



# JOHN GRAHAM HOUSING & SERVICES

Food, Shelter, Hope

69 Main Street, Vergennes, VT 05491

802-877-2677 [www.johngrahamshelter.org](http://www.johngrahamshelter.org)

Winter 2016

## Sleep-Out Helps Combat Homelessness in VT

by Annie Grayer, Reprinted from the Middlebury Campus — December 9, 2015



On Saturday, Dec. 5 the John Graham Shelter in Vergennes hosted its second annual sleep-out at the foot of Otter Creek Falls near Marbleworks. The fundraising event raised over \$35,000, which surpassed last year's total of \$30,000. All of the money raised will go directly into helping homeless individuals find housing. Last year, approximately 40 people participated in the event. This year, more than 70 participated.

Elizabeth Ready, Director of the John Graham Shelter articulated the importance of this event. "The event is to bring awareness to the problem that so many of our neighbors have," Ready began. "We are talking about families with children, we are talking about individuals, we are talking about people of all ages."

Dan Adamek '18, who serves on the Shelter's board of directors, echoed Ready's sentiments. "I think that a lot of people are just unaware that there is a homelessness problem in Vermont," Adamek said.

Adamek pointed out that living in a rural area is part of the reason such unawareness exists. "I think to a lot of people, especially in rural areas, homelessness can be very invisible because it's very easy to not see homelessness in places where people are so spread out."

In addition to helping raise awareness, Ready emphasized how the event gives participants perspective. "When you think that we're only here for one night, whereas other people face uncertainty every night, it puts the situation in context," Ready

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said. Personally, Ready said the event helps her think twice about how she responds to those who call the shelter in need. "Sometimes I thought 'oh well, we're full, let us take down your name and number,' and now I feel like 'oh, yeah we are full, but let's see what we can do.'"

On how this event can help bring perspective to the

College's community specifically, Adamek said, "we live in such a privileged bubble on top of a hill, at an institution that has a lot of money concentrated in one place. But there are so many people around us who are working poor and working class people who are either homeless or on the brink of homelessness."

Ready was quick to point out the gap between wages and housing costs as to why she believes Vermont has seen a spike in homelessness in the last five years. "Bottom line," Ready said, "most of the people at the shelter are working." Guests come to the John Graham Shelter who work at grocery stores, nursing homes, farms, convenience stores, and other jobs because their wages are not keeping pace with the cost of housing.

**"Most people at the shelter are working, but their wages are not keeping pace."**

Ready addressed how the John Graham Shelter has tried to deal with the growing demand for its services and the chronic problem that persists from the state having a high cost of living. "What we try to do at the John Graham Shelter is we try to figure out some answer to the economic riddle by helping people get vouchers, helping people get benefits, helping people advance their income [and doing] whatever it takes," Ready said. (Continued in "Sleep-Out")



Elizabeth Ready, Director, addresses the Vigil crowd



Board Member Dan Adamek (left)



Porter Nurses join the Sleep-Out

## Holidays at the Shelter

We would like to express our deep gratitude to all of our donors—charitable individuals, families, civic groups, local students, and faith-based organizations—for their offerings this holiday season. We would not be able to serve as many families and fulfill our mission without participation from the larger community. And, we would not have been able to put presents under so many Christmas trees without the coordinated effort of so many sponsors.

**We extend  
deep thanks  
to our donors**

The holiday season can be a hard time for people who are homeless or alone. Staff and volunteers work at our five buildings and

beyond to organize events and outreach visits, prepare meals, decorate trees, and distribute presents. We hope that this sense of belonging to a caring community serves as an anchor to relieve trauma and isolation in people's lives.



Chef, cookbook editor, and JGH&S Board Member Rux Martin prepared a feast of prime rib, mashed potatoes, and maple carrots for everyone at the Shelter on Christmas Day.

Marje Rucker, who worked most of her career as a nurse in the Middlebury area, celebrated her 71st birthday in January with a festive dinner and a homemade birthday cake provided by Middlebury College Friends of John Graham Housing and Services. There were tears of joy all the way around!



## Meet Kate Schirmer-Smith: Outreach clinician

I joined the John Graham Shelter in September 2015. I have always greatly admired this organization and when I saw the ad for a Service Coordinator I decided to apply.

I worked for almost 20 years at the Counseling Service of Addison County. During those years I worked as a home-based clinician in Youth and Family and as a clinician in the CRT Program and as an Emergency Team Clinician. I received wonderful supervision at CSAC and had the privilege of working with wonderful colleagues and consumers over the years.

In 2004 I left CSAC and opened a private counseling practice in Brandon. At the time there were no counselors working in Brandon and I knew the need to be great there. I have been working with adolescents, adults, and couples for almost



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12 years in Brandon and I have grown to love that community and the people who live there. I continue providing services to residents of Brandon, and beyond, on a part-time basis.

I am working 20 hours a week at JGS providing outreach services to people living in transitional housing. Working with people in their homes is coming full circle for me as I started my clinical career working with families in their homes through CSAC.

There is something very special when people open their front doors and invite you in. When people open their doors and their homes to you to share their challenges, their successes, their relationships, this is a special privilege, and I am always aware of what it means to be a guest in their home. Sometimes I am a guest who has a bag or two of food for them or gifts from a generous community for them and their children at holiday time. Sometimes I am the bearer of difficult messages that ask them to make changes that are hard, but necessary, in order for them to not be at risk of homelessness again. Sometimes I just have another form we need to fill out to help secure assistance. Whether I am bringing treats or bringing hard facts, I am aware of the privilege they extend to me in welcoming me into their homes. I cannot count the times when, as I have been walking back to my car, I have said to myself, “wow, I have the best job in the world.”

## Joaninha's Story

My family and I fled for our safety from our home country of Angola. My story with John Graham Housing & Services begins when my family and I left Canada. We crossed into the United States near Newport and told the border patrol our situation. They listened and took my family and me to a woman there to help me. We were told that in order for our case to move forward for asylum, we had to go to Florida. When we arrived there, we stayed in contact with the people from Newport, and they told us that there would be a lawyer there who would aid us. But, when we spoke with him, he told us that we in fact had to return back to Vermont.

I spoke with a woman named Anne on the phone and she told me that when I

returned to Vermont, I would not be returning to Newport. Instead, I would be staying in Vergennes with a young woman named Paige. "You will meet her at the train station," she said, "and you will stay with her." Anne sent me a photo of Paige so that I would know what she was going to look like.

But, when I got to the train station with my children, it was actually a man named Paul who picked us up. He took us to a hotel, and the next Sunday morning, Paige and Lhencia came to get us. And that is how I got to JGHS. I can't really fully put into words how much they have helped me, but what I can say is that they have helped me 100%. I don't like to think about what my life would be like without the Shelter. I don't know where I would be.

It has been the Shelter that has been there for the beginning of my family's new life living safely in the United States. Really, though, without the Shelter, my life would be full of question marks. They have helped me have a steady place to live, ensured that my family is fed, and connected me with legal services to help me with my asylum case. I feel so much more stable with JGHS. I'm not 100%, but I'm in a much better place. Sometimes I think of the life that I had, I think of my husband, and I think of my old country. I think of how all of that was changed so quickly, and words can't really describe my thoughts.

With all of the people that I have met here from the Shelter, from the schools, from church, and from the community as a whole, I really hope to become an American citizen. That is my hope and dream for my family and me.



**Joaninha and her four children just moved to a John Graham apartment which they are delighted to call home.**

**“Without the Shelter, my life would be full of question marks.”**

## Robin's Story

It is really hard for me to talk about how I became homeless. I was working full-time at what I thought was a steady job, and was living comfortably because of it. But, my workplace started to downsize, and they kept cutting my hours over and over. Then, in the midst of all of this, my fiancé passed away. It was really difficult for me, and I went into a deep depression because of it. Once he passed away, my emotional problems combined with my cut hours forced me to lose my job. This was a really bad time because I got behind on rent and lost my home.

I was staying with a friend temporarily because I had nowhere else to go. I kept on trying to find help, but everywhere I went, it felt like I wasn't getting anywhere. My friend told me I should call John Graham Housing & Services. She called for me because I felt too scared to do so. When she called, Paige asked to speak with me and I did. She added me to the waitlist, and I waited for the call saying I had a place at the Shelter.



When Paige called to let me know there was space at the Shelter, I was nervous. I had two cats that were the only steady things in my life, and I knew that I would have to find a new home for them. I got to the Shelter the day that Paige called me, and I was scared; it was a new place with new people. I was so scared that I left the Shelter that day and didn't come back for a week. Paige knew how scared I was. However, she had faith in me, and held the room for me during that time.

As I came back to the Shelter, I can remember sitting in the office with all of the people working and just talking. Talking with everybody really made me feel like I was at home. It was the same experience with other people living at the Shelter. It was an awesome community, and it really built by self-confidence to become independent. Another aspect of the Shelter that has meant so much to me is the fact that I don't feel like I am being rushed or forced into doing anything at the Shelter. The people who work there allowed me to be self-sufficient and work at my own pace to improve myself.

**“I never thought that looking at apartments would be so exciting!”**

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I am about ready to move into permanent housing now, and I could not be happier. I never thought that looking at apartments would be so exciting. I think sometimes about where I would be if I had not come to John Graham Housing & Services, and honestly, I do not even know if I would be alive. If I had not come here, I would have been on the streets and who knows what would have happened to me from there. Nancy, my case worker, has been really awesome. She is always willing to spend time helping me to figure any problems I have out.

## Sleep-Out, Cont.

The sleep out event began at 4 p.m. with nearly one hundred people attending a candlelight vigil on the green in town. Diane Lanpher, Representative (D) of Vergennes, spoke about her experience doing the sleep-out last year and her role in the fight to end homelessness. “It was a very cold night, but it was an eye-opening experience,” Lanpher said, recalling her sleep-out experience. Specifically, Lanpher explains, “I had a lot of things that you don’t necessarily have. I didn’t fear for my safety that night. There were people around. We had access to a bathroom that most people wouldn’t.” Lanpher recounts waking up at 4 o’clock and shivering in the bathroom because it was the only warm place she could find. “I had to ask myself in the mirror,” Lanpher began, “would I be able to prepare to go to a job interview in two hours? Would I be prepared to go and find services that day? Thus, Lanpher stated, “people in that situation need our help, to give them the step up ... we need to do the wrap around services, not just



**“Would I be able to prepare for a job interview in two hours?”**

**– Rep. Diane Lanpher**

finding a place, but putting everything else that they need in place.”

Participants of the event expressed their passion and connection to the issue of homelessness. For Fernanda Canales, principal of Salisbury Community Schools, and her husband, Chad Chamberlain, a teacher at Salisbury Community Schools, this was their first sleep out. “I think we encounter families who are in this situation time and time again, and I just felt like I wanted to experience it,” Canales explained as to why they chose to participate. Chamberlain agreed with his wife and also added that he felt that families in his community who were either homeless or struggling with homelessness neglected to reach out for support. Canales agreed by saying: “A lot of times there is a stigma, they don’t want us to know that they are living under certain circumstances.”

Bringing awareness to the issue and approaching the situation with empathy, as the John Graham Shelter is committed to doing, will help Vermonters become more invested in the cause and learn how to deal with the issues more directly.



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Community Partner

## More from Sleep-Out 2015

