

Spirit

NEWSLETTER

HONESTY • INTEGRITY • RESPECT

UNITY HOUSE OF CAYUGA COUNTY INC. EMPOWERING LIVES. SECURING FUTURES.

SPRING 2022

Birthday Dinner Blowout!

Nearly 120 friends joined Unity House on April 25 for our annual board and award dinner at the Hilton Garden Inn. The evening's festivities recognized our outstanding board of directors for their leadership and commitment, honored retiring board member Elane Daly (right), celebrated our 45th anniversary, and presented awards to two individuals who make a difference in Cayuga County.



This year's guest speaker was Acting District Attorney Brittany Grome Antonacci (left). She stepped up when our scheduled speaker wasn't able to join us at the last minute. With just 26 hours to prepare, Brittany gave a passionate talk from the heart about how mental health plays a big role in our court system, and how organizations like Unity House help provide the services many people desperately need.



Michelle Barber of Five Star Bank (below) was awarded the 12th annual Fred Atkins Community Service Award for her many years of volunteer work and outreach. She even delivered Meals on Wheels with Fred Atkins himself! Michelle generously donated her cash award to the Booker T. Washington Center.



Nathan Torrance (right) of Nate's Barber Shop in Auburn was the winner of the 11th annual Open Arms Award, nominated by Unity House employee Victoria Simpson. In her write up, Victoria talked about how Nate would remember his clients' favorite songs, and sing and dance with them during their haircuts.



In honor of our 45th birthday, there was a special raffle and silent auction at the dinner. Our smallest guest walked out with one of the biggest prizes! Peyton Janssen, who is only 10, outbid others to win the kayak in the auction, generously donated by board member Chris Sloan and Nicole Longway. We gave away many other great prizes, and together we raised over \$13,000 to benefit Unity House people and programs.

Unity House is so grateful to everyone who attended this year, and to our generous donors and friends who have supported us for the last 45 years. Please see the Grants & Gifts article in this newsletter for a list of our dinner sponsors and prize donors who helped make the evening a success. Thank you!



Spirit



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CEO's PERSPECTIVE



Liz Smith
Chief Executive Officer

As I'm sure many organizational leaders are doing lately, I've found myself stepping back and reflecting on the immense changes our world of work has undergone these past two years. The pandemic has forced us all to pivot and reimagine the workplace, especially as it relates to newer technology and our workforce.

Before March 2020, Unity House was already utilizing videoconferencing tools to bring our employees together for meetings. It proved beneficial, saving staff driving time and mileage expenses across the seven counties we serve. Once COVID-19 put the kibosh on in-person meetings, we had to take it to the next level. We quickly got onboard with Zoom and began using that platform to keep employees and leadership in touch during those rough first several months. And then all of a sudden, Zoom became the ONLY way to meet.

“I've been missing the synergy of in-person gatherings.”

As helpful as Zoom and other virtual meeting technology has been during this difficult period, there comes a time to perhaps return to our old ways, at least to some extent. The new hybrid meeting and working model certainly has its pros and cons, as well as some unexpected benefits. It has caused me to think about whether the organization really needs the same amount of office space and all the administrative overhead that goes with it. If a number of staff have shown they can successfully work and meet remotely, maybe not? Could we save money by cutting some previously indispensable elements and use that money instead to boost wages or support programming needs?

I have noticed that Zoom meetings don't seem to fully engage people. It's easy to become distracted, check a cell phone, and not pay attention as much as one might in person. Virtual meetings have their place but I've been missing the synergy of in-person gatherings. They bring an energy that only occurs when people gather in the same space to exchange ideas and thoughts. When we come together collectively, I believe greater levels of problem-solving, clarification, and understanding can take place.

As we move forward, I am very aware that we must be thoughtful about when and if we start mandating in-person meetings. There is no doubt that videoconferencing is here to stay, but what kinds of meetings really should be in-person? And how do we balance convenience against safety, productivity vs. ease?

“How do we balance convenience against safety, productivity vs. ease?”

Life goes on and we must go forward with it, claiming individual responsibility for ourselves and remaining sensitive to those with whom we work and interact. We need to learn to live with COVID now. How Unity House does that wisely is something I continually ponder.



Unity House is seeking caring individuals who want to make a difference in people's lives. With competitive pay and excellent benefits, Unity House is more than just a job. This could be a great opportunity to develop a career. Unity House has part-time, full-time and relief positions, which means you can work as little or as much as you would like. Some residential programs pay as much as 20 dollars per hour!

At Unity House, you will support individuals with mental illnesses, developmental disabilities, and/or chemical dependencies. With your help and guidance, the individuals will develop their personal skills and unlock their true potential towards living a more independent life.

View our current job listings and complete an online application at: unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html

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You shop. Amazon gives.

Who knew shopping on Amazon could help your favorite non-profit! Simply sign into your Amazon account at Smile.Amazon.com, and designate **Unity House of Cayuga County Inc. as your charity of choice**. The AmazonSmile Foundation will donate 0.5% of all eligible purchases directly to Unity House. Donations add up quickly. It's a fun way to shop til you drop while also making a difference.

Smile.Amazon.com

JOIN OUR
Legacy Society

Unity House is excited to announce the launch of its new Legacy Society, and you're invited to join!

The Legacy Society has been established to celebrate and thank those who are making estate plans today that will provide significant benefits to Unity House people and programs tomorrow. Our charitable organization cares for over 1,000 individuals a day who rely on us for the services they need. Legacy gifts can be mutually beneficial, and for many, may provide tax advantages as well. Contributions to the endowment fund help ensure Unity House's long-term fiscal stability, and our ability to serve this vulnerable population well into the future.

Won't you help us meet our mission by making an estate gift to Unity House? Those who advise us of their intent to do so will automatically become members of our new Legacy Society, which recognizes your thoughtful, generous philanthropy.

Please call 315-253-6227 ext. 313 or email development@unityhouse.com to get started.

Legacy is about life and living. It's about learning from the past, living in the present, and building for the future. Legacy is fundamental to what it is to be human: an interconnection across time, with a need for those who have come before us and a responsibility to those who come after us.
~ Susan V. Bosak, *The Legacy Project*



Grants & Gifts

Unity House is the grateful recipient of funding from:

SOCIAL SERVICE LEAGUE OF ITHACA - \$1,500

Funding to buy beds and bedding for our Tompkins/Tioga respite facility, which supports those who are homeless or on the verge of homelessness.

TOMPKINS CHARITABLE GIFT FUND - \$780

Support to purchase a range of fitness, virtual learning, and educational materials for our Ithaca day habilitation center.

ANNUAL DINNER SPONSORS - \$10,600

Deep appreciation to all the businesses and individuals who supported our annual dinner and our 45th anniversary celebration:

\$1,000 level: Bonadio Group, Cuddy Law Firm, Enterprise Fleet Management, Key Bank, Nucor Steel, Reagan Insurance Co., Tompkins Trust Co.

\$400 level: Currier Plastics, Eastern Xerox, Empower FCU, Five Star Bank, Jonathan's Furniture, Lynch Furniture, MEDENT/Community Computer, MG Architects, WSTM NBC Channel 3

Raffle and silent auction prizes: Elm Tree Golf Course, Finger Lakes SCUBA, Greek Peak, Inns of Aurora, Meadowbrook Golf Club, Mid-Lakes Navigation, Millstone Golf Course, Owasco Marine, Owasco Paddles, The Printery, Chris Sloan & Nicole Longway

SEEKING BOARD MEMBERS!

Unity House is seeking dedicated individuals who have the time and energy to devote to leading the organization. Those with fundraising experience and under 50 years of age are especially welcome to apply.

Please go to www.unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html to learn more, then contact CEO Liz Smith lsmith@unityhouse.com or 315-253-6227 ext 320 to express your interest. A phone or Zoom interview will follow to discuss how Unity House's needs best fit with your interests and expertise.

STAFF Spotlight

Unity House believes that 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 embraces the agency's core values. Winners may select a piece of Unity House swag and receive four hours paid of time off.

Congratulations to our first quarter 2022 winner Brittany Randolph, DSP from Hector Street IRA! Here's what her nominator Peter Cornell had to say: "Brittany is the backbone of this residence. She is always willing to cover shifts when others call out. She pays attention to our service recipients' needs and ensures that they're well fed. She also values our participants' time and makes sure that they get to their appointments punctually. She is an example to the rest of us."

Well done and thank you, Brittany!



Perform4Purpose 

Charity Tap Night

for our 45th Birthday Bash!

New Date: Wed, July 20 5pm - 8pm

Tinkers Guild - 78 Franklin St, Auburn

FREE; Donations happily accepted

Join us for live music, raffles and food!

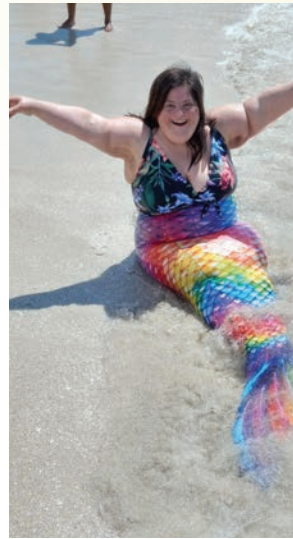
Please Join Us!

Rain or Shine



Vacation OF A LIFETIME

By Bernie Knapp, New Life IRA DSP



Recently I was blessed with the opportunity to take one of the people I support, Natasha, on the vacation of a lifetime.

Natasha's mother Maria lives in Guam, and that was our original destination. However, because of Covid regulations in Guam, we would have had to quarantine in the hotel the entire trip, so we decided that we would meet halfway in Waikiki, Hawaii.

Since the day I met Natasha, she has liked to say that she is a mermaid and is going to live under the ocean. When we were planning her trip, we

found a mermaid swim with photo shoot and a submarine tour. It was perfect for getting her under the water to see all of her "sea friends." She was able to see many types of fish, and of course her favorite: Hawaiian green sea turtles.

We also went on a sunset dinner cruise with a Polynesian show. Natasha was able to stand and participate in the dances. On our last night together, we attended a traditional luau, which was very informative on the Pacific Islands and their cultural dances. Plus, the food was delicious!

To sum it up, this was one dream vacation with many dreams fulfilled. Taking responsibility for Natasha and assisting Maria with all of her needs was a very tasking job. However, I would do it all again just to see the pure joy on Natasha's face and to know that if nothing else, Natasha was able to spend quality time with her mother.



Seeking Volunteer OPPORTUNITIES

Grace House participants are welcoming the chance to return to volunteer placements in the Auburn community. As part of their recovery plan, these individuals are responsible for developing and meeting a 35-hour weekly schedule, similar to the "work week." Participants may volunteer 10-25 hours per week. This hands-on work empowers them to develop and hone their skills, and make and honor commitments. Meaningful opportunities to help out and give back in the community aid in remission, and support a positive return to family, employment and educational pursuits.

If your organization or business needs volunteers, please contact Program Director Dorothy Radcliff at 315-253-6227 ext. 250 or email dradcliff@unityhouse.com Thank you!

Unity House resident Natalia moved to Auburn from Boston back in 2018. Once she settled in she began exploring the art of photography. "I like photography because it's a blend of art and technology," she explains. "Photography is an accessible way for me to make art. I've tried drawing and other mediums, and it's very difficult for me." Natalia takes her pictures with either an iPhone or a Nikon 170, and then uses Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop to create the final product.

In March, Natalia was invited by Auburn Public Theater to hang an exhibit of her pictures in Café 108 for First Friday. This was the first photo gallery for the restaurant, and Natalia and her father had to engineer a way to display her pictures. They were able to connect several frames with wire and a metal beam to give the illusion of floating on the walls. It took five hours to put the display together, but the results were worth it.

"I'm really pleased by how the exhibit turned out; to see it there is like WOW!" Natalia continued: "I have struggled with having low self esteem in the past, and to have my art celebrated like this is the confidence booster I needed."

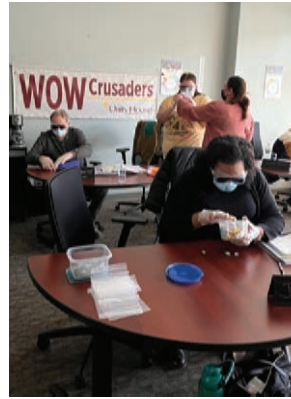
Natalia's work is available for viewing at Café 108 indefinitely. Find the exhibit at 108 Genesee St, Auburn.



PROGRAM *Happenings*



Polar Plunge: In March, some of our Ithaca Day Hab staff braved frigid Cayuga Lake for the 51st annual Polar Plunge. This event is held every year to raise money for local Special Olympic athletes. Our team brought in \$720. Overall, the 2022 Special Olympics Polar Plunges across New York State raised more than \$80,000.



Sensitivity Training: Unity House regularly offers sensitivity simulation trainings. As part of our new hire orientation process, all staff go through this simulation to help them understand what it may be like to be a person with developmental disabilities. Participants are given goggles that make it hard to see and gloves with popcorn kernels in the fingers. They're then asked to do tasks in a noisy room with no lights on while the facilitators mimic "bad" staff. Afterward everyone discusses how it made them feel and how this experience will help them support our individuals with greater empathy and understanding.

The Joy of Learning: Ithaca Day Hab continues to knock it out of the park. Staff there have been putting a great deal of time and effort into creating engaging activities for their participants. Some recent activities include baking healthy cookies, going out into the community to recycle, drawing self-portraits and group trips to state parks.



Recovery Walk:

In recognition of May as National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Court Month and Mental Health Awareness Month, Unity House joined with Lifeworks, Drug Court, HEAL, NAMI, and Nick's Ride 4 Friends to co-host the 17th annual Timothy Durant Recovery Walk. Auburn Mayor Mike Quill kicked off the event with opening remarks. Then more than 50 community members walked down South Street and back to raise awareness of addiction and recovery. Grace House handed out baked goods and beverages to participants.

Mental Health Night: Unity House participated in the Auburn YMCA's Mental Health Night on May 25. Several other agencies also came to inform the public about local resources. Unity House directors Nyka Phelps and Judi Magee made coloring packets for both kids and adults, and distributed mental health program information.



Out on the Town: The residents at Hector Street IRA are extraordinarily happy that they can finally go out to eat at restaurants again after two years! All the folks at the house recently went as a group to Chili's in Ithaca for dinner. Their happy unmasked faces say it all. Bon appétit!



Lucky Penny Day: Auburn Day Hab participants wanted to cheer up the nursing staff at The Commons at St. Anthony, an Auburn nursing home. They ended up making hundreds of small cards that said "From your friends at Unity House," then glued a heads-up penny onto each one to bring good luck. It was rewarding for them to bring some joy and light to the hard-working staff at Loretto.



Fresh Air & Sunshine: The folks at Auburn Day Hab had a party the Friday before Memorial Day to celebrate the good weather and the upcoming holiday. It was a sunny day, so participants got to enjoy their lunch outside by the river outlet and soak up rays in the grass.

2022 – 2024 STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

Representatives from all levels of the agency met several times last fall and into the new year to formulate a strategic plan that will guide us over the next three years. The top five priorities are outlined below:

I. Staffing

Goal: Unity House is an employer of choice in the communities we serve

II. Information Technology

Goal: Ensure business continuance, sustainability, and disaster recovery from a technology and information perspective

III. Endowment

Goal: Grow the new endowment fund to seven figures

IV. Quality Services

Goal: Create a process to ensure relevant and high-quality services for the individuals we support

V. Employee Wellness

Goal: Unity House offers a premier wellness plan for its employees

Lessons Learned

Shannon Coccimiglio, Director, Unity Employment Services



Unity House of Cayuga County has been a part of my journey throughout my professional career. In the early 2000s, I was a residential counselor. Over time, I took different jobs in the community, but kept in touch with UH and the people served. Seeing a person in the community that I knew from UH was the best part of my day and the joy was infectious!

In 2018, I had the opportunity to return to UH as a program manager of the Without Walls (WOW) day habilitation program in Ithaca. The program needed leadership, direction and a reinvigoration of purpose and structure. The staff of WOW were pivotal in the transformation that occurred for the people we served. New ideas (and barriers) would arise, and the team would gather to find the solution.

I was blessed with a team that I called "Small but Mighty," and we started a phrase to inspire each other: WOW Strong. WOW Strong became our mantra and represented the vision of acceptance, support, and team unity. WOW Strong lost over 300 lbs as a team, won the 2019 UH Corporate Challenge, and grew within their skills. What I learned from my three years at WOW was that even when something was tough or scary, it didn't mean you couldn't succeed. And then March 2020 hit the world and everything changed!

The WOW Strong Team was redeployed to the various residential sites and took the mantra with them. Watching the staff and our supported individuals adapt to virtual connections and experience isolation from their services and regular routines was hard. WOW Strong created a new virtual learning platform called Zoom Hab. We started teaching courses and kept the fun in fundamental skill building. Being the host of Zoom Hab two hours a day was a blast, and many lessons were learned!

In 2021, I was promoted to program director of Unity Employment Services (UES), and I took the WOW Strong mentality with me. The pandemic and the staffing crisis have directly impacted the UES team and the people supported. Each day has brought new challenges, stressors, and small successes that add up to big gains. Watching the evolution of UES has reminded me of the growth within WOW and I am excited for the future. Dare I say "UES Proud" to my newest "Small but Mighty" team?!

The biggest lesson I've learned? Team work makes the dream work!



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Welcome **NEW DIRECTORS**

There was a seismic shift in director-level positions at the agency this spring. We are pleased to promote from within and recognize the good work of three long-time employees:

Director of Day Services Aaron Brozon. Aaron has served as assistant program director for residential services in Tompkins County for 12 years, and joined the agency in 2006. Upon the resignation of Lee Sullivan, Aaron was selected to become the director of day services in both Cayuga and Tompkins Counties. He holds a B.A. in psychology from Seton Hall University.

Assistant Director of Residential Services Candi Saxman. Candi was chosen to fill the assistant director position vacated by Aaron. Candi has been with Unity House for 17 years and most recently was program manager of the Danby Road IRA. She maintains her nursing license, and has been actively involved at the agency on the Staff Appreciation Committee and as a Sensitivity and CPR/First Aid instructor.

Assistant Director of Day Services James Beaumont. This new position was created due to the size and scope of the agency's day programs. James was promoted from day services program manager in Ithaca, reporting to Aaron Brozon. James has been with Unity House since 2011. He earned an associate's degree in human services from Genesee Community College, and a bachelor's in social work from SUNY Plattsburgh.

Congratulations to all three!



Aaron Brozon



Candi Saxman



James Beaumont