that I was avoiding doing by myself. I also was lucky enough to meet people who started to feel like friends, that were willing to put up with my playful sarcasm and even joke with me in return.

Through the case workers at DIAL/SELF, I applied for one of their programs called STEP. The STEP program essentially works as a transitional living program for young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-one) who are at risk to not have their own housing or were already homeless. The STEP program helps them learn the skills necessary to live on their own. Once I was accepted, I moved into the building in Turners Falls where all the youths in the program live. We didn't have our own wifi access in the building, which forced me to leave my room and go down to the common room on the first floor. If the Ethernet cable wasn't available, I would go outside, which was rare for me and pushed me out of my comfort zone.

We were given a weekly stipend depending on if we completed tasks, such as cleaning up our apartments and going to the groups we had on Thursdays. They gave us various tasks, like putting away at least half our monthly income in a passbook saving account. Completing these tasks allowed us to finish various 'steps' (everyone starting on Step one, going up to Step three), which granted us privileges such as getting to sleep away from the building. While it may sound harsh to those who haven't been in it, I found it to be one of the most fun and rewarding experiences of my life. With only my phone to connect me to the internet, I started baking, went on the planned weekend trips the program put on to places like Interskate 91 in Amherst or to the nearby farmer's market, and even started making friends, not just with the caseworkers, but also with the other participants who lived there.

Over that year I was with them I also had my first paying job, started volunteering with Community Action Youth Programs, and got accepted into Hampshire College where I started living on campus again and where I currently am now. It forced me to overcome my anxiety and start learning how to live outside of my room, and I wouldn't change my time with DIAL/SELF for the world.



A poster with the details of the Step Program.

# HONOR HER

CONT. FROM PAGE 1



Shakusky, pictured, playing a set on tour.

The idea of doing a benefit concert for ACC came from a benefit concert that Shakusky did previously for Craig's Doors. Liam's friend Greg, who is in a band called De'rive, had wanted promotional help for a local show he was doing. Liam helped him come up with the idea of a benefit concert for the shelter and then helped him set it up. Liam explained that the members of Shakusky had been wanting to do more local shows, as Amherst is where Shakusky was formed. After recently meeting our Executive Director, Liam became interested in doing a benefit concert for ACC. He read our monthly newsletter, "What's Up?!" and told us that ACC, "Seems like a very active way to help out the homeless community." Which is important when our chronically homeless population in Amherst is rising.

The benefit concert will be held shortly after their promotional tour, on October 15th in the Unitarian Meeting House. The Honor Her promotional tour was held from September 8th to the 28th, playing 19 shows in 21 days from Massachusetts, out to Chicago, down to Florida and back up the eastern seaboard. Kira and Liam expressed that they hope their tour and the benefit concert will be more friendly towards young women interested in alternative music. Inside their record cover you can find a sheet of paper that expresses this mission, "Girls: these words are for you. I want you to hear this music. I want you to make your own music, or do whatever activity makes you feel empowered. And I want to talk to you about it! We can be friends, because the best resource we have is each other. Xoxo Kira"



Shakusky's new album, Honor Her.

Amherst Community Connections would like to thank Shakusky for playing this concert to benefit our participants and our work! The proceeds will be used to help provide services to low-income and homeless individuals in the area. These services include help with applications for public benefits, housing, and jobs, as well as one on one case management to get people off the streets and integrated back into our community.

## HOUSING FIRST GRANT



Amherst Community Connections (ACC) has received a three-year grant in the amount of \$150,000 from the Town of Amherst, Community Preservation Act Committee (CPA). This grant will be utilized to begin a Housing First program. The grant will provide three (3) chronically homeless Amherst residents with a housing voucher that will also include wrap-around supportive services. The purpose of ACC's Housing First program is to empower, advocate for and assist the program participants to become self-sufficient, and become integrated into the larger community eventually residing in long term permanent housing. The deadline for submission of application is October 14. For more info, please call ACC at [413-345-0737](tel:413-345-0737) or go to our website [AmherstCommunityConnections.net](http://AmherstCommunityConnections.net).

# IT COULD BE YOU

BY DENISE BARBERET

We all lead busy lives, with much to accomplish every day. We get up, have breakfast, and go to work. Later, we shop for and prepare food, deposit paychecks, pay bills, clean the house, and attend to all sorts of minor and major tasks that need to be done so that our lives run smoothly. Sometimes there are setbacks, but usually we can persist and resolve the problem.

But sometimes we face more difficult challenges. I'll use an example from my own life. Two years ago, my job situation became so intolerable that I had to leave. Despite reassurances from Human Resources that my employer would not contest my unemployment claim, it was indeed contested. Even though I had applied for benefits online – “It's quick and easy!” – I waited two months to learn that my claim had been denied; more time for a hearing, at which my claim was again denied; and then more time to see if the Board of Review would grant me another hearing. Each time I had to carefully state my case, which meant reliving the stress that had made me leave my job. Finally, after two hearings in Springfield, and six months after I had filed my initial claim, I received my accrued benefits.

My anger over this situation made me persist. I am also very capable of advocating for myself: I have a Ph.D., I am fully literate in two languages and in computer technology, I am used to dealing with bureaucracy, I have a reliable car, and I have friends who will let me blow off steam. But there were times when the stress of such a prolonged and humiliating process made me want to just stop fighting.

But what if something in your life turns every day into a challenge? Chronic illness or pain, physical or mental disabilities, no transportation or access to computers, unfamiliarity with the labyrinths of governmental agencies or a lack of confidence to approach them, limited proficiency in English, substance abuse, or a combination of these can turn daily life into an overwhelming challenge. It can also leave you unable to provide for your own basic needs. While it is true that there are many agencies that help individuals with housing, food, medical care, and transportation, gaining access to this help is not easy. Just beginning the process involves a seemingly insurmountable mountain of paperwork; the waiting period that follows can require enormous patience and persistence, and setbacks happen. Advocating for oneself in favorable circumstances is difficult. To have to do so when one feels overwhelmed by everyday life can leave people frustrated and drained of energy. If that person also feels alone and isolated, they often give up, believing that help is simply beyond their reach.



Low-income individuals waiting in line to apply for food stamps public benefits.



The “system” needs to work for everyone.

Who are these individuals? They might be members of the homeless population whom you may have seen in downtown Amherst. Or they might be your next-door neighbor, sinking into depression because he has lost his job and can't find another one, and his unemployment benefits are about to run out. Or it could be an elderly woman up the street, who can no longer drive and who feels overwhelmed by property taxes she can no longer afford. Or it could be .... you. As Jessica Zane observed in ACC's May newsletter, if some, or all, of the wrong circumstances come together in just the right way, we could find ourselves in exactly the situation we thought we could never be in. But the common denominator in all of these examples is that, despite our circumstances, we are still members of a community. When we connect with a community, when we know that we are not simply left to do it all on our own, that is the moment when we can begin to regain the strength to better advocate for ourselves and to again live a fulfilling and more productive life.

*Denise Barberet is an interpreter for Spanish-speaking patients, and has worked in hospitals, doctors' offices, mental health units, and substance abuse treatment facilities, and has also provided interpretation for governmental agencies such as the Department of Transitional Assistance, the Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Mental Health.*