

Q&A

HOMELESSNESS: the questions, some answers

Emily, Kenneth, Lawanda, Maria

They have nothing in common. They have everything in common.

They ask hard questions. They ask no questions.

They have all the answers and they have no answers.

They take care of the people no one cares for.

They have homes they cherish. They seek homes for others.

They are the staff of Columbus House.

Some long-term employees, some passing through.

Some bridging jobs. Some building bridges.

White and black, Hispanic and Asian.

Case manager, residential supervisor, outreach worker, coordinator.

Some are in recovery themselves. They can show the way because they've been there.

They define home differently, but it is the same place.

Their titles do not tell the story – the people tell the story.

Is anyone listening?



A whatever
it takes.

“We’ll do whatever it takes to keep them housed.”

Emily Robinson

Emily Robinson works for Columbus House as the Coordinator of Cedar Hill Supportive Services. Cedar Hill is a supportive housing community with 25 efficiency apartments. Emily has worked there since before it opened six years ago. She previously worked with learning disabled adults for over 30 years, including 12 years at Chapel Haven.

Q: What do you think when you hear the word ‘homeless’?

I think about people on the street, people with no place to live. When I was a kid they were called bums. My grandmother used to always tell us, “Don’t walk past someone laying in the street. They may need help. You don’t know what’s going on with that person in the street.” I never dis-respected them but saw them as somebody who needed assistance. That’s just the way I was raised.

Q: What do you do at Cedar Hill?

I work with the tenants on case management, depending what their needs are. Money management is a

big issue for clients, especially former substance abusers. For them, money can become a dangerous trigger. Most clients live on a monthly income and just don’t know how to make their fixed income last the entire month. I help them budget. Sometimes I wear the hat of property manager and make sure repairs are done. Our tenants work as our in-house maintenance people, so I supervise them. There are also day-to-day issues. There are about 12 nurses who come in and I have to make sure the tenants are here. We also help people get to doctor’s appointments.

Q: Is there a typical day?
“Every day is a new day,” I always

say. I come to work about 8:30 and there’s always people waiting for me at the door for different issues. I have one tenant who smokes and I hold his cigarettes. He has one cigarette an hour so he’s waiting there for me. And, if they’re relapsing, I help people get into programs. We’re a referral service to other agencies so we try to get either inpatient help or outpatient help. If people have a mental breakdown my job is to get services for them, either through hospitalization or working closely with the clinician.

Q: What are some of the pleasures at Cedar Hill?

We work with other agencies, like the New Haven Land Trust, who helps us with our garden in the back. We have a flower garden and a vegetable garden. That’s been very good therapy for our tenants. The Land Trust helps the tenants plant and then we maintain the gardens. This year we aren’t going to plant as many vegetables. We have a rabbit that just can’t wait. So this year we’re only going to plant one box with vegetables and then we’ll screen that in. They even ate our sunflowers!

Q: What are some of the other client issues you deal with?

When the people living here get sick, if they’re not taken care of, it can be serious. We have eight people diagnosed with diabetes. If they hadn’t been living here, if they were still living on the streets, they probably wouldn’t even have known they were diabetic. One woman is now on dialysis. She came to me, and said, “Emily, can you look at my legs? They’re hurting and I don’t know why.” Now this is a very quiet woman who never complains. When I looked at her legs, they, of course, were swollen. I thought she might be in heart failure. I took her to the doctor’s right away. Turned out she was in kidney failure and she was put in the hospital for several weeks. We try to make sure that people get at least a yearly physical exam. Make

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sure people go to the foot doctor, even remind some people to shower daily. Not just concentrate on their substance abuse or their mental health but also concentrate on their physical well being.

Q: Where do Cedar Hill residents come from?

Most of the people here have been homeless and were referred from shelters or the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. We've been open for over seven years and we still have six of the original clients. Our focus is to keep the people housed so whatever it takes to keep them housed, that is what we work on. We've only had one eviction in the whole time we've been here and that person we housed someplace else. We don't want people to go back out on the streets. And when they leave, I don't lose touch with them. Whenever they call me, I'll see them. If they're doing well they call and they call if they're doing bad, too. But I like it better when they call and tell me they're doing good.

Q: What are some of the residents like?

One of our tenants was homeless for 25 years and when he first came here, he had dreads and a beard. He had trouble grasping the concept that this was his own place and he could move the furniture around or do with it whatever he wanted. He's done a 180-degree turnaround. He got to the point where he shaved and cut his dreads. Then he got a job and eventually a car. He plays in a band with the same guys he played with when he was in high school. He doesn't even remember being homeless for so long – 25 years! One of the things I'm trying to work with him on now is to get him to have a future. What I find is tenants live for the day, or live for the past. They don't think that there's a tomorrow.

There's another guy who's been here since '99 after living at our transitional house, clean and sober for two years. He uses church as his higher power. He and another guy

were in my office and we were talking about planning for the future. We were talking about his finances. I said, "I see you get paid twice a week. What do you do with your money?"

"Nothing," he said. "I buy food with my money."

I said, "With the amount of money you're making, you can open up a savings account. You'd be able to travel, you could even buy a car."

Several weeks later he came and showed me two passbooks, one for his regular savings and one for a Christmas club. I said, "Since you go to church all the time, why not buy some 'Sunday go-to-meeting-clothes'?" He came in yesterday and told me that he laid away a suit for church. I think it's a very positive step because he's starting to believe in a future.

Q: What's a good day like at Cedar Hill?

A good day is a quiet day. People are doing what they're supposed to be doing. When the clients are going to their programs, we don't have any crises. That's a good day.

Q: What's a bad day like?

People in crisis. If somebody has a psychotic break, we need to decide if he should be hospitalized or not. If a client has a relapse, we try and get them help right away because we know that person can infect the building. We have so many people here struggling to stay clean, but it only takes one or two for it all to snowball. First we have to make sure that person is ready or willing for treatment and if they're not, we say, "If you continue this behavior you can be evicted." We have zero tolerance here. This also means contacting all the outside agencies they're involved with – his clinician or probation officer. They try to get him to realize what he's going to lose. But it can be a slow process. Sometimes it's days and sometimes it's weeks! It took me five weeks to get somebody into an inpatient program. Another client will go stay with his mother because one of his friends in



the building was using drugs. That bothers me. This is his home. He should be comfortable in his own house. So those are the bad days.

Q: What keeps you going?

I have always liked people and always worked with people. When I retire though, I want to work at a mindless job. With this kind of job my mind is always going. I realize that I can't save the world but I still work as hard as I can. I feel satisfied that I've tried to help someone. I don't feel like I'm a failure if it doesn't work.

It took me years to learn to separate work from home. Still once in awhile my work fills up my head and I can't sleep. That's when I take a vacation. At home, for relaxation, I make dolls, porcelain dolls, and I love to dress them. I have two granddaughters and I tell them they'll inherit the dolls one day.

Q: What does 'home' mean to you?

Home is a place where you love to be, where you can kick off your shoes and relax and feel free to do

what you want to do without anyone telling you what to do. I love going home. My house is the way that I like it and I'm surrounded by the things that I love.

Q: When you hear about Columbus House, what comes to mind?

Shelter. That's what Columbus House did when I first came here. I know it's a lot more than a shelter now and that it's a place to help people.

Q: What about places like Cedar Hill?

We need a lot more of them. If not for this building, three quarters of these people would be homeless. A lot of people are homeless because they cannot manage their day to day activities – things most people take for granted – pay the rent, manage their money: keep a clean environment. We have people here who have never used a stove, cooked a meal or had a proper diet. There are people living in our community who are struggling to do this and I believe there should be more and

more places like Cedar Hill. I understand why people are getting evicted. The rents are ridiculous, number one, but even if they have an affordable place, they don't know how to manage their money. They spend it on what they think is necessary and not their bills. Folks with not enough money sometimes think, "Oh, I don't have it anyway so I might as well just spend it on what I want."

Budgeting is a learned behavior. I taught my children how to budget so they would be able to pay their bills, and now they all have houses. If you don't have the money for something, then you wait until you get some money.

Q: Is there anything else you want to mention?

It's a struggle to keep someone housed. Sometimes we're fighting so hard to keep someone housed, and the person we're fighting is the very person we're trying to keep housed! But it's a day's work.

Q: What have you learned through this type of work?

One thing I've learned is that people who became substance users when they were teenagers often revert back to that age when they stop abusing. If they started when they were 11 or 12 years old, they haven't gone through some stages of life. You can't skip a stage – we all have to go through adolescence, young adulthood and adulthood. So when they get clean and sober, they think they are dressing their age, but they're dressing the age they remember. So you see them with the baggy pants or the jerseys with big basketball and football names – outfits you might see on a teenager! My mother used to tell me, "If you don't have a red cent in your pocket, no one should know you don't have money. You should dress appropriately, clothes should be clean not have holes in it." But I try not to push my ideals on clients. Who says we're doing the right thing? Who says that I put my values on you and that's right?



A these are
our people.

“We meet people where they’re at!”

Kenneth Driffin

Kenneth Driffin works for Columbus House as a case manager in the Outreach & Engagement Program, which began as a community effort to reach homeless individuals who are resistant to treatment, services and even shelters. He used to be a case manager at the overflow shelter, first part-time and then full-time.

Q: Who are your clients?

Primarily, the folks we work with are the people who are sleeping outside, under bridges or in abandoned buildings. We go to soup kitchens. Some of the people, they talk to themselves, dig in trashcans. These are our people! They are people who are in desperate need of services, even though oftentimes they may not even want services. Our goal is to engage them and develop a relationship with them and build it up until they start making some progress.

Q: How can you help them?

Some of these people won't even come into a shelter, so we drop off food, blankets, sleeping bags. We come up with a survival packet. One of our goals is to get them into a shelter, get them their entitlements,

get them some medical help, and see if they need mental health treatment or substance abuse treatment. We get them connected. I think that's our motto – we meet people where they're at.

Q: What are your responsibilities with the Outreach Program?

As a case manager, I'm a member of a team of outreach workers who work with homeless individuals who may have mental health and/or substance abuse problems. Our team is comprised of more than one agency – there's Columbus House, the Hill Health Center, ALSO Cornerstone and Connecticut Mental Health Center. Everyone comes to the table with their particular expertise and we work together.

Q: How many of the team members go out at one time?

We usually go out in teams of three, unless we have a client we've established a good relationship with, then we go one on one. I've got a guy like that. Every Wednesday he meets me on the corner of Ferry and Grand. I know he's gonna be there and he knows I'm gonna be there and we're going to do something together. I bring him to the office. Sometimes I take him where he can get a shower and a change of clothes. I call him “my makeover” – my outreach makeover. He may have an appointment at social service disability, whatever. Or maybe we just talk to see how he's doing. I ask him what's going on. I say, “Do you think you'd be interested in going to detox today?” Stuff like that. Just conversation.

Q: What got you involved?

My personal life. I've been 11 years in recovery. This is my way of giving back, doing what I like doing and doing what I understand.

Q: What's a typical day like?

It really varies day to day. But there's not a week that goes by that I don't connect with someone who wants help. Most of the folks have substance abuse problems. I get them connected to treatment. I make sure all their insurance is in order. We try to document the work we do, but in outreach you don't really get the opportunity to document everything. I'm also assigned to work at another shelter. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings I go to Immanuel Baptist Shelter where I run a support group from 5:15 – 6:15 p.m.

Q: Where do you go to seek out people who need help?

I go out with a team and we go to areas we've identified as outreach locations, where we know we can find folks. Like there's a street sweeper who sleeps outside, but we know he's always in the same area at



Q: Why do you think these people get so disconnected?

I think some of the folks are in pain. They're hurting from whatever happened to them in life. Some people blame society. Everyone has a story to tell and they're angry, they're bitter, they're hungry and they're hurt. They don't trust a lot of folks. I think one of the key things we do very well is meet them where they're at and gain their trust.

Q: Do you worry about your physical safety at all with this kind of job?

We know that most of these folks are usually harmless, but we always take precautions. We go out in teams, not alone. And they're not just low income, poor or on drugs. Some of these people are from good families, well-to-do families. A percentage of our clients have college degrees. They're very intelligent, but you never know. They just got stuck.

Q: What's a good day?

Almost every day is a good day, when we can get people into treatment. "Help me," they say. "I'm tired of doing drugs. I'm sick and tired of being tired. I've burnt all my bridges. I have nowhere to go. I don't know what I want to do. Help me!"

I say, "Let me know if you're ready. I'll call the program and say you're going." And they say, "I'm going!" That's a good day – someone gets connected with someone who's going to help him. Getting a person who's on the street into the shelter for the night, that's a miracle! We're talking breakthroughs here because these are things people resisted. "I surrender. I need some help."

Q: What's a bad day?

I don't have bad days. Some days are a little more challenging but they're not bad days.

Weekend outreach is hard because everybody's hung over, so mostly all we can do is bring donuts and coffee, keep talking to folks, giving

the same time, sweeping the streets. In an emergency I'll give him a few dollars. His shelter is just one of those outdoor clean-up, fix-up things. I try to engage him but he's a very difficult person to engage. He's an elderly black man who's really set in his ways. He never really wants services. I found that he really likes coffee, so what I do, one of my tools, is always bring him a cup of coffee. I know how he likes it and that starts a little conversation. When the wintertime comes we get him some thermals and gloves, a hat – things we know he's going to need to survive the winter.

Q: Where else do you find your clients?

There's some other folks we know who sleep under the bridge. We go to check on them, bring them some coffee. Our goal is to succeed in bringing them inside. "It's going to be awfully cold tonight. Columbus House has beds and Immanuel's got beds." We try to see what their most urgent needs are and help meet those needs.

“This is the house of hope. If I could re-name it I'd call it

‘Another Chance.’ ”

Q: Is your work sometimes discouraging?

I'm used to working with this population. I understand some people may not ever come into the shelter but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop working with them. I have one guy who just wanted me to help get him medical care. It took me five months, but he got his medical coverage and now he doesn't want anything to do with me. But that's okay. Now he's got his food stamps and he can go to the doctor's. Maybe later, down the road, if he wants more, he knows that we're here for him.

them our cards, telling them what we do. We just keep on trying to engage them.

Q: Tell us about a client you remember.

We had a woman on the streets, who was a substance abusing woman, and she happened to be a prostitute. She'd say, "I'm going to come. I'm going to call you," and we'd say, "Come now. We've got a bed for you. Come to Columbus House," and she'd say, "Not now, but I'm going to call you." That happened for a couple of months. Then one Sunday morning she said, "I'm ready." We got that woman into Columbus House and then we got her connected for her benefits and we got her into detox, into inpatient treatment and into a place called Recovery House which works with folks until they're housed. She is currently housed and has her own place.

Q: What's your most unforgettable experience?

We knew one particular guy was sleeping in a garage in the wintertime. It was a mess – dilapidated, rats, squirrels, a wet mattress – I had to hold my nose when I went in there. But this is my client. One day we went back out because we hadn't seen him. This was during a blizzard. We looked around with a flashlight and found him in the driveway. He never made it to the garage. He was laying there face down in the snow. He was still alive and I "911'd" him. They said he would have died. He's here at Columbus House now. He's downstairs.

Q: What keeps you going?

I look forward to going to work. "How can I make a difference today?" It motivates me. When I go to bed at night I say, "Did I do a good job?" To me it's like a ministry. The other thing that keeps me going is my five boys at home: 13, 11, 7, 5 and 4, and my adult daughter who lives on her own. There's never a dull moment.

When I get home they know it's homework first. No homework, no TV, no games. They're doing well, very well.

Q: What does the word "homelessness" mean to you?

Hopeless, sometimes. Well, not everyone who is homeless is hopeless. These are people who need a hand. Of course they need a home, but there's got to be some contributing factors as to why they're homeless – loss of jobs, family breakup, substance abuse, mental illness, unable to pay the rent, expenses exceed income. To help them, we first gotta find out what happened.

Q: Does your work often seem hopeless?

Not at all. I think we're making a difference on every level. Can we change the world? Yes, but we all have to do our part. We look at a chain and it has different links. As long as these links fit together and move, we got some progress.

Q: How do you define home?

I define it as ME in a family. You can have a house but, if no one's there, it's not a home. I got kids, we got a cat. I got five boys. I see myself going to a place with people that I love and I am also being loved. That has a lot to do with home for me. That's all for me.

Q: What does Columbus House mean to you?

This is the house of hope. If I could re-name it I'd call it "Another Chance." I don't want to put a limit on it, second chance... third chance. No. Another Chance!

"...not everyone who is homeless is hopeless"

"I see myself going to a place with people that I love and I am also being loved. That has a lot to do with home for me."



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we are an
extended
family

“What we are is an extended family.”

Lawanda Towles

Lawanda Towles is a residential supervisor at Columbus House. If you visit Columbus House during the week, chances are Lawanda is the first staff person you'll meet. She's the one in the front office, greeting visitors and clients alike. This is her story.

Q: How did you start working at Columbus House?

I worked for the Community Action Agency in Bridgeport for 30 years, as director of a program called Educational Alternatives. I finally got burnt out and retired. I stayed home, took a few courses, but when I decided I wanted to go back to work I didn't know what I wanted to do. I worked in housing for a year, then at Job Corps in New Haven. I missed working directly with people. When I enrolled my granddaughter at Sacred Heart School, Columbus House was right next door, so I came in and filled out an application. Every day I would go in and check when I dropped her off at school. I think it took four months but I finally got hired as a back-up person and then on to the front desk. I've been here since 2000.

Q: What does your job in the front office involve?

I answer the phone, directing the calls to the appropriate staff – calls from the media, law enforcement, or calls about a donation. I also enter information in the log on an hourly

basis, monitoring the behavior of the clients, which I'll give to the case managers. Normally, people who come in during my shift are referred here by an agency and a case manager is expecting them. So when they get here, I give them tags so they can tag their belongings and then I call the case manager. I sometimes set up counseling appointments for a clients or help them out in other ways. For example, a client may say he has a dentist appointment but doesn't have a way to get there. I'll see if there are bus tokens or if he can get a ride. Sometimes I take minutes at the residential supervisor meetings and I also monitor the cloak room. And, from time to time, I'll train new staff and mentors in various clerical tasks.

Q: How does your work day start?

I work first shift, from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. but I'm usually here by 7:30. I come in, look at the client roster, go inside the dining room and say good morning to everybody. I don't feel comfortable just going to the front desk and staying there. I have to go ask, “How is everybody?” It makes me

feel good and I think it makes people feel good that they're being acknowledged. I call it “feeling people.” I get to know them more, other than just their names. That, to me, is very important.

Q: What's a typical day like for you?

Well, first I receive the shift change, discuss any problems, review the roster, and then I greet the clients. I spend a lot of time answering the phones. Sometimes I get calls from people who want to donate money, or furniture or services. I realize my attitude is important so I try to let them know their donation is needed and I thank them for bringing things in. Then, with the assistance of a mentor, I'll set up the intake and counseling schedules for the case managers. New and referred clients come in from various places so, towards afternoon, my day becomes busier.

Q: What's it like at Columbus House around 4 p.m.?

What happens at 4:00 is a whole different situation. That's when the clients start to come in – the

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emergency clients and clients who live here with reserved beds. It’s also when I leave and the second shift takes over. Each shift has different tasks. Some days, it’s so smooth and other days it’s almost chaotic.

Q: What’s the hardest part of your day?

Both the beginning and the end of my shift. Clients are leaving. Clients are returning. Once these activities are completed, the day starts to balance out. Sometimes, if I feel like it’s getting to me then I get someone to cover for me, so I can go get a breath of air. You have to have a certain mind set.

Q: Are some days harder than others?

I think the day before holidays are the hardest. People are more depressed, upset because they may not have a place to go to.

Q: What’s a good day?

I’m not sure I would describe them as good days or bad days. There are just days when you’re not going to

have any issues and some days when you’ll have a lot of issues. There’s a lot of backup support here with the case managers, and the directors. If I have a situation I feel I can’t handle, I can always get on the phone and call upstairs and ask if someone can come down and help me out. There is a good backup support system here.

Q: What keeps you going?

I like it. I had no idea what it was like in a shelter beforehand, other than what I saw on TV which was sort of negative. I think I’ve been here four years now and there’s nothing more fulfilling. I want to do what I’m doing because I like the job and I like the people. It’s not all roses, it’s not all good, but what I get out of it makes me feel good, aside from all the other things. And, I know that I’m giving back to the community.

Q: Can you recall a memorable moment?

There was one young woman who used to be a client at the

Columbus Avenue shelter. She was in and out, and in and out, but she got into one of our programs. She came in and volunteered at the front desk and then she finally got into the mentorship program. She got hired as a supervisor and now she just started a job as case manager at another agency. To see a former client leave, not as a client, but as an individual who was able to overcome her fears and gain strength – it makes it all worthwhile. I think she got a lot of support here so she could do this. You see some people come in and out of this place every year. They're not always going to get out but you've got to work with them.

Q: Do you ever see clients outside of work?

If we see a client outside, we aren't allowed to speak to them unless they speak to us first. It's part of our 'boundary' training. But when I go downtown to the library, all I hear is, "Hi, Miss Lawanda." We're not allowed to socialize, but it's good to see them. They come up and tell you, "Oh, I got an apartment," which is good. We have some clients who will stay in contact, no matter what, even those that are doing really well. They'll drop in to say they're doing fine and let us know what's been happening with them."

Q: What does the word "home" mean to you?

I think home should be a place where you know you're comfortable. But here, at Columbus House, it has to be a place where you can't stay, but it's like a step. We don't want you to stay here. We want you to move on. We help you get ready to go on.

Q: What do you think about homelessness?

I think it could happen to anybody. Yesterday one of the clients was being negative about a new client – and about homeless people – and I said, "There, but for the grace of God, go I. It could be any one of

us." People have bad breaks. The economy causes a lot of people to be homeless. We're not just talking about people who have substance abuse issues or mental health issues. We're talking about people who have economic issues and I think that's the new homeless population.

Q: What comes to mind when you hear the name Columbus House?

Columbus House is more than a building. And it's more than food. We're not an institution. There's warmth and a welcome offered here. I guess what we are is an extended family to a lot of people.

“We have some clients who will stay in contact, no matter what, even those that are doing really well.”





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you see
change

“The ladies go from being co-dependent to being independent.” *Maria Rodriguez*

Maria Rodriguez is the program coordinator of Sojourner's Place, which offers transitional housing to women who are dually diagnosed with mental health and substance abuse issues. She's worked for Columbus House for four years, as a member of the residential staff, a case manager, the coordinator of the outreach program, and for the last nine months, at Sojourner's Place.

Those children are either with a family member or in a foster home.

Q: What do you consider a good day at Sojourner's?

A good day is when I come in in the morning and the ladies are feeling great and going about their day without having too many upsets. A good day is not having to hear about a fight or argument or something that went wrong in their lives. That's a perfect day, but it's rare.

Q: What keeps you going?

The clients. The clients keep me going. We come in, we see the ladies. Sometimes it takes a year, but you see change. You see the ladies go from being co-dependent to being independent, functioning individuals. And just a look at the right time in the right place makes a difference. I can be so overwhelmed that I just want to scream and pull my hair out. But the next moment one of them comes up and says, "I need a hug," and that's it, for both of us!

Q: What is one of your most unforgettable experiences?

I took three clients to New York City for the Christmas holiday. We managed to come up with the money to go to New York, see the tree and everyone ice skating at Rockefeller Center. One of the three women had not been out in a crowd for over 25 years. She had been at Sojourner's about four months when I arrived and she had a social phobia. The trip was a breakthrough for her.

Q: What brought you to Columbus House?

I had worked with the homeless population in Bridgeport for over 10 years and I wanted to do the same thing here. Prior to that, for seven years, I worked as a technical assistant with the Homeless Coalition in Bridgeport.

Q: Tell me about the staff at Sojourner's Place.

Sojourner's has two staff people on duty during the day – myself and another case manager. From 4 p.m. to midnight, there's one staff person, and from midnight to 8 a.m., there's another staff person.

Q: What is it like at Sojourner's on a day-to-day basis?

Well, we have to make sure the place is running smooth, that all the clients get where they need to be each day, like getting to their treatment programs. We have to make sure the ladies are up and about, that they're feeling well, and that the house is clean. We try to

figure out where we can place the ladies for vocational programs. There's quite a few vocational programs and no one criteria. We make sure we fit the program with the personality. We have to take a whole lot of things into consideration before a person is referred.

Q: Is there a typical day at Sojourner's?

There is no typical day. You never know what to expect. The best thing is not to bring any expectations. Whatever happens, happens. Sometimes clients have problems the night before that I have to deal with, or something happened that morning. They might have a relapse. I try to address the most urgent needs first.

Q: Do the women here have families?

Most of them do, though of the 11 women here now, two have no family involvement. Five have children over 18 and four of the women have younger children.

“Home can be a little hut anywhere as long as it’s your space. It’s not only a place where you can sleep, but a place where you can feel safe.”

In order to get her to go, I told her we’d go out to eat. She was somewhat paranoid but she had someone there to hold her hand. That was something I never thought she would accomplish. But she did it and it got her motivated to do more. She’s doing great now although she still doesn’t do well in groups. But you have to motivate the person. For

her, the motivation is food, shopping and jewelry making. I took her to the arts center and got a grant for her and she’s enrolled in a jewelry class. There are other people in the class, but she’s motivated by the desire to make jewelry.

Q: Are there any other client stories you can share?

There’s a person who’s been here for one year now. She had never been more than two months clean, free from drugs or alcohol. I said, “Your behavior is not acceptable,” and put her on a contract. It’s been nine months now, that she’s been clean. She used to have a nurse come in on a daily basis. Now the nurse comes in every two weeks and the woman makes her own appointments. She’s in our mentorship program now and will graduate soon. I was a little tough on her, but she needed structure.

Q: What comes to mind when you think of Columbus House?

Growth, because I have been able to see change with the clients and also with the agency. It used to be at 200 Columbus Avenue and now we’re at 586 Ella Grasso Boulevard. And some of our staff were the clients and are now residential staff. Most of us started as residential staff and that experience helped.

Q: What does the word “home” mean to you?

I feel that home can be a little hut anywhere as long as it’s your space. It’s not only a place where you can sleep, but a place where you can feel safe.

Q: What comes to mind when you hear the word “homeless?”

Unacceptable. There shouldn’t be homeless people. America is so rich and yet we have the highest rate of homeless. How much money is thrown away or given away? I believe we have to take care of home first and then outside. It’s sad when you see people outside and it’s below zero

degrees and they refuse to come in. People have forgotten the basics that we all need. We live in a society of instant gratification. It’s “me first, me second, me third!” and there’s no room for anything or anyone else. People don’t communicate and people aren’t cared for. They’re not loved.

Q: What troubles you about the issue of homelessness?

On any given day we have over 100 people at the shelter and yet there are so many abandoned buildings! Why not get them? Ask how many would be happy to fix up the buildings and live there. If you give someone a little job, you give them their dignity back. Some people are not looking for handouts; some people are looking for an opportunity to help them get ahead. There are 33,000 homeless people in Connecticut. This doesn’t count the people who live under tunnels, bridges or other out-of-the-way places. There are some families that are homeless, sleeping in cars. They hide those cars to make sure no one can find them because they don’t want someone to take their kids away! Instead, we should be trying to keep those families together. If you go to the Broadway Soup Kitchen in the evening you will see families eating there. There aren’t many family shelters either. Mom might go to a shelter with her kids and dad is somewhere else if there’s a place.

Q: Any closing thoughts?

It’s hard to believe that in a country as great as ours, homelessness exists at all. We live in the wealthiest country in the world, yet funding for the homeless is a low priority. Society as a whole has a negative impression of homeless people. They are the unseen. The reality is that most of the homeless are people just like you and me, people with families, hopes, dreams, and desires. People looking for a helping hand.

A Message from the Executive Director



During the past year, state budget cuts have impacted social services and the lives of people who are in greatest need. Friends of Columbus House have expressed their interest in how these cuts affect our work and how they can help. We have had to make adjustments to the agency budget in order not to lay off staff or curtail critical services to people who are homeless. While Columbus House has been able to cope, the people we serve have had a more difficult time. Cuts to the State Administered General Assistance (SAGA) and the imposition of Medicaid co-payments have put an undue burden on people who live in poverty. Cash assistance to those on SAGA has been slashed to as low as \$50 monthly for some. As the cost of living continues to bolt, the picture is bleak for those who are simply trying to survive.

Columbus House has depended on state and federal funding for programs and services since it opened in 1982. Both sources of funding enabled us to acquire and rehab our new facility on the Boulevard as well as Sojourner's Place, our women's transitional program on Howard Avenue. Equally important are the various collaborative efforts that we have developed with the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Department of Social Services and the numerous local programs which they support.

At the same time, we are dependent upon the private sector for our survival. Volunteers provide thousands of dollars of in-kind support through meal serving groups, administrative support, operational assistance and fundraising efforts on our behalf. Faithful donors help us close the gap in the bottom line, year after year. Advocates rally to help stave off misguided legislation and budget cuts that would debilitate us. We could not provide the housing and support that we are known for without the support of friends and donors.

Our current Capital Campaign for Columbus House is a prime example of the support this community has provided. We are just shy of our \$2.5 million goal, and in the upcoming months, we will launch a Community Campaign, asking people throughout the Greater New Haven area to help us reach our goal to help support our new building and secure the future of Columbus House. If you can help out with a donation now, please send it in the enclosed envelope.

Alison Cunningham
Executive Director

A Message from the Chairman of the Board



Having completed my first full year as Chairman of the Board of Directors of Columbus House, I can say I am deeply honored to lead this board and this organization. I am committed to the mission of Columbus House and determined to help continue to secure the organization's financial viability, because without financial security, we could find ourselves in as an untenable and precarious position as our clients. We owe them our own stability, as they search for their own.

Columbus House is fortunate to have a fine reputation, built over many years by the efforts of many. But the story of Columbus House keeps begging to be told, from many perspectives – through the media, the clients, the board, and in this annual report – through the voices of our own staff. In their own words, you will hear about their jobs, their views on life, their thoughts about homelessness and their acute appreciation of home. It doesn't take long in a place like Columbus House to be thankful for your luck, your health, your job and your everyday successes.

While Columbus House is clearly a place that helps folks who are down on their luck, or suffering from mental or physical illness or addiction problems, among many other things, it is not the simple emergency shelter it was when it began over 20 years ago. Columbus House is more than a shelter because it needs to not only provide a bed and food for the hungry, the weary and the poor, it also needs to help them take the first and second and third steps that will lead them toward the direction of independence, health and a home.

I have learned much since I first joined the Board of Columbus House in 1998. I have witnessed a group of dedicated individuals work together and stick together during turbulent times – sometimes side-by-side and often at the mercy of outside organizations and elected officials – to stay the course and remain focused on Columbus House's mission. Our mission is: "To serve people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless by providing shelter and housing and by fostering their personal growth and independence."

If you can help us with this mission, please send in a donation. Thank you for your open arms and your support.

Joe Pajor
Chairman of the Board

COLUMBUS HOUSE, INC.

Statement of Operating Revenue & Expenses

For the Year Ended June 30, 2003

Operating Revenue

Grants for Operations	\$2,452,695
Client Fees & Rents	120,835
Other Fees & Rent	46,887
Fundraising Revenue	351,231
Investment & Interest Income	2,610
Other Revenue	30,220
Total Operating Revenue	3,004,478

Operating Expenses

Salaries	1,701,224
Fringe Benefits & Payroll Taxes	491,159
Client Needs	32,834
Client Workfare	81,936
Food, Food Supplies & Service	59,337
Rent & Mortgage Interest Expenses	22,731
Utilities	97,142
Other Occupancy Expenses	198,417
Depreciation Exp – Bldgs & Imprv	42,143
Vehicle Expenses	26,362
Staff Travel, Training, & Recruitment	12,950
Consultants & Per Diem Help	22,452
Accounting & Audit Expense	10,226
Office Supplies & Other Expense	68,075
Telephones & Beepers	34,790
Insurance – Commercial & Auto	67,985
Data Processing	51,199
Bank Fees & Charges	1,026
Promotion Materials & Services	20,089
Event Expenses	1,758
Total Operating Expenses	3,043,835
Net Operating Revenue (Expense)	\$(39,357)

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We gratefully acknowledge these donors who made contributions to Columbus House, Inc. between July 1, 2002 and June 30, 2003. If we have inadvertently omitted or mis-spelled your name, please accept our apologies and notify the Development Office at 203.401. 4400 ext. 106.

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2003 Columbus House Annual Report

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