



What's Up?!

ACC'S Housing First Initiative recommended by Community Preservation Act Committee

Amherst Community Connections is grateful and excited to have been recommended by the Community Preservation Act Committee of Amherst for the proposal to implement a *Housing First* initiative. If funded, the project will receive \$150,000 for a three year funding period. This spring, ACC will have the opportunity to present at Town Meeting and request approval for the project.

ACC believes that housing is *the* solution to homelessness and programs around the country are proving that it really can be that straightforward. Well known projects in Denver, D.C., and Utah have demonstrated the effectiveness of the *Housing First* approach to ending chronic homelessness.

The standard approach to housing the homeless has been to prepare individuals to be "housing ready" prior to placing them in stable housing. The problem with this approach is that it is much more difficult to overcome disabling conditions like addiction without stable housing. Housing First programs provide housing to individuals without income or sobriety requirements. Once an individual has housing, they are provided with case-management and support services. Housing First programs have been enormously successful at increasing housing retention, improving homeless individuals' health and wellbeing, and saving taxpayer money. ACC hopes to bring this model to Amherst.

ACC's experience operating a transitional housing program in Amherst in previous years has provided excellent preparation for implementing a program of this kind. Through the proposed project, housing will be provided through traditional rental units, paid for by vouchers held by ACC. ACC is seeking to create three vouchers that will each enable one chronically homeless individual in the community to move out of the shelter or off the street and into a rental unit. To qualify as chronically homeless an individual must have at least one disabling condition and have been homeless for one year or more. At last count, there were 20 individuals living in Amherst who fit that definition. ACC works with many of these individuals and will seek applications from those who qualify, but will also accept referrals from other agencies who work with the homeless. (Continues on page 5)



A piece of Art's Work

What's New?!

- **April 7th** Two ACC participants will be featured in the Amherst Art Walk! Check out pieces by Art and Kafele, both featured in our last newsletter, at 121 North Pleasant Street by the post office. Also on display will be the UUSA's beautiful stained glass window, Angel of Lilies, created in 1889.
- **April 13th** At 10:00 am at ACC's Wednesday Incubator Meeting, Rob Powell from Food Bank will discuss the recent changes in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and how to navigate through the changes. Come and learn how to preserve your SNAP benefits!
- **April 16th & April 23rd** You're invited to attend one of our Housing First Initiative Info Sessions! There will be a 2:00 pm and 3:00 pm session on both days. Please RSVP to accinamherst@gmail.com.
- **April 30th** Do you want to look out for your health? Join us at our office at 121 North Pleasant Street for a free kidney screening. Check out page 5 for more information. Please RSVP to accinamherst@gmail.com or nodewade17@amherst.edu.

BACK ON HIS FEET

“I was middle class. I used to be middle class.” Pedro was very clear that from the time that he was with his first wife up until he separated from his second wife, he was financially stable. After his second wife departed a little over four years ago, Pedro was renting a room in a house and was working to pay for it. Unfortunately, one thing led to another and he lost both his job and his license. Without the job he soon lost his room and was left homeless, a position in which he never thought he would be.

For 2-3 months he was homeless entirely, and the rest of the time he was able to stay with family members in Springfield. That didn’t alleviate the pressure he felt from having to rely on others for his basic needs. He didn’t feel comfortable where he was staying and he wanted to move back to Amherst. Still on good terms and in contact with his first wife, he was referred through a friend of hers to Hwei-Ling and Amherst Community Connections. In early December, his oldest son helped him move back to Amherst from Springfield. Pedro stayed in a shelter in Amherst for one week. During that time he came to the drop in hours at ACC’s One-Stop Resource Center where he received help with applications for jobs at UMass and Amherst College, searched for and followed up on housing opportunities, and made appointments to get important documents such as his driver’s license.

Pedro describes himself as an ambitious and positive person but admits, “I just needed a push.” The “push” that he received came in the form of a little extra support from the right people: his family and the staff at Amherst Community Connections. He remembers, “When I came in I was asking for help, and I needed it and I got it... now I’m back on my feet.” Now, two months later, Pedro has a full-time job working at Amherst College, he has his own place to live, and he’s feeling optimistic. He is thankful for all that he has gone through. “I don’t regret it, not one bit,” he says, “you learn from your mistakes and what you go through, and I did.”

Pedro’s attitude toward his struggles and recovery contributes to what a good father he is to his children, which is something in which he takes pride. He sees this moment as an opportunity to teach his children about the struggles faced in life and further, that it is your attitude and how you handle challenges that define you as a person. For this reason, he considers his recent experience to be a learning moment and opportunity for growth. He now feels a need to be a supportive member of the community and someone who gives back. “When I was middle class, I never used to think about doing any of this [volunteering] stuff.” Now, Pedro tells me that he plans to pay it forward. “I’m going to try to volunteer,” he said, “It’s important for me to give back and help others the way that others were there to help me when I needed it.”



Pedro, posing for the camera.

A Poem By Melissa Standley

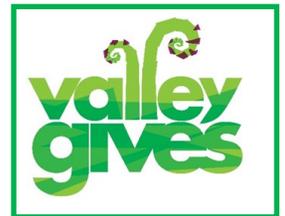
Black Sky.

Bulky clouds, big black gray overcast,
silence.

There is no threat of storm but an
outpouring of pent-up gloom.

The release so subtle, more like a leak
oozing black ink that writes the day a
story of Spring and the threat of color.

HELP US TO CONTINUE THE GREAT WORK WE DO!



Your generous donation allows us to continue programs that help members of our community who are facing poverty and homelessness. We are a 501(c)(3) and accept donations year-round. Every little bit helps! Checks can be made payable to Amherst Community Connections and sent to 121 North Pleasant St., PO Box 141, Amherst, MA 01004, or online at our website www.AmherstCommunityConnections.net/donate.

We are pleased to announce that we will be participating in this year’s Valley Gives Campaign on Tuesday, May 3rd! Our goal is to raise \$5,000 to support our One-Stop Resource Center. Our Resource Center serves an average of 15 people per day and helps approximately 1 individual or family to secure/maintain housing every week! Please check our website and Facebook page to stay up-to-date on how to participate in Valley Gives!

Job Hunting?

Tips for Getting that Job, from an ACC Participant

By Helmi Pucino
Certified Career Coach

When asking Pedro Ayala Jr. what advice he would give to job seekers, his first reply is “There’s the door. Go get it.” Pedro should know. He was out of work for over a year.

After a break up in his marriage, Pedro experienced the stress of losing his job, home, and car.

After living in Springfield, he returned to his hometown of Amherst where he met Hwei-Ling Greeney at ACC. Although he was going through some hardship, Pedro maintained a “can-do” attitude. “All I need is a PUSH”, he said, “I can do the rest.” And Pedro did do the rest. Today, he is gainfully employed in Food Services at Amherst College after attending a job fair held there.

What are the tips Pedro would give other job seekers? Number one is: “We have to make an effort. The job will not come to you”.

Pedro also says not to regret or be embarrassed about having to ask for help or live in the shelter while you get yourself back on your feet. “Being unemployed can happen to anyone”, he reminds us.

His advice to finding a job starts with your attitude:

1. Remember the times you were successful at something. Keep that image in mind as you look for a job.
2. Don’t be afraid or embarrassed to ask for support.
3. Don’t regret having to use services such as the shelter.
(Continues on page 6)

MADE FROM THE HEART

Sharon Carty, a resident of Amherst, supports Amherst Community Connections through creativity. Sharon has a passion for quilting and crocheting. She found this love before beginning graduate school at Boston University. Sharon and a friend spontaneously decided to make something just for fun but seeing all of the colors come together sparked Sharon’s interest.

When Sharon first started quilting, she used predetermined patterns. As she continued, she worked up the courage to create ideas of her own. Sharon

explains how she can be inspired in various ways. For example, she can see a piece of fabric and use that one piece as the base of her design. One of her favorite pieces is from a section of fabric she used that depicted ocean wildlife. Once she saw this small piece of fabric, her ideas started rolling. Sharon describes that this is how most of her ideas begin; she sees something she likes and goes from there. A design wall assists Sharon in envisioning how she can put her creations together.



Sharon poses with some of her creations.

Sharon’s afghans and quilts come from hard work and dedication. She works on her pieces approximately four hours per night and they can take weeks to finish. Sharon searches for her materials everywhere including flea markets, donations, tag sales, leftover fabric, old clothes, etc. Once Sharon finishes a piece, she usually gives it away. Her work first became gifts for her family and friends, but soon enough people began approaching her to make quilts based on their own personal memories. Sharon has always enjoyed doing this but also wanted to do something more with her work. She knew her good friend, Hwei-Ling, started Amherst Community Connections to provide services for those in need. This resonated with Sharon, so she decided to donate her handmade afghans and quilts to Amherst Community Connections. Amherst Community Connections gives these handmade afghans and quilts as housewarming gifts for formerly homeless participants who have been able to secure housing.

Making and giving afghans and quilts helps to bring beauty into our world. Sometimes it is hard to see color when everything feels grey. Sharon believes “it is important to have beauty in this world. People who are suffering need beauty and you know something handmade comes from love and the heart.” Sharon’s handmade pieces transform a house into a home.

MEET OUR STAFF

NORZOM TENZIN

Norzom first moved to Amherst six years ago as a sophomore in high school. After graduating from Amherst Regional High School Norzom decided to pursue a degree in Public Health at the University of Massachusetts, where she also has a minor in Psychology. Norzom came to intern at Amherst Community Connections when she started to look for opportunities to get involved in the community that would also help her to further her career interests. “I was interested in learning how nonprofits work,” she said, also citing a passion for helping others and giving back to the community.



Norzom, pictured as part of our staff profile series.

When Norzom isn't busy at ACC or studying, she enjoys practicing with a 5-college area dance group that performs hip-hop and Korean pop (K-pop). Beyond her passion for dancing is her involvement in UMass Students for a Free Tibet, a group that strives to raise awareness on Tibetan issues. Norzom holds a secretarial position with the group, and their work is something that she feels strongly about and has a personal connection to. When asked about it, she explained that her parents come from Tibet, a nation that is nestled in the southwestern part of China that shares a border with India and is home to Mt. Everest. Tibet is currently under the rule of China, although much of Tibet does not consent to China's rule and seeks independence, desiring to be identified as its own nation with its own culture and heritage. “There's no freedom of speech,” Norzom said, outlining how China exerts control over the nation and its people.

She tells me that oppression is part of the reason both of her parents left the Tibet As for the Amherst area, Norzom says she enjoys it, “It's safe here. It's a peaceful community that's good for families and good for education.”



AMHERST KIDNEY DISEASE SCREENING AND AWARENESS PROGRAM

Chronic Kidney Disease is one of the leading causes of death in America. In fact, 1 in 3 Americans are currently at risk of developing the disease. The Kidney Disease Screening and Awareness Program (KDSAP) is a student-run organization that provides free kidney health screenings and health education to communities in order to target the issues of kidney disease before it is too late.

A free screening – which includes a free physician consultation – will be held at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst (located on 121 N Pleasant St, Amherst, MA) on April 30th from 1:30pm – 5:30pm. Please RSVP at accinamherst@gmail.com or nodewade17@amherst.edu.

ACC'S Housing First Initiative (continued from page 1)

Once participants are placed in housing, ACC staff will work closely with them to address the issues that have been barriers to maintaining housing in the past. Services will be offered to help people recover from addiction and other mental and physical conditions, develop supportive networks and independent living skills, and find employment.

ACC anticipates that the town will see a reduction in emergency response costs if more individuals are housed through Housing First programs. Amherst emergency response services responded to 775 calls in 2013 regarding homeless individuals, at a cost of around \$58,000 to the community. Programs in Denver and D.C were able to reduce these costs by as much as 72% in two years. ACC's Housing First program would also cost about 50% less per participant per night than shelter services. This project would have a significant positive impact on the community as well as participants.

If approved, the project is slated to begin in July of this year and will continue for three years. A goal of the program is that participants will "graduate" out of the voucher program as soon as they are ready and move into their own public or subsidized housing units. This way, more than three people per year will receive the benefit of participation in the Housing First project.

ACC would like to welcome anyone who is interested in learning more about this proposal to attend a Housing First Initiative Info Session, to be held at the ACC office at 2:00 pm and 3:00 pm on April 16th and April 23rd.

Supporting Our Community

One Connection At A Time



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MEET OUR STAFF

TYLAH BRATHWAITE



Tylah, a senior at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, entered Amherst Community Connections as an intern after researching various local internship positions that were in her field of interest. A transfer student who grew up in Boston, Tylah is majoring in Psychology with a minor in sociology and plans to go into social work focusing on substance abuse and family counseling. Ultimately she aspires to be a psychiatrist for Veteran's Affairs. These are goals that her role at ACC helps her to prepare for. Tylah is quick with a warm smile and values politeness and respect as qualities that everyone should exhibit toward all others, a belief that shows in her work at the shelter and when doing case management.

Tylah, pictured as part of our staff profile series.

When she's not studying or interning, Tylah enjoys watching Netflix, doing physical activities such as yoga and spinning, and additionally checking out Pinterest for cool DIY projects—something that she loves doing. From t-shirts to pieces of furniture to decorating her bedroom, she says it's all fair game. "I DIY'ed my whole room - redecorated everything! I bought stuff at thrift shops and the TruValue hardware store that I used to work at". Her enthusiasm for DIY projects even included repurposing a storage shelf that she found next to a dumpster, making it "glamorous" after cleaning it up and painting it with spray paint, a medium that she enjoys using.

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Job Hunting (Continued from page 3)

Tips for improving your attitude toward job hunting:

1. Be realistic. Even in good economic times, it can take over six months to find a position.
2. Check your "Self-Talk", which are the tapes you run in your head. Change negative thoughts to positive. Instead of thinking "No one will ever hire me" change the thought to "I will get a good job even though it may take some time." Write down the positive thoughts and practice replacing the negative thoughts with them.
3. Use available free resources. You won't feel so alone in your job search. Try these resources out:

CareerPoint
850 High Street
Holyoke, MA 01040

Franklin Hampshire Career Center
78 Industrial Drive, Suite 1
Northampton, MA 01060