

Liberty Community Services

Helping Those in Need Feel at Home

by AMY J. BARRY / photography by TONY BACEWICZ and CHRIS VOLPE

People fall on hard times for many reasons: physical and mental health issues, addictions, questionable choices or just plain bad luck. But in the end, it's about having the positive outlook, courage and, most importantly, the support system that makes it possible to get back on one's feet and move forward with dignity and hope.

Santos Perez Martinez of New Haven is someone who has risen above difficult circumstances, attributing a great deal of his good fortune today to Liberty Community Services.

Now in its 30th year serving Greater New Haven's homeless, the nonprofit agency provides a network of programs that includes supporting housing services and much more.

"Liberty has blessed me with just being there, and letting me know, 'Hey, we've got your back,'" Martinez says. "They helped me not only materially but mentally and emotionally with social workers and their staff. They sit down, take time to hear me, and give me advice. They've helped me a lot."

The short version of Martinez's story is that he came to Connecticut from Puerto Rico for two weeks that turned into six years. He failed to appear for a court appearance following a motor vehicle charge that resulted in a three-year probation. Martinez says not being allowed to leave the state and return home to Puerto Rico cost him his marriage and, after selling

everything he owned, he found himself homeless.

"I was in Waterbury, trying to work, trying to get on my feet, staying in shelters, and no one was helping me," Martinez recalls. "I came to New Haven because the programs are better, there are more services."

While living in a shelter on Grand Avenue, he went to Liberty's Sunrise Café that offers a hot, nutritious breakfast, Monday through Friday for anyone in the community in need. It serves as many as 200 people on any given morning.

"I started to get to know people working with Liberty and got involved with other programs that opened doors for me," Martinez says. "They offered services like their Safe Haven Day Program [for people living in shelters] that let me take a shower, use the computers, eat lunch, do laundry, so I could spend the rest of the day looking for work."

Martinez took advantage of Liberty's project RESPECT – a mobile work program providing temporary jobs to homeless people with the goal of helping them procure continuing employment. The work involves beautification projects in New Haven.

"I was blessed to be able to participate, getting a couple of hours of work every day," Martinez says. "[Project RESPECT] helps you by not just getting accustomed to everything being handed to you, but to work, get a paycheck, buy what you need."

Martinez's life today looks very different than it did six years ago. He recently signed a lease for his own



Santos Perez Martinez is no longer homeless thanks to Liberty Community Services. Photo by Tony Bacewicz

apartment in a Liberty-operated residence in Hamden.

“It’s so much better than where I was,” he says. “I have my own kitchen. I like to cook; I’m a good cook.”

Martinez is planning to complete classes he began at a technical school. He is also working on creating his own business doing hydroponic farming.

Whenever Martinez is in the neighborhood of Safe Haven – Liberty’s largest permanent supportive housing facility, a 33-unit apartment building in the Ninth Square neighborhood – he stops in and grabs a mop or starts sweeping.

“They tell me I don’t have to do that and I tell them, ‘I want to do it.’ I do what I can to give back what’s been given to me,” he says. “Liberty has given me the tools to grow beyond a meal, housing, to put my life in a new direction that’s positive.”

HISTORY AND MISSION

Since 1987 Liberty’s mission has remained the same: to end homelessness in Greater New Haven. But the organization has evolved dramatically over the years.

Originally named the Connecticut AIDS Residence Program (CARP), its focus was providing housing for people living with HIV/AIDS. In the 1990s, this expanded to include people with a wide range of issues that led to homelessness, and the name changed to Liberty Community Services. Today its 15 core programs serve more than 1,000 individuals annually.

Liberty’s mission is very ambitious, acknowledges Jim Pettinelli, who was hired as executive director last year and comes from a long career focused on housing and homelessness.

“Our big mission is to end homelessness,” he says.



Santos Perez Martinez researches information for a hydroponics garden project at Safe Haven — Liberty Community Service’s largest permanent housing facility. Photo by Tony Bacewicz



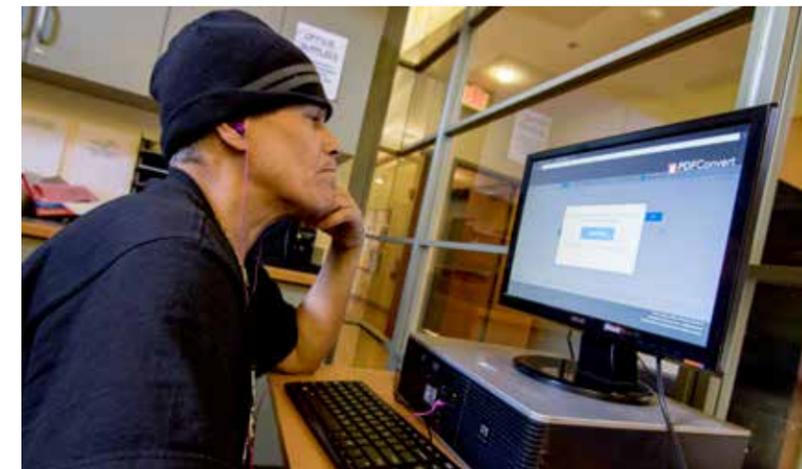
Jim Pettinelli, executive director of Liberty Community Services. Photo by Tony Bacewicz

“The real magic comes with how you do that. You have to have a vision and march toward it – something many organizations in Greater New Haven are committed to. When you think what’s unique about us, we’re looking at three big categories: housing, health, and income. All our programs fit under or connect to those three things. On any given day

we are providing housing and support services to 250-plus people.”

Pettinelli is heartened that due to a coordinated response over the last decade, the numbers of homeless have continued to decrease. He says what struck him from the get-go was Liberty’s ability “to be flexible and very innovative in responding to urgent needs as they arise in the community, figuring out the best intervention, and implementing and operationalizing that successfully.”

And the organization has 50 amazing staff and board members making the mission successful, he adds, “plus a whole other core of volunteers supporting us as well.”



Liberty Community Services client Ivan Diaz uses one of the computers available to him at Safe Haven. Photo by Tony Bacewicz



Project Style Master of Ceremonies, Ann Nyberg, WTNH 8 anchor and New Haven fashion designer, Neville Wisdom, organizer of the event's runway show. Photo by Chris Volpe



Andrea Katz modeling a Neville Wisdom design at 2016 Project Style event held at New Haven Lawn Club where this year's event is being held. Photo by Chris Volpe

THE LONG VIEW

Subrena Winfield, director of program management, has been at Liberty for 14 years. Impacted by friends and family members who had contracted HIV or AIDS, she wanted to work with an organization that was trying to help people.

“At the time, I knew a lot of people who were being kicked out of their homes, and families were disconnecting with them because of the lack of education around the disease. When I found out Liberty (then CARP) was opening a project to house people who had nowhere else to go, so they could die with dignity – not in the street – that’s what brought me to the agency.”

Winfield explains that over time, as medications evolved,

people weren’t dying of AIDS/HIV, but living with it.

“And so now, we were trying to house people who just needed housing, not directly related to them becoming ill. One of the biggest successes I’ve seen is watching the agency grow from this one specialty to a gamut of community services.”

Both Winfield and Pettinelli agree that one of the biggest challenges they face has been funding cutbacks in both state and federal budgets. Like many nonprofits, they struggle with having to do more with less year after year.

But, like Pettinelli, Winfield is excited about both the work Liberty does and working at Liberty.

“One of biggest successes is when you see the light bulb

go off for the client, [for example] someone who has been homeless for years and they’re in housing for the first time, so they’ve not managed money, not had the responsibilities of a household,” she says. “And then you see them evolve. They get a part-time job, they prosper, and it’s wonderful to see that happen. But we’re also glad to be here for those who have to come back.”

“This is an amazing place to work,” she continues, “because there’s great growth opportunities for the employees, but it’s also about being connected. This agency has a direct pulse in the community. We’re liked by the city and I think we do a great job – and maybe I’m a little partial with that.”

PROJECT STYLE

Project STYLE has been Liberty’s signature fundraising event for the past 10 years. Proceeds go directly into services and programs such as The Sunrise Café, permanent and transitional housing, homelessness prevention, security deposit programs, and transitional employment programs.

The evening kicks off with a cocktail hour with a full bar, hors d’oeuvres, and food stations (everything is donated by local merchants and restaurants), followed by a runway show organized by New Haven fashion designer Neville Wisdom, featuring his professional models showcasing his spring collection as well as volunteer models from the greater community, also outfitted by Wisdom.



(Inset photo): Candace Ben-Elohim modeling a Neville Wisdom design at 2016 Project Style event. Volunteer community model Bruno Baggeta of Market New Haven at 2016 Project Style event. Photos by Chris Volpe

Jim Pettinelli hosts the event with WTNH News 8 anchor Ann Nyberg. Guest speakers include Liberty Services clients and supporters.

Project Style is coordinated by Nikki Besitko-DeRenzo, Liberty's development director, and chaired by Ellen Gabrielle, a longtime Liberty supporter and volunteer at the Sunrise Café.

"Liberty doesn't do a lot of big, splashy fundraisers," says Gabrielle. "Over the years this has really grown. We started to bring in local merchants in the last two years for auction items, as well as jewelry, hats, and clothing worn by the community models in the show."

In 2017 the event raised more than \$30,000.

"People come to support Liberty, have some wine and hors d'oeuvres, see the fashion show, but also see the direct impact of where their money is going. We have clients attend and speak, and photos of our programs [on display]," Besitko-DeRenzo explains. "Our goal this year is to really tie in what coming to this fun event means to an individual, who may not have a place to sleep that night, have breakfast in the morning, or a place to wash their clothes."

Gabrielle's job is to recruit volunteers and go to local

merchants for donations to a huge silent auction.

"Because I live in New Haven and I'm old, I know a lot of people," Gabrielle jokes. "It's a great community. The merchants get hit from every place [for donations]. But they're very generous." 

PROJECT STYLE

Project Style 2018 will be held on May 3 from 5:30 to 9 p.m. at the New Haven Lawn Club, 193 Whitney Avenue. Tickets are \$125 (VIP), \$100 (front row), and \$75 (open seating) and can be purchased online at www.libertycs.org.



Volunteer community models with fashion designer Neville Wisdom at 2017 Project Style fundraiser held at New Haven Lawn Club. Photo by Chris Volpe