



The Healing Power of Music

by Alexis Liberatore

Unity House serves a variety of people. One of them is Anthony Savarese, a resident in our mental health independent housing program. Anthony sat down to speak with me about his experiences with Unity House and how working with us has shaped his life. Currently, he works at Elders Choice in Auburn as a personal care aid, but Anthony's side gig as a deejay for Metal World Radio is where his heart is. He hosts two shows each weekend as DJ Metal Brow. It was obvious to me when we spoke that music, and especially heavy metal, is one of Anthony's greatest passions.



Anthony playing a tribute to his late mother with her acoustic guitar

While attending Cayuga Community College in 1994, Anthony's struggle with mental health started with a serious car accident. "I was doing my first internship at a radio station in Seneca Falls," said Anthony. "On the fourth night on the way home between Seneca Falls and Auburn, it started to blizzard. A lady crossed over the middle lane and hit me head on. I was in the hospital for three months and I had to learn how to walk again through months of physical therapy."

Anthony explained how an accident like that affected his mental wellbeing: "Back then, I was

Continued on page 3



Celebrating 45 Years

Unity House is observing its 45th anniversary in 2022. The agency got its start in 1972 when it began offering housing services to emotionally disabled veterans in the historic Case Mansion at 108 South Street in Auburn. Twenty-one beds were made available to this population, and a community need was met.

Five years later, it became clear that this need was growing and Unity House decided to expand to meet it. The agency hired its first executive director, and on March 28, 1977, Unity House's articles of incorporation were filed, making it official. While Unity House concentrated on mental health services early on, the agency now also serves people with developmental disabilities (PWDD) and those with substance use disorders.

Now in our 45th year, Unity House supports more than 1,000 individuals a day in seven central New York counties. When fully staffed, the agency employs about 450 people, and administers a \$24 million budget. At the root of this success are, of course, the people – the wonderful people Unity House supports and partners with and employs.

Over the course of four and a half decades, the agency has empowered and enriched the lives of so many, and we look forward to doing so for another 45 years. Thank you for your support of Unity House and its mission.



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P E R S P E C T I V E



Liz Smith
Chief Executive Officer

The world lost an icon at the new year. Betty White was just three weeks shy of her 100th birthday when she passed away on December 31. Her outlook on life was so positive, and she seemed unflappable even in the worst of times. Betty brought such delight and humor and inspiration. I always thought of her as being forward-thinking and ahead of her time.

“Everybody needs a passion. That’s what keeps life interesting. If you live without passion, you can go through life without leaving any footprints.”
-Betty White

Unity House is forward-thinking too. We observe our 45th anniversary this year, and our next three-year strategic plan is nearly finalized. We have important priorities to focus on, but I’m especially excited about the programs and services component. Program design and expansion has been driven by the state forever. However, we’re 45 years in now. We know what we’re doing. It’s time to switch up our services and make necessary changes while we continue to provide stability and support for the people we serve. I’m looking forward to reimagining our program design. We will continue to engage with the state, and even though we’re confined by the regulations that govern us, we can still get creative and think outside the box. What would be best for our folks?

How can we mix up our services and breathe new life into them? What will inspire our employees? Program redesign keeps it fresh.

Technology is another strategic priority. While we always need new technology, from a tech perspective, we’re light years ahead of many organizations. We put an effective electronic health record in place long before it was required. We’ve established an intranet for efficient internal communications. We were nimble in the early days of Covid, offering telecommuting and virtual meeting capabilities fairly quickly after the world shut down. And we implemented new cyber-security technology.

As I mentioned, we’re celebrating our 45th anniversary in 2022. I’ve worked at Unity House for 27 of those 45 years. As we remain forward-thinking, we also plan to take time to look back and reflect on how far we’ve come over the past four and a half decades. We’ll celebrate at our annual dinner on April 25, and have a few other fun activities up our sleeves for later this year. Please keep an eye out for announcements, and join us as we mark 45 years of outstanding human service in central New York.

“Kindness and consideration of somebody besides yourself keeps you feeling young.”
-Betty White



Continued from cover

a kid who was very unhappy and didn't want to change. I had my whole world taken away from me. I didn't know how to advocate for myself. When you go through something like that, you don't want to change or evolve. I did have a suicide attempt at that time. I didn't know it then, but my brain chemistry was off because of the accident."

It was two years after the accident that his mother and sister urged Anthony to look into how Unity House could help him. "In 1998, when I was 25 years old, I moved into my first apartment with the independent housing program. I have been a resident with Unity House ever since. I have battled my depression for 23 years, just going through the motions of life. Four years ago, I was pushed by my staff to move into a more independent living situation. I didn't want to make the change at first, but I have since been able to become self-sustaining. Unity House has been one of my biggest supports mental health-wise."



Anthony receives thanks and a gift from CEO Liz Smith after sharing his story at the annual donor appreciation breakfast in November.

When asked about his plans and goals for the future, Anthony said: "My first long term goal is to get my Peer Specialist certification through Academy of Peer Services. I would also like to create more music. If I don't join a band, I will make a solo CD. I don't expect this to make me a lot of money, but if I get invited to play at different shows, that is all I can ask for. Overall, my main aspiration in life is to use mindfulness and keep moving forward. I would love to help others with my music in any way I can."

I then asked Anthony to tell me how Unity House helped with his radio career. He said, "I started working at Metal World Radio in 2016, and it has been my rock ever since. I have had many successful experiences in my career as a radio host. I was able to come from a place of self-loathing to a place of self-acceptance through my DJ work. I have gained the confidence to interview musicians at clubs all around upstate New York. I finally feel like I am the real Anthony."

You can listen to Anthony's show on Saturdays and Sundays at: www.metalworldradio.com
Instagram: @metalbrow
YouTube: Anthony Savarese

45th ANNIVERSARY CONCERT

Sunday, May 22 @ Auburn Public Theater

Perform4Purpose
Helping the community one performance at a time...

Unity House is excited to announce that we have partnered with local nonprofit Perform 4 Purpose (P4P) to put on a special 45th anniversary concert on Sunday afternoon, May 22 at Auburn Public Theater. P4P provides local youth with opportunities to learn, create, and perform music while teaching the importance of helping others and giving back to the community. One way they do this is by performing live music events for local charities. Mark your calendars now for this fundraiser to benefit Unity House people and programs. Donations happily accepted! Additional details coming soon.

HOLIDAY CARD Winner



Congratulations to Steven U of PROS, the winner of the 13th annual holiday art contest.

MONTHLY GIFT = PEACE OF MIND

Want to make a real difference in your charitable giving? A recurring monthly gift to Unity House may be the answer! It's so easy and brings you peace of mind: once and done.

When setting up your recurring donation at www.unityhouse.com/donate.html, you'll have the opportunity to select the amount and day your gift is processed each month. No more action needed! You can relax, knowing you're providing on-going resources to the agency all year round.

Please join us for the



ANNUAL BOARD & AWARD DINNER

Monday, April 25, 2022

Hilton Garden Inn, 74 State St, Auburn, NY

\$75 per person; all are welcome

5:30 pm Cocktails & Conversation; Cash Bar; Silent Auction; \$20 Raffle for an Adventure Package

6:15 pm Buffet Dinner

7:00 pm Remarks by guest speaker Sebrina Barrett, Executive Director of the Association for Community Living

Presentation of the Atkins & Open Arms Awards



SEBRINA BARRETT

RSVP by April 18

315.253.6227 ext. 358 or email annualdinner@unityhouse.com

Join Our TEAM

Seeking meaningful employment with competitive salary and excellent benefits? Positions are open right now in Cayuga, Onondaga and Tompkins Counties! We have relief and full-time positions available with temporary starting pay rates between \$16-\$18 an hour expected to extend until mid-2022.

Unity House is looking for caring individuals who are interested in working directly with adults with mental health illnesses, developmental disabilities, and/or substance use disorders. The agency partners with these individuals to develop their personal skills and potential, helping them to live fuller and more independent lives.

View our current job listings and complete an online application at:

unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html



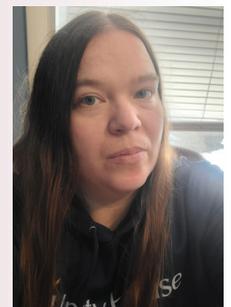
STAFF Spotlights

Now more than ever, Unity House believes it is important to recognize the hard work of its staff. Through our Employee of the Quarter program, staff 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 paid time off.

Congratulations to the committed employees we recognized at the end of 2021. Here's what their nominators had to say:

3rd Quarter – Terri Craig, DSP, Dryden Apartments Ithaca

"Terri has gone above and beyond to help out the residents at Beam Hill and helped with the specialized IRAs. She used her knowledge of media, video games, and technology to create a training for the program managers and support team. As a result, the specialized IRAs are better able to support the residents as they engage in different technological leisure activities. Terri's knowledge of individuals served is outstanding and because of this, her work with them is amazing. We are lucky to have her." – Program Manager Doreen Wagner and Psychologist Hannah Young



Terri Craig

4th Quarter – Kayla Washburn, DSP, Cayuga Residential Apartments

"Kayla always goes above and beyond for the individuals and her co-workers. I started pulling relief shifts at East St and whenever I have a question, Kayla is always willing to help. She pulls hours at just about every house in Auburn, forever willing to lend a hand to whoever is in need without hesitation. She has such a kind heart and the individuals adore her! I'm so grateful for her." – DSP Desiree Jernigan



Kayla Washburn

WHY I SUPPORT UNITY HOUSE

by Gary Coon



Atkins Award winner Gary Coon and his wife Linda at Unity House's 40th gala dinner in 2017.

In 2017, I was awarded Unity House's 7th annual Fred Atkins Community Service Award. The recognition was a very humbling experience. I knew Fred's sons as a boy, and when I was 13, Fred taught us how to waterski on Owasco Lake. Going through life's journey, I was taught to give of myself to others.

The programs established by Unity House have grown extensively these past 45 years. I enjoy donating to Unity House programs and attending their annual dinners. It's a great dining experience, and it's nice that they hold it at a different location every year. I like to hear stories and learn more about their mission.

Another way I have supported them is by buying locker plaques at West High School in Auburn. Unity House now owns that former school building, which features their headquarters and 59 apartments. But it still retains many school attributes, and the old lockers are still there. For people that graduated from West High or Middle School, donating \$100 to purchase a locker in the hallways we once roamed is a rewarding experience.

I'm also actively involved at the Calvary food pantry and serve on the Mission and Stewardship committee at my church, Westminster Presbyterian. I wish I could do more, but I get great satisfaction in helping as I can and supporting Unity House and other worthy causes.



BUY YOUR OWN LOCKER

Do you have fond memories of your time at West Middle or West High School? As Gary said, you can buy a locker plaque for only \$100 and have your name held in perpetuity in the building. Just email development@unityhouse.com or call 315-253-6227 x313 for details and to order. What a great way to support Unity House and be remembered in your alma matter forever!

RISING LEADER

The Cayuga County Chamber of Commerce offers an annual leadership program to a range of participants. Unity House encourages staff development by sending one representative to Leadership Cayuga each year. This learning opportunity helps raise awareness, increases networking opportunities with peers, and exposes other participants to what Unity House does in their communities.



This year, Marketing and Development Project Coordinator Alexis Liberatore is representing the agency. "Leadership Cayuga has been a wonderful and important experience for me," said Alexis. "I have been learning so much

about our community's history, resources, and opportunities. I have also gotten to connect with other leaders. This year, my class project is focused on helping certain marginalized groups get meaningful employment opportunities. I was assigned people with disabilities. I am delighted to work on something close to my heart, and I'm looking forward to applying the lessons I've learned to become a better leader at Unity House."

Maintain **DON'T GAIN**

Unity House prides itself on its employee wellness program, Move in Unity. Move in Unity has been focused on improving staff's overall health and work-life balance for over a decade.

During the 2021 holiday season, the Move in Unity committee offered a voluntary challenge to all employees. From November 22 through January 7, participants were encouraged to try to maintain their current weight or lose 3%-5% over the allotted timeframe. Thirty-eight people across multiple departments and counties participated.

Congratulations to the winners of the following categories:

- Greatest % of weight loss - William Vaughn-Russell
- Maintained weight - Lea Church
- Lost 4% or more - Michiyo Pestridge

Kudos to everyone who participated – you're all winners!

PROGRAM *Happenings*



Passport Winners: Congrats to our intrepid service recipients and staff who participated in the Passport to Travel contest last fall. Folks were encouraged to get out in the community to locate 60+ local landmarks and points of interest. These are our winners who found the most! Bravo!

PROS Craft Fair: The folks at PROS hosted their first craft fair in December. Several participants began new hobbies since coming to PROS, so at the holiday season, they decided to organize their own craft fair. Homemade cards, resin art, jams, baked goods, and much more were on sale. There was a good turnout and they are planning on making it an annual event.



Giving Back: The staff at Unity House headquarters adopted a family through the Community Action Program: a single mother with five kids under the age of 10. Employees came together to collect items from their wish list to help give them the Christmas they deserved.

Class is in Session: Ithaca Day Hab started off 2022 strong with a variety of new and engaging classroom services. Offerings include group exercise, knife safety, anxiety management, pattern drawing, money management, science, civics, art, community inclusion, volunteering, nutrition and meal planning, cooking, self-advocacy, socialization, and handling anxiety and relationships. Kudos to our staff at Ithaca Day Hab for putting together these enriching activities for our individuals.

Welcome **NEW DIRECTOR**

Dorothy Radcliff has joined the agency as the new director of Grace House. She holds a Bachelor of Social Work from Nazareth College, and is a Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC). She most recently was a program director and counselor at Helio Health in Syracuse, and worked for many years at Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services. Dorothy replaces Ashley Short, who is now the executive director of Nick's Ride 4 Friends.



"Dorothy comes to Unity House with extensive experience in central New York providing a variety of services to individuals in recovery," said COO Darlene Podolak. "I am looking forward to her leadership at Grace House and Supportive Living, providing residential support and guidance. I anticipate that she will become a part of the Auburn community very quickly, and the transition will be positive for the staff and the residents."

In this role, Dorothy is responsible for direct oversight and monitoring of all operations for Grace House and the agency's supportive living facility. She provides clinical and administrative supervision, guidance, direction and counsel to the community residence program staff. She will also foster and maintain an environment that promotes the health and safety of persons in recovery while recognizing that each individual has potential for lifelong learning and growth.

"Addiction is a powerful disease, and one that has touched everyone's life directly or indirectly," said Dorothy. "I'm very excited to return to the community that I grew up in to work with the Grace House team in making a difference, one day at a time."



Lessons Learned

by **PROS Director Nyka Phelps**



When I came to Unity House we were not only still dealing with the pandemic, we were in the middle of a staffing crisis. The sense of dread and instability could make anyone feel overwhelmed; and I knew it would be particularly hard on the people who were already dealing with mental illness. But, as time has gone on, I have learned that the PROS participants are some of the most resilient and extremely supportive people I know.

Although each of them is working on their own personal goals, they won't hesitate to stop what they are doing to support another peer in a time of need. They laugh, cry, and help each other in expressing their feelings appropriately. When a discussion becomes intense, they are able to de-escalate one another with little staff intervention.

I attribute this to what they are learning here at PROS. We give them the tools to communicate effectively, form healthy relationships, and acquire basic living skills, just to name a few. It has been wonderful to see them use these skills to help one another.

A few people have told me that because of their experience here at PROS, they are interested in becoming certified peers this spring! This is an amazing undertaking which will allow them to take on new responsibilities and teach classes themselves. I am proud that they will be able to help others on their healing journey. It is rewarding to watch them working together to learn new skills and then applying them to their everyday life. In these uncertain times, I have learned that one of the greatest resources that we provide is each other.

COMPASSIONATE *Leadership*



ACL Executive Director Sebrina Barrett (left) and Liz Smith at the ACLAIMH conference in Lake George, November 2021

Unity House's Chief Executive Officer Liz Smith has been named president of the board of directors of the Association for Community Living (ACL). ACL helps provide education, support and advocacy to members serving over 40,000 New Yorkers diagnosed with serious and persistent mental illness. Liz will lead the 14-member board for a two-year term.

"I have been fortunate to have worked in many facets of the human service industry over the past 25 years, first as a relief staff, later as a Medicaid support specialist and now as chief executive officer," said Liz. "In this time, much has changed in the ways our society cares for those in need, but the one thing that hasn't altered is the dedication of our employees. Our employees across the state face many challenges, including increased regulatory requirements and less funding, but their care and compassion for their residents is second to none. We must advocate for our residents and our employees to continue to provide opportunities for growth and success."

Liz has been a member of the ACL board for six years, where she has helped lead the organization in advocating for adequate funding for mental health housing and the support needed for residents' recovery. Because of her proven leadership, her colleagues unanimously elected Liz president of the board.

"Liz is a wonderful representative of our industry," said ACL Executive Director Sebrina Barrett. "Her compassion led her into this field, and her focus and drive have benefited countless New Yorkers. Liz has a proven track record of identifying challenges and working with her colleagues to find solutions, so that we can provide continuous care despite decades of erosion of resources and funding. We are looking forward to her leadership of our board, and we are proud to stand with her in advocating for the most vulnerable population in New York State."