

# To Life, to *life!* L'Chayim!

*In Hebrew, the word for "life" is "chai." Each Hebrew letter possesses a numerical value, and the two Hebrew letters that make up the word "chai" are chet (8) and yud (10). So chai is equivalent to 18, a number which has come to assume mystical meaning. When a monetary gift or donation is given, it is often given in multiples of \$18 – symbolic of giving "chai" or life.*

Daniel lost 18 years of his life. He was homeless, though he doesn't remember how it came about. For 18 years, Daniel had no contact with his friends and family. He didn't know his mother had died. He never knew when his grandparents died. His father gave him up for dead. All that time, Daniel was lost in New Haven, lost in homelessness.

He grew up in New Haven, in what he remembers as a "normal" family. His father, who was in the military, was a prominent figure in the African American community. His mother raised the children. He fondly recalls his mother's love of gospel music. Daniel was very close to his younger sister. When he was a child, the family lived in Paris for four years, and his eyes twinkle when he thinks of the fun they had as children in a far-away city. He grew up in a "potpourri of people" – a good environment for a young person, he says.

Daniel attended Sleeping Giant Junior High and Hamden High and graduated from Hillhouse. A musician, he played drums in the

band at Sleeping Giant, and in bands outside of school in later years. He went on to Southern Connecticut State College for a year, enjoying it until his parents separated and he was faced with a choice of staying in New Haven or moving to Philadelphia with his mother. In 1971, he did go with her and his sister for two years before moving back to New Haven with his dad. For the next eight years, Daniel shuttled back and forth between the two cities.

He remembers various jobs he held, relationships he had, and apartments in which he lived. He remembers working in a machine shop, and things were going well. But then, things got very confusing for Daniel. He doesn't remember how he lost his job or his apartment. He wasn't doing drugs, he didn't have an alcohol problem, and he had no criminal background. But around 1980, he found himself on the streets, asking for directions to a homeless shelter. He honestly has no recollection of how he became homeless.

Daniel spent the next 18 years homeless, moving from one shelter to another in New Haven, with various health problems, little trust of the people around him and no vision for a future. He started at the city's Overflow Shelter, then on Crown Street. From there, he found the Columbus House shelter on Columbus Avenue, where he stayed for two years. For the next few years, Daniel lived at the Immanuel Baptist Shelter on Grand Avenue. Luckily, Daniel never had to spend time living "on the streets."

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He found life in the shelters regimented and difficult. He had to do what he was told, eat and sleep when he was told, and leave the building at 7 a.m. every day, even when it was bitterly cold outside. In the early days of his homelessness, he coped by walking for hours. Later he spent his days in the library reading. Sometimes he tried temporary factory work, but it was too difficult and, he believed, toxic. His favorite job – one he held for several months – was in the mailroom for a newspaper company.

This was his life for 18 years. He was isolated and ashamed. He didn't call any of his family or friends because he didn't want them to know he was living in a homeless shelter. Even if he had wanted to reach out to his father, he didn't know where he was living.

Over the years, there were rumors about Daniel's whereabouts – some said he was in jail, others thought he had simply moved away, and some wondered if he was still alive. His father had lost hope all together and after seven years of silence, notified the Social Security Administration that Daniel was dead. By the late '90s, his friends and his family had given up hope of ever seeing him again.

Then something happened that caused Daniel to begin to wake up. He met people from Columbus House who wanted to help him. He hadn't trusted anyone for years.

But the Columbus House ACCESS team – case managers who did aggressive outreach and engagement – were used to working with people who were difficult and had long histories of homelessness. A case manager named Tracy made repeated visits to the shelter and had consistent meetings with Daniel. Eventually she connected. In spite of himself, Daniel began to trust Tracy, and to believe her when she told him he didn't have to live in the shelter for the rest of his life. Tracy said she



# To Life! t



**Emily Robinson, Cedar Hill's  
Community Services Coordinator.**

**Daniel,  
like most  
tenants,  
pays only  
30% of his  
income  
for rent.**

would introduce him to someone who could help find permanent housing.

Daniel was skeptical but he agreed to meet Emily in August of 1997. Right from the start, he had the feeling Emily would not steer him in the wrong direction. She told him about new apartments that were being built on State Street. Together, Emily and Tracy took Daniel to see the building under construction. They told him he could live there if he wanted. All he had to do was say yes.

Week after week, he watched as the walls at 1465 State Street went up, the windows were built in, the tile was laid, and finally when the doors were open. Week after week, Emily met with Daniel, gently moving him from his quiet isolation to trust and hope.

Emily Robinson, the Community Services Coordinator at Cedar Hill – as 1465 State Street came to be known – recalls that when she first met Daniel, he had long hair, a full beard, and was very thin. He was very untrusting. Emily knew that he had a story to tell, but more important, she knew that he was

a good candidate for this permanent supportive housing site. If she could just get him to agree to move in, the rest would follow. She let Daniel know she believed in him and had faith in him. During this time, Daniel “felt a big lift” from making a connection at last with someone who cared about him. Daniel was ready to take a leap of faith. In December, 1997, he became one of the first tenants at Cedar Hill.

Cedar Hill is a small, 25-unit housing site, set back on an acre of land on State Street. It was built for low-income wage earners and for people who are homeless. Daniel, like most tenants, pays only 30% of his income for rent, and is responsible for his utilities and other living expenses. HOME, Inc. owns and manages the property; Columbus House provides the on-site support services with two case managers.

Daniel's progress was slow. When he tried to reinstate his Social Security benefits, he was told that his family had declared him legally dead. Daniel literally needed some proof of his existence. The search for his father began, and

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eventually Daniel and Emily found him, living and working in the Bahamas. His dad was astounded to hear Daniel's voice over the phone, and asked old friends of the family who still lived in New Haven to run right over to Cedar Hill and verify that this was his son. Sure enough, Daniel's godfather recognized him immediately.

It was at this time that Daniel realized he had begun to wake up. He knew he had been out of touch with his family, friends, and even himself for many, many years. He had missed major life events. Daniel couldn't put those 18 years back together, but he could begin to reach out to family and friends and try to create a life for himself.

He called his friends. Though he was very anxious, he went to visit his father. He called his sister in Philadelphia. He met the whole family there, where they had many, many questions about his life over the last two decades. He couldn't remember a lot, but they were all happy to be reunited. Though disturbed by the mystery of Daniel's disappearance, they accepted him back into the family as if no time had elapsed. Since then, Daniel has seen his father often, and his father came to visit him at Cedar Hill several times in the past year.

Emily helped get Daniel's Social Security reinstated; she supported him as he regained his health; and she is always there to give him guidance when he needs it. Daniel credits the staff for helping him get where he is today.

For Daniel, the last eight years at Cedar Hill have flown by. He lives in an efficiency apartment, drives a car, has a job and plays in two bands. He enjoys cooking, when he takes the time to do it, and is proud that he is able to manage his other responsibilities. He participates in the weekly support group for the men in the house, where they work on short- and long-term goals. His short-term goals include losing weight through good nutrition and cooking healthy meals for himself. His long-term goal is to become more responsible for his finances. The support group helps Daniel as he examines his life from time to time.

For Daniel, Cedar Hill is "not a program – it's home." His own home, where he can come and go as he pleases. He says, "It's normal, like what everyone needs, and most people have."

He has no desire to look back at his time of homelessness. He wants to put that behind him and continue on his path, healthy and happy. "I'm happy," he says. "I'm fortunate to be where I am. I just appreciate what I have."

**What he has,  
everyone should have:  
family, friends,  
home. Life.**

This is Daniel's  
band's latest CD.