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Virginia Supportive Housing

has been working for 30 years to ensure everyone has that most basic of human needs—a home. Begun by a group called the “Instigators”, this organization has helped thousands of Virginians in the pursuit of a roof over their heads. Today, VSH is renovating and expanding one of its existing facilities at the corner of Clay and Harrison streets herein Richmond. When completed, this nearly \$20 million project will serve some 80 individuals. Virginia has the unfortunate distinction of containing five of the top-ten American cities with the highest eviction rates: The River City is number two on that national list. Along with the executive director of VSH, and a case manager, you’ll also meet Willie Davis, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, who not long, was evicted and found himself on the streets, and might have fallen through the cracks had it not been for Virginia Supportive Housing. *continued on page 14*

Virginia Supportive Housing

BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD

IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE READING THIS story tonight, lounging on your couch, or lying down in your bed, with plenty of light illuminating the words, and the cool, artificial breeze of an air-conditioner keeping the demons of heat and humidity at bay, consider this: Right now there are more than 100 people actually living on the streets in our fair city, though there are far more who are homeless, some 600, which is nothing by comparison to the tens of thousands of homeless folks in cities like New York and Los Angeles. People without four walls and a roof, indoor plumbing, a stove and a refrigerator, the luxury of climate control, music, TV, cable, Wifi. Not even a single bed. The biggest culprit by far is eviction, and Richmond leads the country at Number Two in this dubious race.

"IT'S UNACCEPTABLE,"

says Allison Bogdanovic, executive director of Virginia Supportive Housing. She sits at the table with Willie Davis, a veteran who "experienced" homelessness this past winter; and Anthony Clary, a veteran's case manager for VSH, who helped Willie find a home.

"Thirty years ago a group of volunteers got together in Richmond, and they called themselves the Instigators," says Allison. "They knew there were a large number of folks living on the streets who didn't have a place to live. Back then it wasn't really a strategy, but they knew they needed affordable housing with supportive services, and so they formed Virginia Supportive Housing."

Many organizations with similar goals sprang up across the country a little over three decades ago like a bumper crop of mushrooms. And it was not simply coincidence. It was because of the collateral damage caused by the policies of the Reagan administration, politically-motivated strategies that cast hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets almost overnight. First there was the de-institutionalization of the mentally impaired. And then there was a fiction known as Reaganomics, characterized as trickle-down economics. The idea was that by giving corporations tax breaks, money would begin funneling down to the poorer strata of society. Fact is, the money never really reached the poor; it kept getting inexplicably stuck right near the top where it was siphoned off to bloat bellies already filled to bursting. The rich kept getting richer, and the poor just bottomed out into homelessness.

VSH began attacking homelessness at its core from the beginning. Back in 1992, the organization created Clay House in Richmond's Carver neighborhood at the corner of Clay and Harrison streets. The 47-

unit building contained small, single-resident units with shared shower and kitchen facilities.

"Thirty years later we have sixteen buildings in Richmond, South Hampton Roads and Charlottesville," says Allison. "Each year we serve more than 1,500 people who have experienced homelessness."

That first building in Carver is now undergoing extensive renovation and expansion. Dubbed New Clay House, this facility, with a price tag just under \$20 million, will house up to 80 people in true efficiency apartments, each of which will include a kitchenette with full-size appliances, and a full bathroom. New Clay House will also house a community room, a private courtyard, a computer room, a resident phone room, fitness and laundry room, and off-street parking. EarthCraft Virginia-certified, the new facility will feature a photovoltaic solar array to reduce the building's energy load, and a solar thermal hot water system.

Homelessness continues to be an issue, and VSH is always there manning a safety net to catch those who plummet downward. "We can't build fast enough," Allison says. "And so we partner with private landlords who are willing to rent to our clients, and then we take services to them in their homes."

And it is working. "We can end homelessness," says Allison. "We know how to do this. It's very evidence-based. Over 95 percent of our residents don't return to homelessness because we provide affordable housing."

Many factors can contribute to homelessness, and all of these need to be addressed, but the first thing every human being needs is reliable shelter. "Let's solve their housing crisis first," Allison says. "Make sure they know they're going to have a place to stay

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D'ANGELO



Hands-on and onsite. Allison Bogdanovic, Willie Davis, and Anthony Clary overseeing the progress made at the “New Clay House”.

and where they’re going to eat, and then surround them with services. And the services are always voluntary, because requiring services doesn’t work. First solve the housing crisis, and then help them set goals and figure out how they want to improve their quality of life. Whether that’s about a job, or whether that’s education, or whether that’s focusing on their physical or mental health, or even addressing substance abuse.”

Homelessness itself is far costlier for society than supplying those in need with housing. “Everybody should want people to live in a stable housing environment,” says Allison. “It’s a basic human right for one thing, but it also makes financial sense. Someone who lives on the streets costs our community between \$30,000 and \$40,000 a year. When they live in one of our programs, it’s \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year.”

Politicians from both sides of the aisle embrace VSH and its programs. “We’ve had Republican presidents

and governors support these programs,” Allison says. She pauses to consider one group of people who have all too often experienced homelessness. “The Commonwealth of Virginia ended veteran homelessness by providing enough resources for veterans who are experiencing homelessness so that when they become homeless we can respond to their crises immediately,” she says. “Now that’s not to say that we have enough housing for everybody, but it can be done, and the numbers are coming down, for sure. We can solve this.”

Allison then mentions Michael Desmond’s Pulitzer-prize winning book “Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City”, which was released a couple years back.

“Eviction rates in Virginia are the highest in the country,” she says. “Michael Desmond did research through The Eviction Lab (Princeton University’s

nationwide database of evictions) and it shows that five of the ten large cities in the US with the highest eviction rates are in Virginia, and Richmond is number two. The eviction rates in this country now are higher than they were during the Great Depression. There’s a process for the eviction and it starts with the landlord notifying the tenant”

VSH Veterans Case Manager Anthony Clary nods along as Allison speaks. “Once that writ goes in place, it says you have 21 days to pay up, or 30 days to get out,” he says. “Once that sheriff comes and tacks that on the door, you’re out and they’re not going to let you back in.”

Anthony tells the story of one of his clients who was evicted from her apartment, which led her down a despairing spiral. She was a 25-year old veteran, who, while in service to her country, was brutally raped, and later diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia.

Anthony called her landlord and told him VSH would pay off any of the young woman's outstanding debts.

"Are you sure you want to pay for that?" he asked.

"Well sir," said Anthony. "She served her country, and she's entitled to this."

"But it's almost \$4000," the landlord said.

"Sir, she served her country," Anthony insisted. "This money's here for her. That's what supportive services for veteran's families does. So let me have your W-9 information and I'll get the check cut and bring it to you personally."

Anthony even sent over a promissory note, but the landlord ignored him.

He remembers the call vividly. "When I was on the phone with him, I could feel him looking down his nose, judging her because of where she was mentally," says Anthony. "And she couldn't help where she was mentally."

The landlord filed the writ, the young veteran was evicted, and because of her mental condition she began to drift.

"She was homeless on the street because she had burnt every bridge be-

hind her," Anthony says. "Folks who have an SMI (serious mental illness) are hard for the family to deal with. So folks like that, they kind of go from pillar to post."

She ended up in Georgia, and later in Kansas, and Anthony urged her to study at community colleges in those other states. During her time away from Richmond, Anthony corresponded with her.

"I knew she would probably come back to Richmond, and what I wanted to establish with her first was a trusting relationship," he says. "I told her, 'Hey if it doesn't work in these places, come back and we can help you.'"

Anthony was able to lay a safety net that caught her. "Now I have her linked up with the VA, and she's going to eventually get housed again," he says. "She's also got a voucher. She's only going to have to pay 30 percent of her income for rent, so she'll have enough money to survive. And she's also going to have long-term case management."

He goes back to the time she was evicted. "He (the landlord) threw her out, man," Anthony says. "She was almost



like a ten-year old, and it was breaking my heart. She was on the phone with me and she was screaming, 'They put me out, all my stuff is gone, what am I supposed to do now?' So I met her at the local McDonald's and I was trying to figure out how to help her. She was traumatized, so I never pressed her. Whatever it is she felt like she needed to do, I let her do, but I also informed her that there are services that she could really benefit from."

And now, thanks to the landlord's legal actions, this young woman has a record of sorts. "So it's all on her housing record now," says Anthony. "What

kind of tenant she is, and this stuff follows her. It's like a police record. She had the money to pay, but he rejected it, and now she's stigmatized."

Anthony tells me another story about a pair of veterans, each of whom had done three tours of duty in the Middle East. "They were fine before they went," he says. "And they came back and they were just not there. And they both were trying to work, trying to put their lives back together. One guy asked me, 'Anthony I know you didn't serve, but I know you do this every day so I know you can help me, When does it get better?' It broke my heart."

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VSH Executive Director Allison Bogdanovic.



Anthony Clary, veteran's case manager with VSH.



Willie Davis, veteran who experienced homelessness.

"This one particular guy was in the same situation as the other young lady," Anthony says. "The landlord ignored us, didn't want to house him, but I caught him in time. Left that check on the desk."

This veteran is trying to do everything he can. "But this guy couldn't go work in a pie shop," says Anthony. "His mental health was just gone. He was gone. And with the medication he was shaking all the time. If they don't

get the help they need, often these guys get dropped through the cracks. So when I get them I try to link them up with every service possible. He didn't know what to do with himself. I grabbed him by hand and took him over to the VA. He needs that case management. He has a fiancé and six babies. He needs that case manager to say, 'Did you remember to do so and so today?'"

After a very long pause, Anthony says,

"I couldn't imagine doing three tours. I can't imagine what this man is going through."

Directly across the table from Anthony, Willie Davis is nodding his head. "Without that feeling of support, you don't know what to do," he says. "Before Virginia Supportive Housing came along, I had no idea what I was going to do. I knew I was going to have to fight tooth and nail to survive. Not to have a place to stay,

but just to survive."

Willie Davis served four years in the U.S. Marine Corps as an artilleryman. He traveled to Malaysia, Hawaii, Hong Kong, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines. Not long ago, after living in Baltimore for a few years, Willie returned to his native Richmond.

"I started a job as a maintenance man with a certain hotel here in town," he says. "As part of my salary, I was allowed to live at this hotel for almost a year."

Then one day, without any notice, Willie was told the hotel had changed its policy. "I was paying my bills," he says. "I was doing everything I needed to do, but the rules changed. Suddenly, I was facing eviction."

Willie did have a sister who rented a place in Jackson Ward, and she agreed to let him move in. Before he did move in, however, his sister also received an eviction notice. "I was going to be homeless," says Willie. "I spent a few days in the street and it wasn't nice."

He had not only been evicted, but he also lost his job at the hotel. Every day he would look for work. On one

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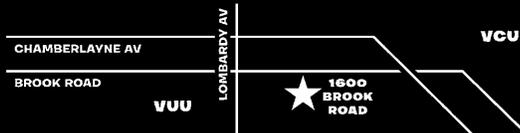
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of his job searches he met a man who told him about Virginia Supportive Housing. "It was late this past winter, and once I hooked up with Virginia Supportive Housing, things sort of worked themselves out," says Willie. "In the process of them helping me, you know, through their support, somethings came through on my end, as far as getting a job. Things kind of clicked, but it was touch and go for a minute."

Homelessness is not simply a physical condition, it's almost a state of mind. "You can have the best intentions for yourself, but once you get stigmatized with homelessness no one wants to help you, no one wants to support you," Willie says. "You get to feeling low about yourself. Sometimes I wondered how I was going to eat at night. When these guys (VSH) came along, it gave me an incentive to put myself out there to help myself out."

He recalls homeless people he has met. "You're being set up to fail once you cross that line of not being able to pay your monthly rent," says Willie. "You got all these people out here, and I'm talking about hard-working people,

people who work hard every day of their life. They try to take care of their kids, they do what they have to do. They're struggling, but they're making it, and then one slip, one paycheck, and they're messed up. For twelve years, you pay your rent every month on time, and you mess up one time and you can be thrown on the streets as if you just moved in last month."

Allison says that even before reaching the event horizon of homelessness, many people are already on the verge of collapse. "They're already living in trauma because living in poverty is extremely stressful," she says. "The impacts on people's physical health and mental health and their children are extraordinary. And then you add eviction to that."

"That's right," says Willie. "And once you go down that rabbit hole, it's really hard to get out of it. You're in a home, you're in an apartment, you're stable. You have enough food to make it to the next payday. You lose your home, what do you have? What do you hold onto to make it to that next payday? You have nothing. You're going to stay down for a long time now. So it's going




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to be harder and harder for you to get back to that level where you were.”

Allison says that many responsible area landlords are examining their own eviction policies. “Just because it’s the law doesn’t mean they have to enforce it that way,” she says. “We all need to look at these policies. As a community, as a Commonwealth, we need to look at them. Because this is not right, and with stable housing, everybody wins.”

Things have steadily improved for those experiencing homelessness in Richmond, thanks in large part to organizations like Virginia Supportive Housing, and Allison Bogdanovic wants to get that story out.

“We’re always trying to make people aware,” she says. “The real stories behind this. That’s what people relate to. Everyone has someone in their family who’s had a crisis. It touches everybody. We say, ‘There but for the grace of God . . .’”

And before she can finish, Willie Davis says, “Go I.” 



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