

Supporting the Community: Community Council for the Homeless at Friendship Place

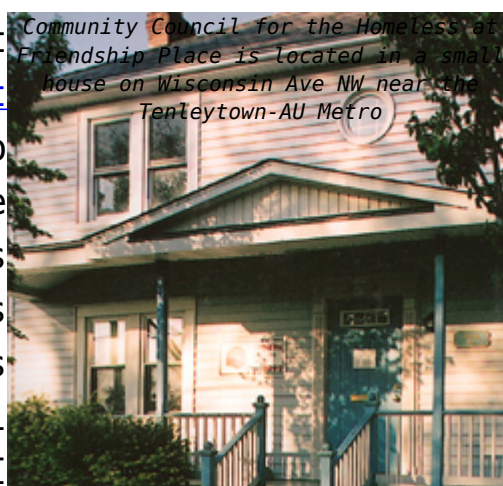
By Aeren Martinez



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The receptionist grabs me and says, "Don't you speak Spanish?" and then she hands me the phone where I chat with a Spanish speaking lady wanting an appointment with the doctor. I get things cleared up quickly and figure out that she really wants to talk to the main Unity Health Clinic not our office.

I no sooner hang up the phone when I hear, "Aeren! Is the cup half full ...?" I recognize the voice from one of our regular consumers. I haven't seen him in a few weeks, and I remember when I first met him almost two years ago. Then, he was in Friendship Place every day hanging out, having a glass of water, eating a sandwich, talking on the phone or just listening. I don't remember when it first started, but one day he asked me "Is the cup half full, or is the cup half empty?" Someone else might think this is a rhetorical question, but coming from Terry, it wasn't. He really wanted to know how my day was shaping up. I gave him an answer and he engaged me in a conversation every time he came into the office. Terry came to Friendship Place in through a "good will ambassador" – a formerly homeless man named Andrew who lives in one of our apartments and sits on the board of CCHFP as a consumer advocate. Andrew and Terry spent many a day talking about anything and everything. Andrew was doing most of the talking and Terry was doing most of the listening.

Terry suffered from severe depression and had been homeless since 1996. What's even more remarkable is that the quiet, sometimes withdrawn man that crossed our threshold two years ago had found his voice. He is now a spokesperson for the

homeless, he goes out nationwide as part of the National Homelessness Speakers Bureau and talks to high school and college students about homelessness. He works at the Pilgrimage (a program sponsored by Church of the Pilgrim) to lead college groups to live on the street visiting his old haunts and also keeps busy as a member of the CCHFP Speaker's Bureau talking to local congregations and schools about homelessness on behalf of CCHFP.

In May of last year Terry spoke at the Friends and Neighbors Fundraising Breakfast (an annual fundraiser for CCHFP). He said, "My grandson always used to ask me, "Where do you live, Granddad?" Now he could show him his new apartment and not be ashamed of the answer.

I am drawn to Friendship Place because it is a people oriented organization. Time and time again I've been impressed by the people who work at Friendship Place and how they put consumers first. Treating each person with dignity and compassion.

One thing that sets CCHFP apart from many other homeless providers is the uniqueness of their model. Many organizations lay claim to the title of "one stop shop." That is to say that they help individuals through all their problems from one location. But few can say that they begin that help with an outreach worker that actually looks for homeless people underneath bridges, in the city's parks, in Metro shelters, and doorways. Then that outreach worker builds a relationship with them that leads to helping them



rebuild their lives with temporary housing, medical and mental health clinics and continue on to provide permanent housing.

It may take months and maybe even years of work with the outreach coordinator for a person to feel comfortable enough to come through our door. Jean Michel Giraud, our executive director, is fond of saying; “We meet people where they are and give as much as they are ready to accept.” This is a key element of our philosophy at Friendship Place. In a recent article for [Reaching Out](#) (CCHFP’s newsletter), Terry wrote, “A few years ago a friend told me about Friendship Place. I dropped by but I wasn’t ready to be helped—but I kept coming. They didn’t judge me, they just let me be.” That willingness to let people come to terms with what their needs are keeps people coming back. We gave Terry the space he needed—now he lives in a permanent housing apartment provided by Friendship Place.

That support is only made possible through the generous contributions from area congregations of which Seekers Church is included.