

MINISTRY FOCUS:

Everyone Has the Right to Change Their Lives for the Better

by Robin Barr, Cheryl Sesnon and Susanne Byrne

No matter what is happening in the world, there is always a population of disenfranchised, underserved, and usually poor, who are struggling. As our editorial board planned this issue, we realized we wanted to hear from people at the nonprofit ministries that serve those populations. They are forced to think fast on their feet for survival while continuing to meet the needs of their clients. We were curious how they do that in challenging times.

Three executive directors of ministries founded and supported by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, in the Congregation's three regions (United Kingdom, Western and Eastern United States), answered our questions. Our thanks to Robin Barr of Harbour Place, Susanne Byrne of York Street Project, and Cheryl Sesnon of Jubilee Women's Center for sharing some of their very precious time.

Harbour Place Is About Change

Grimsby, United Kingdom

Robin Barr, Executive Director

Harbour Place was established in 1996, and for over more than 20 years, we have been a recognised part of the community in which we are based. From the beginning, Harbour Place, led by Sister Hilda Baxter, CSJP and an amazing team of staff and volunteers, worked with the homeless, the socially isolated and vulnerable in some of the most deprived wards in the country. Many of our clients were coping with complex / multiple issues, including:

- substance / alcohol issues
- social isolation
- mental health /dual diagnosis
- repeated patterns of homelessness
- offending history
- long-term physical health issues
- long-term unemployment
- childhood trauma

Many of our clients fell outside the remit of statutory agencies, or were distrustful of, and loathe to use services that they saw as "authority".

Over the course of the year, Harbour Place often worked with up to 600 individuals a year, frequently registering up to 300 new clients each year. Harbour Place became an essential "safety net", yet one that often went unnoticed.

Has that mission changed in the last few years?

The focus of our work now is working with the homeless, in particular, those living on and near the streets. We operate a 15-bed night shelter, 365 nights of the year. We also have an outreach team working



with rough sleepers and street beggars. The project works extensively with those considered marginalised and hard to reach. In addition to practical support, shelter, hot food, showers, sleeping bags and change of clothing, the team provide advice and advocacy services helping clients to re-engage with benefits, health and harm reduction services and family. Harbour Place believes that everyone is capable of change and will only achieve their full potential when offered a safe, supportive, empowering and non-judgmental environment.

It is our intention to provide such an environment and meaningful activities, which will help reverse the spiral of rough sleeping and homelessness. Harbour Place is about change and about believing that everyone has the right to change their lives for the better.

We aim to assist individuals to re-establish the foundations for a stable, positive life, built upon



consistent support and the opportunity to have “your own front door”.

Since opening our new premises in September 2018, we have registered over 200 people for our service and have assisted over 115 people to find permanent accommodation.

Biggest Challenges

As for most organisations like ours, a major challenge for us is to ensure we have enough funding to deliver the important services we provide.

I never cease to be amazed and humbled by the generosity and compassion of the communities in which we work. We receive terrific support from local companies and church groups, and receive grants from a number of charitable foundations, but, as hard as we work to achieve financial sustainability, the reality is that this will always be a challenge for us.

Without wanting to be over-political, austerity has also impacted directly and severely on our community. The cuts in benefits, the introduction of Universal Credit appears to have hit the poorest disproportionately hard, and the re-shaping, downsizing or complete withdrawal of services (mental health, harm reduction etc.) has meant that we are often now the first point of contact for people at the point of crisis.

Work and Personal Life Balance

I joined Harbour Place four years ago, intending to work three days a week, as part of a planned move towards retirement. Things have not quite worked out like that, and I feel more engaged and immersed in work than I have for some years.

Working with a group of committed people to develop and deliver services that really make a difference is enormously rewarding, and I feel very fortunate to have had this opportunity to build on the foundations laid by Sister Hilda and others.

Away from work, I am lucky to have a great family. Gilly and I have been married for 40 years this year and have three lovely daughters and five amazing grandchildren. There is nothing like spending time with kids to put things in perspective and help you to remember what is important.



Jubilee Women’s Center – Strength in Adaptability

Seattle, Washington

Cheryl Sesnon, Executive Director

The mission of Jubilee Women’s Center is to support women who are experiencing homelessness to build stable and fulfilling futures, one extraordinary woman at a time, led by the guiding principle that women of all races should be treated with respect and dignity. Jubilee began in 1983 when Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace leased a converted convent with 20 bedrooms. We now have four homes (two are converted convents) and can house 55 women at any given time. Additionally, we have grown our referral services, computer lab, and free clothing boutique so that we serve nearly 2,000 low-income or homeless women each year.

Adaptability

One of Jubilee’s strengths as an organization is our adaptability.

During the recession many women ended up homeless because they got laid off and couldn’t find another job, especially older women. Entry-level jobs were going to young people just out of college, because jobs were scarce. The average age of a Jubilee client was 50 years old. For many of the women, our focus was to get them on Social Security benefits and into subsidized housing, so they would be stable.

Without jobs, Jubilee’s clients had more complex barriers, such as no health insurance. Women with disabilities (physical and/or mental), or who had a chronic or debilitating disease, such as cancer or severe arthritis would lose their jobs, their insurance, their homes, and end up on the streets or living in their cars.

We created a program track called the Healing and Restoration Track for women who would likely never be





able to keep a full-time job. We taught business skills to women on that track. The goal was to keep them from isolating (because without jobs they were often depressed), create a supportive community through teamwork, and provide resources for them to create products they could sell at fairs and markets. They learned everything from branding and marketing to pricing and cash management. Most importantly, they built their confidence and self-esteem. This program had a transformative impact on the women who participated.

New Challenges – No Exit Strategy

Then things changed.... The City of Seattle decided to embrace Housing First where the people who were chronically homeless with the most barriers would move into the subsidized housing the city had available. That dramatically reduced the amount of housing available for our women who were ready to exit Jubilee's program. Also, because they were temporarily housed at Jubilee they couldn't even get on the Housing First waitlist and apply for subsidized housing anymore. That created a dilemma for us – if we accepted someone into our program who would never be able to get a job and/or afford market rate housing, there was no exit strategy for them. The only way to eventually get into low-income, subsidized, permanent housing would be to go back on the streets and get on the Housing First waitlist. All of this was happening while market-rate housing costs began to soar in Seattle because of the booming influx of Amazon, Google and Microsoft employees. Affordable housing was becoming impossible.

We determined the niche we could best serve is women who are homeless but have the potential to become employed within two years. We restructured our program to focus on getting women back to school and/or into jobs with potential career paths. We have strengthened our Education Center to provide career exploration, work readiness skills, interpersonal skills and money management. We also purchased a home

with 12 bedrooms that is available for women who have completed the two-year core program at Jubilee but still need more time to increase their salaries to afford market-rate housing.

The other innovation we added was a Matched Savings Program. If a woman in the Jubilee program saved a minimum of \$20 up to a maximum of \$100 per month, and they did this consistently each month for up to 20 months, showing staff their bank statements of the deposit and no withdrawals, at the end of 20 months, we would match their savings 2:1. That would give her up to \$6,000 that she could use for first and last month's rent and security deposit to move into a new apartment or home. She might also use it to pay off old debt, purchase a car or any other purpose that could move her into a new level in her life. Plus, she will learn great savings skills! We believe this is a key piece to really moving out of poverty.

Shifting the Tide

Some of the bigger picture concerns are the political trends we see in our country. There seems to be some popular support for moving backward in areas like women's rights, government support for people in poverty, low or no cost mental and physical health care, addressing racial equity and finding solutions to homelessness. I pray these trends are temporary and we can shift the tide in the direction of compassionate, inclusive and humane policies and actions.



York Street Project

Jersey City, New Jersey

Susanne Byrne, Executive Director

Our mission is to shelter, feed, educate and promote the healing of persons in need, especially women, children and their families.

While the mission hasn't changed, how we are able to carry out that mission has. For over 25 years we were able to provide transitional housing to homeless families. Due to changes in funding priorities and policies at the federal, state and local government levels, we had to move away from the transitional housing model, which allowed for 18 months of onsite housing, and now operate a shorter-term emergency shelter onsite and a 24-month offsite housing program for homeless families. The average length of stay for our onsite families is now just over 100 days.

This change has impacted almost all our programs within the ministry, but fortunately our leadership and staff have found ways to adapt and evolve our services to continue to meet the needs even under changing conditions.



Challenges

We experience many challenges, from lack of funding for our programs to a lack of quality community resources to assist our families with their needs, but ultimately our biggest challenge is the lack of safe and decent permanent affordable housing for our families.

We can address the multiple barriers that cause or contribute to our families becoming homeless. We provide mental health services, and we teach parenting skills, life skills, and household management skills. We can connect our families to treatment programs when needed, and we can teach them job readiness skills. But a lack of formal education, work experience and access to high paying jobs means that our families earn a hourly wage between \$9-\$14 per hour, and they cannot afford a monthly rent that at minimum will exceed \$1,100.

As a result, we are constantly building relationships with landlords to secure lower cost housing whenever possible. We are enhancing our career development program to help identify industries and programs that will enable our women and families to identify employment areas where there is room for advancement. Our goal continues to be helping our families to break the cycle of poverty, but with housing cost so high, that goal has become more of a challenge than it was before.

How Things Have Changed

We are still serving homeless and financially disadvantaged women, children and families, however since moving to the emergency shelter model we have found that some of the families who are seeking shelter need more crisis intervention services than the families we used to serve in transitional housing. In the past, families would be on a waiting list before being

accepted into our program; now families are coming to us during their crisis.

Due to the shortened length of stay in the shelter program, not as many families are placing their children in our early childhood development center. Because of this, we have opened the program up to community families, both low-income and higher-income families. Our low-income families qualify for a voucher to help them cover the cost of tuition. While taking in families from outside our programs was a change, we believe that it offers us the opportunity to serve a more diverse socio-economic group of families, and we believe that all the children in the center will benefit from that.

Work and Personal Life Balance

It is challenging to maintain a good work/life balance, but it is critical if you plan to do this work long term. For me, I learned that I needed to leave work at work. We are witness to a lot of tragedy, heartache, unjust actions and violence, and if we were to carry that with us outside of work, it would be difficult to focus on anything else. It continues to be a struggle and it takes a lot of discipline, but it is important.

I have asked my staff to respect boundaries and to only contact coworkers during non-work hours if it is an emergency (unless the contact is non-work related). When I am off work, I will check my email but only respond to things that are urgent.

I take time off to attend my children's events and games. For me, this is critical, because the time passes so quickly, and they grow too fast. I have missed so many things over the years before I made the decision that this needed to be a priority.

I have also learned to better organize my day, plan meetings, prioritizing items that must get done, while also building in time to focus on more longer-term projects. This has helped me avoid having to stay at the office until late in the evening.

