



An Evening of Celebration

Unity House is doing a happy dance because its annual board and award dinner is able to return this year! Usually held in late April, the big event was pushed off until it felt safe to gather again in person. Mark your calendars now and join us in the celebration: **Wednesday, September 15.**

We are excited to gather at the lovely Chantelle Marie Lakehouse venue on Owasco Lake, three miles south of The Springside Inn in Auburn. Catering will be provided by Balloons Restaurant. Seating will be limited to 150. Cocktails and conversation begin about 5:30, buffet dinner will be served at 6:15, and we pride ourselves on concluding by 8:30. In addition to presenting our two annual awards (see below), guests will hear remarks from special speaker Jacqueline Cioffa.

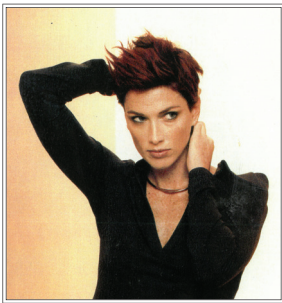
Join us!

Wednesday, September 15, 2021

5:30pm – 8:30pm

Chantelle Marie Celebration Venue
5127 West Lake Road, Auburn, NY

Catering by Balloons Restaurant
\$75 per person; all are welcome



An Auburn native, Jackie is a champion of women's rights and a staunch advocate of mental health awareness, especially timely right now. A celebrity makeup artist and an international model for 17 years, Jackie was living in New York City when her life and identity were forever changed, altered by a psychotic episode and a diagnosis of manic depression. Her memoir about her mental health journey, *The Red Bench: A Descent and Ascent into Madness*, has received critical acclaim. Living with bipolar disorder, Jackie believes passionately in using her voice to advocate and inspire others.

We would like to thank these dinner sponsors (to date) for their support of our special event: Cuddy Law Firm, Currier Plastics, Empower Federal Credit Union, Jonathan's Furniture, Lynch Furniture, MEDENT, MG Architects, Reagan Companies, and Tompkins Trust Co. Additional sponsorships are available; please contact development@unityhouse.com

Invitations will be out in the mail in early August, but the award dinner welcomes everyone. We hope you will join us for this evening of celebration!

11th Annual
**FRED ATKINS COMMUNITY
SERVICE AWARD**
**TRUDY BUXENBAUM
MATTHEW HOUSE**



10th Annual
OPEN ARMS AWARD
**SHERRI CAMPAGNOLA
CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE**





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Executive Director's PERSPECTIVE

These are dire times for our nation and the world, and Unity House has not escaped the fallout from the global pandemic. While I applaud our government for issuing stimulus payments to ease the burden so many experienced during Covid-19, we are now noting a practical outcome that is hurting our communities: people are not returning to work while the government is paying them to stay home through the unemployment stimulus package.



Liz Smith
Executive Director

Look around you. There are "Help Wanted" signs everywhere for every type of job imaginable. And yet we cannot fill positions. The intentions of the American Rescue Plan and previous stimulus programs are good – we certainly want to assist people who can't put food on the table or keep the lights on – but many are no longer in that place now that restrictions have loosened. The impact on companies across the country has now become detrimental, and businesses are unable to open or must alter hours and services because they cannot get employees. The same is true for Unity House.

“Unity House is now down more than 130 positions with few applications coming in.”

The US Chamber of Commerce recently announced a nationwide initiative to address the worker shortage. Of the 600 agencies that serve people with developmental disabilities in New York, 450 are at risk of not being able to sustain financial viability. The national workforce is dwindling and the Department of Labor reports that 2.3 million women have left the job market since Covid closed schools last year. That is a significant statistic, especially for an agency whose employee base is predominantly female. We were watching a downward trend in applications and hired workers before Covid. When the pandemic hit 16 months ago, the bottom fell out. Unity House is now down more than 130 positions with few applications coming in. My team and I have done a deep dive to come up with creative ways to work around this staffing crisis.

This year, the agency has been compelled to suspend and condense programs so we could redeploy the staff to other sites. Our 24/7 group homes (IRAs) must be adequately staffed year-round, so some of our day programs have taken the hit. We have significantly increased our advertising budget to include television commercials, print ads, and even a billboard on Route 13 in Dryden, NY. We have asked for volunteers from our support departments in Auburn – HR, Finance, Marketing, QA, and Maintenance – to pick up a shift at an IRA in Ithaca once a week. We are launching a letter writing campaign to elected officials, urging them to increase our reimbursement rates so we can pay our direct support professionals a living wage, and asking for enforcement of federal unemployment regulations. If we remain lax in enforcing the pre-Covid expectation that individuals collecting unemployment must actively seek work between checks, our economy will not bounce back and many businesses will close before the stimulus package ends in September. COO Darlene Podolak and I are busy calling on elected officials in person to share this same message.

Continued to page 3

Continued from page 2

Perhaps the most drastic step we've taken is temporarily increasing our hourly pay rate to \$18 until September. In order to do this, Unity House had to dig deep and is paying for this salary increase from its reserve savings account. This enhanced rate is not funded by the state or federal government. We sincerely hope that this boost will draw applicants and offset this large staffing shortage.

I have long expressed my grave concern about low wages in our industry. I understand the whole world is suffering now and is struggling to get back on its feet. Now is the time to look closely at paying people what they are worth. Our employees serve one of our country's most vulnerable populations. To see fast food chains offer a higher rate than we can is so difficult when our hands are tied by state funding. We do not have the luxury of flexing our hours or selling more widgets to make up the difference. Our rates are dictated by the state of New York and we simply must have an adjusted rate reimbursement to pay a living wage.

“Now is the time to look closely at paying people what they are worth.”

DISCONTINUED

ART *Flaire*

Unity House has enjoyed hosting Art Flaire for six years. With COVID-19 giving us an unexpected break last year, we had time to reflect on our event. Sadly, this feels like the right time to discontinue Art Flaire. We have had so much fun putting on Art Flaire and we appreciate the sponsors and artists that came out and supported us every year!



Drive by and check out our new billboard! It is located on Route 13 near Dryden.

Staff Giving From The Heart

Our employees are so generous, giving of their time, considerable effort, and monetary donations. They stuck with us during Covid, and we couldn't be more grateful for all they do to keep the agency moving forward!

In our recent 2020 annual report, we neglected to denote several of these devoted staff members who have made gifts to Unity House for more than five consecutive years. We'd like to thank them now:



- Elisha Haynes
- Amy Santobianco
- Ashley Short
- Liz Smith
- Alice Stoyell



Grants & Gifts

Unity House is the grateful recipient of funding from these sources:

Allen Speiser Memorial Vocational Rehab Fund - \$1,200

These funds purchased four Android tablets for Unity Employment Services (UES) in Syracuse. By equipping professional program staff to work remotely out in the community, we improve their ability to assist people with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining competitive, equitable, and inclusive employment.

Friends of Tompkins County Public Library - \$300

This support allows Unity House to buy a range of educational materials and books for our Ithaca Site-Based Day Hab library.

Welcome NEW DIRECTOR

Unity House's Chief Operating Officer Darlene Podolak recently announced that Shannon Coccimiglio has been promoted from day services manager to director of Unity Employment Services (UES).

"Shannon brings great enthusiasm with solid experience in employment and day programming to her new position as director of employment services," said Darlene.

Shannon Coccimiglio holds a B.S in Social Work from Keuka College, and an M.S.W. from University at Buffalo. Before her promotion, she was the program manager for Unity House's Without Walls day program in Ithaca. In her new role, Shannon is responsible for overseeing 15 staff and operating three employment offices in Syracuse, Auburn and Geneva. UES prepares and trains individuals with disabilities for competitive, productive work in the community. Shannon's team will pair these individuals with willing employers, and will match applicants' skills and qualifications to the job needs. UES also provides pre-vocational assessment and on-the-job training and coaching.



Contact Shannon if your business needs workers: scoccimiglio@unityhouse.com 315.253.6227 x335.



Unity House
is on

www.youtube.com/channel/UCyUkBTn84Akh6PIK6esRN0g



Unity House is now uploading all video content to our YouTube channel! Subscribe to Unity House of Cayuga County to stay up to date. Once we get 100 subscribers, we will be able to customize our page and URL. Help us hit the goal! While you're at it, follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/unityhouseofcc and Instagram at www.instagram.com/unityhouseofcc

Once & DONE

Looking for an impactful way to make a real difference in your charitable contributions? Consider scheduling an automatic monthly online donation to Unity House, like Board Member Patti Festa:



"For me, setting up a recurring donation online is extremely easy, takes the burden off of a one-time donation, and makes my charitable giving much more manageable," said Patti. "It allows me to give a bit more than I would have, spread out over the year. It's like: 'set it and forget it!' And I can always write an additional check if I want to, when I want to."

Set up your monthly gift easily at:
www.unityhouse.com/donate.html

Third Anniversary AT WEST MIDDLE SCHOOL APARTMENTS

It's hard to believe, but Unity House moved its headquarters into the former West Middle School three years ago. The agency partnered with Two Plus Four Construction in East Syracuse to turn the empty school building into 59 affordable apartments and our organization's headquarters. This project met a huge housing need in Auburn.



Dignitaries cutting the ribbon at the official opening of WMS Apartments on April 16, 2018

Lessons **LEARNED**

by Judi Magee, Director of Mental Health Residential



After I graduated college, I worked for several years in mental health residential programs. My first job was scary because I had no idea how to interact with people with serious mental illnesses. What I quickly learned was that there is no one "way" to interact with someone diagnosed with a mental illness, except to treat them like human beings.

While I enjoyed these jobs and gained valuable experience, it wore me out. At times, I was the clients' only support so their problems and challenges became my problems and challenges. There was always the expectation that their "worker" to fix it for them. I had to learn that I could not fix everything for everyone, and sometimes people just need to sit with their discomfort until they are ready to make a real change. This meant there were times when I had to make the decision to do nothing, which was hard for me.

Working at Unity House has taught me that I will always want a job where I get to interact and work directly with the clients we serve. The truth is I have learned a lot from the individuals I have met over the years. I used to think I had to have all the answers or people would think I didn't know what I was doing. I have come to realize that this is ridiculous because nobody knows everything! It's far better to just admit you don't know something than try to fake it.

For instance, when I first started working in Syracuse, I did not know my way around the city at all. This was before we had GPS. I quickly learned that the clients knew their way around, so I let myself learn from them. What I also came to realize is that this made them feel good too; they felt useful and it gave them a sense of purpose.

So, my overall lesson is that people with mental illness are just people. They want the same things as everyone else but have more barriers to overcome because of their diagnosis. Working with the mental health population can be sad at times, but it can also be rewarding. Life has not always been kind to them but they keep going and work towards having the life they want. This makes them incredibly strong and resilient. The success stories make doing this work worth it, along with the hope that the ones who are not ready now will be ready at some point.

Spirit

PROGRAM *Happenings*

With the weather getting nicer, vaccines rolling out, and Covid restrictions lifting, we have been able to do much more around the agency. Here are just some of the many activities that have been going on these past few months!

Polar Plunge: In early March, the team at Ithaca Day Hab participated in the 50th annual Polar Plunge. The event raises money every year to support local Special Olympic athletes. Our Ithaca Day Hab staff braved the chilly Cayuga Lake waters and raised \$680!



Winter Fun: On St Patrick's Day, Grace House had their third annual winter recreation. Six teams competed in a variety of challenges throughout the day including: making team shirts, a comfort food cook off, historical photo contest, and trivia. After all the points were totaled, the first-place team was the Recovery Tigers!

Egg Drop: After Easter, there were a few extra eggs at Auburn Day Hab, so the folks there put their problem-solving skills to work with an egg drop contest. Participants planned and built their own egg protectors, and then dropped them from the second-floor window at Market Street. There were many creative solutions but the winner was Melissa A. Hers was the only egg that did not break or crack.



Dino Safari: In May, Dino Safari USA invited six of our houses to experience their park for free! Dino Safari is an interactive drive-thru adventure held at the NYS Fairgrounds from May 17 – 31. Our residents were so excited to see the dinosaurs and had a great time! The agency is grateful for the free admission tickets.

Chalk It Up: On Memorial Day weekend the entire agency was invited to participate in the second annual chalk contest. This year's theme was Together in Unity. All of the submissions were great and it was tough to pick the best design, but the winner was Jefferson Street IRA in Auburn!



Walking IN UNITY



Peer Specialist Bryan Bush (left) and Grace House Director Ashley Short working the BBQ



In recognition of May as National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Court Month and Mental Health Awareness Month, Unity House joined with LifeWorks, Auburn Drug Court, HEAL, NAMI, and Nick's Ride 4 Friends to co-host the 16th annual Timothy Durant Recovery Walk on May 18. It ended up being a nice spring night, perfect for walking.

Mayor Mike Quill and Judge David Thurston started the event with opening remarks on Exchange Street Mall. Then, more than 60 participants walked down South Street to Metcalf Street and back. Once returned, participants enjoyed a BBQ hosted by Grace House.



STAFF Spotlights

Unity House believes it is important to recognize the hard work of its staff. Employees are nominated quarterly by their peers when they witness an act or activity demonstrating how the nominee embodies the agency's code of ethics and core values. Winners may select a piece of Unity House swag and receive four hours of time off.

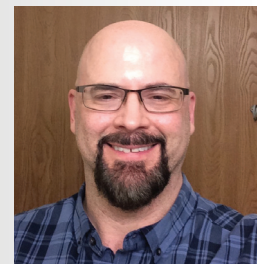
Congratulations to the committed employees we have recognized so far in 2021. Here's what their nominators had to say:

March: Rachel Longley is a DSP at our North Street Road IRA. She joined Unity House in 2009. Rachel's coworkers describe her as "a hard worker, patient, selfless, and kind. During this time of being short staffed, she is always willing to help out and work extra shifts, even on her days off. When it comes to training new staff, Rachel is a great mentor. She genuinely cares for her fellow staff and the people she supports, and is always giving 110%."



Rachel Longley

June: Jeff Brown is a DSP from Ithaca Site Based Day Hab and has been with Unity House since 2016. Jeff's coworkers describe him as "constantly showing empathy, understanding and respect to the people he works with. Jeff spends extra time coming up with activities that each individual may be interested in. Recently, Jeff demonstrated his empathy and respect when a client became emotionally upset. He was able to deescalate the situation by taking her on a one-on-one outing. Jeff's compassion for the people we serve is inspiring."



Jeff Brown



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Auburn, New York 13021

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Unity House is Hiring!



New Starting Wage!

Now through September 17, Direct Support Professionals will earn:

\$18 per hour!*

for hours worked. Benefits include:

-  Paid Leave
-  Medical and Dental
-  Full- and Part-Time Shifts
-  Set and Flexible Schedules

**Temporary pay rate for all new and current DSPs May 29 - September 17, 2021*



unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html