

Spirit

NEWSLETTER
WINTER 2024

HONESTY • INTEGRITY • RESPECT

UNITY HOUSE

EMPOWERING LIVES, SECURING FUTURES.



You Empower with:

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- your servicepage 4
- your advocacypage 8



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Unity House
217 Genesee Street
Auburn, NY 13021
www.unityhouse.org

Editor

Kelly D. Buck
Director of Marketing & Development
315.253.6227 x 313
kelly.buck@unityhouse.org

Writers & Photographers

Nicole Hube
Chris Iven

To be added to the *Spirit* e-mail list or to opt-out, please call 315.253.6227 x 358 or e-mail development@unityhouse.org. Learn more about Unity House's services and how you can support Unity House at www.unityhouse.org.

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Our mission: to empower and enrich the lives of people in recovery, coping with a mental illness, and/or diagnosed with a developmental disability. This is accomplished by offering services and supports in an inclusive, person-centered environment.

Our vision: all individuals are respected and lead lives of personal fulfillment and acceptance within our community.

Our core values:

Respect, Honesty, Integrity

HAVE WE MET?

CEO's PERSPECTIVE

Hello! If this is the first time you've received our newsletter, let me introduce you to Unity House. **Since its founding 47 years ago, Unity House has been dedicated to empowering people with disabilities.** I'm proud to say that I've been here 29 of those 47 years, serving as CEO for the last 15.

If you're already a supporter of Unity House, you're getting this newsletter because I want you to see how your donations power our mission, every single day. All of the great things you'll read about in these pages would be impossible without your gifts, your time and your advocacy.

Haven't yet donated to Unity House? I hope this newsletter shows what your generosity could do – for people with disabilities, for the people who support them, and for our entire community.

No matter who you are, I want you to know that **we need you** to overcome the many challenges we face. That's why we're investing in strengthening relationships. It will take good people like you to ensure that Unity House remains a caring force in our community for generations to come.

Stronger relationships have already resulted in 40% more donors and 70% more money raised in 2023 than in 2021. We now have an endowment fund and a volunteer Planned Giving Advisory Council to help our supporters include Unity House in their estate plans.

You can help. Just reach out to me. Your voice is especially important now. In 2024, as we work on our next three-year strategic plan, I want to hear from you. Why do you support our cause? What needs aren't we meeting? How can we work together to make our community stronger?

Liz Smith



Liz Smith
Chief Executive Officer

Let's connect

Have a thought you'd like to share with Liz?

Want to get our new e-newsletter?

Just visit:

www.unityhouse.org/connect

or scan this QR code:

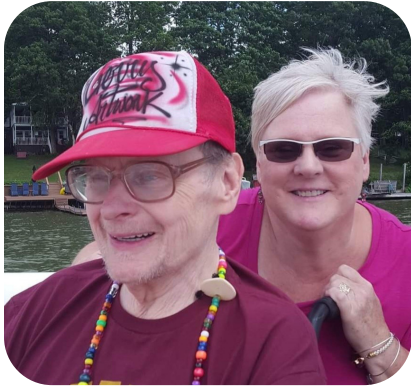


On the cover: Jesus Acevedo and Kathy (left) enjoy playing bingo at Auburn Day Hab.



REMEMBERING Gerry

Gerry Hodnett was an artist with a following



"There was something very special about Gerry," said his sister, Sandy Arden. "He made friends wherever he went and he even touched people he didn't meet."

When Gerry died at age 74 last year, Sandy was devastated, and so were his closest friends.

Among them were his housemates at Unity House's Sheffield Road residence, where he lived since 2011.

"This is Gerry's family, too," Sandy said of the residents and staff at the group home for people with developmental disabilities. "They're hurting, too."

Sandy visited the home recently to present an outdoor bench as a gift. It includes a plaque in Gerry's memory that's in the shape of a red crayon – his favorite color. The gift is from Sandy, but she had help from an online community of supporters who have come to know Gerry and his art through her.

Gerry has always enjoyed making art and crafts, including drawings and bead jewelry. When Sandy posted on social media about Gerry's works of art, her friends responded with appreciation. And when she told them in 2020 how COVID had forced a lockdown that kept her from visiting, they responded with an outpouring of art supplies to send to Gerry.

"He had quite a fan base, actually," Sandy said. "He touched a lot of lives."

After Gerry's death, the response from his social media fans was overwhelming. Donations to help pay for the memorial bench came in from family, friends and people Sandy barely knew.

"It was the most heartwarming thing I had ever experienced," she said, "so loving and spontaneous and genuine."

The bench and matching side table now sit on the front deck to welcome visitors to Gerry's former home.



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Please join us for the

 Unity House

Annual Board & Award Dinner

Monday, April 29, 2024 5:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Hilton Garden Inn, 74 State Street, Auburn

Tickets are \$80 per person; all are welcome

5:30 p.m. Cocktails and conversation, cash bar

6:15 p.m. Buffet dinner

7:00 p.m. Remarks by guest speaker



Charlie Mills,
owner of
Mr. Mills Enterprises Inc.

"Tragedy to Triumph: My Road to Hope & Recovery"

Presentation of the Atkins Community Service & Open Arms Awards

Please RSVP by April 25 at
unityhouse.org/annual-dinner
OR call 315.253.6227 ext. 358

*Sponsorship opportunities are available;
please call 315.253.6227 ext. 313 or email
kelly.buck@unityhouse.org*

LOCKER LEGACY

Do you have fond memories of your time at West Middle or West High School in Auburn? With a donation of just \$100, your name or short message can be engraved on a plaque and permanently affixed to one of the school's historical lockers. It's a great way to support Unity House and be forever connected to your alma matter. For details, email kelly.buck@unityhouse.org or call 315-253-6227, ext. 313.



SERVING OUR COMMUNITY

Welcome new board member

Michael Antonacci, partner and advisor at Rialto Wealth Management in Syracuse, joined Unity House's board of directors in January. Mike has been a member of the organization's Planned Giving Advisory Council since 2022 and has over 10 years of experience in investment advising and wealth management. He specializes in complex estate and tax planning.

"I'm excited to work with Mike on the board," said Unity House CEO Liz Smith. "His area of expertise will move Unity House to the next level surrounding fund

development, and will help us find alternative revenue sources."

Mike earned a B.A. from Hamilton College, an MBA from Union Graduate College, and his J.D. from Albany Law School. He is a Chartered Financial Analyst, and has been admitted to practice law in New York State. He also serves on the SUNY ESF Foundation board, and on the Cayuga Community Fund Leadership Council.

"I was first introduced to Unity House's good work while watching honorees receive the Fred Atkins Community Service Award for excep-

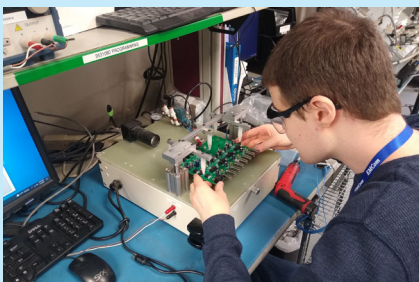


tional volunteerism," said Mike. "I got to hear from some whose lives have been touched by the work that Unity House does on a daily basis. Working to empower the lives of people with disabilities is critically important work. I am excited for the opportunity to help further this mission in our community."

LET'S WORK Together



Does your business need skilled employees? Our Unity Employment Services participants are qualified and ready to work in childcare, food service and maintenance. Wage subsidies may be available. For more, please contact UES Director Amanda McManus at 315-253-6227 ext. 325 or at amanda.mcmanus@unityhouse.org.



Unity House PRESENTS: FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

SAVE THE DATE

PROVIDE FOR YOUR FAMILY

PROTECT YOUR ASSETS

SUPPORT YOUR CHARITIES

Wed., May 15, 2024

5:00 - 6:30 p.m.

West Middle School
Community Room
217 Genesee St., Auburn

This free, casual event will give you an overview of estate planning options and resources available, with time to get your questions answered. Panelists to be announced. Light refreshments will be served.



Ithaca Polar Plunge 2024

The Unity House Plungers will once again participate in the Ithaca Polar Plunge. They'll jump into Cayuga Lake at Taughannock Falls State Park March 23 to raise money for Special Olympics New York. Last year, our team raised \$5,622, the third highest amount.

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SET UP FOR SUCCESS: EMPOWERING OUR WORKFORCE

When local community colleges began offering credentialing courses to direct support professionals last fall, Unity House DSPs were first in line.

At Tompkins Cortland Community College, all 15 seats were filled by Unity House staff members, said Patty Tvaroha, professor of human services.

"It has been a blessing, I think, to have them all be Unity House people," Tvaroha said. "They are creating their own natural support system."

Learning more about disability advocacy and support strategies is important to Service Instructor Lea Church, who works at Auburn Day Hab. She enrolled in Corning Community College's DSP-1 credentialing course to learn better ways to communicate with the people she supports.

"If I can learn better ways to be able to do my job so that individuals develop the skills they want or need, it seems like the easiest decision to make," Lea said.

She plans to keep working through DSP-2 and DSP-3 accreditation so she can develop better ways to combat stigma and empower people.

Unity House offers pay rate increases for every DSP credential level completed, which can boost pay by as much as \$1 per hour. Wages also increase significantly for employees who hold an associate's and/or bachelor's degree. The academic credit earned through the credentialing courses provide a head start on a degree in human services.

"This legitimizes and validates everything our DSPs are wanting for themselves," said James Beaumont, assistant director of day services. "A lot of our DSPs have expressed interest in going back to school ... Now, we have the capability to provide that college-level training at no cost."

Unity House CEO Liz Smith said she pushed for credential-based pay increases because education and training help employees better support people with disabilities. These incentives also aid in staff retention. She's happy to see that so many employees are eager to earn nationally recognized credentials: "This credentialing shows that DSPs are professionals and that they are being valued for their professionalism. It helps people appreciate the value of the expertise that DSPs already have."



Congratulations

The following staff members recently completed their DSP-1 accreditation:

Russell Buehler
Sarah Coyle
Lea Church
Manderin Darling
Danielle Hilts
Tina Laird
Aaron Kelley
Melinda Mills
Nicole Overstreet
Brittany Randolph
Cassandra Rainess
Maria Riggles
Heather Small
William Vaughn-Russell
Kayla Washburn-Sayre
Christopher Wouters



Service Instructor Lea Church supports John, a participant at Auburn Day Hab.

What's next?

Thanks to you and other donors, all direct support professionals now have the ability to enroll in flexible, on-demand DSP credentialing courses. Unity House's new workforce training platform, Relias, allows DSPs to learn while they earn.

RELIAS



Employees OF THE QUARTER

We couldn't deliver on our mission without our amazing employees. That's why we're proud to celebrate some of them here. Each Employee of the Quarter is nominated by their peers.

2023 Q-4 HONOREES



Aaron Kelley - Senior Counselor, Beam Hill, Dryden

"Wow! Aaron possesses fabulous medical oversight! I was covering for the site nurse, and Aaron's knowledge of folks' needs and follow up was great."

-Kelly Minde, Nursing Program Manager



Hede Perenyi - Registered Nurse, Ithaca

"Hede is a team player. She is an amazing member of our nursing team! She truly cares about our individuals and will always go above and beyond to make sure they have what they need to stay as healthy as possible."

-Kelly Minde, Nursing Program Manager

PROGRAMS THAT EMPOWER

UES participants thrive in the kitchen

Unity Employment Services' Career Specific Vocational Training students work in the kitchens at Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES' Center for Learning and the Holiday Inn in Auburn. They're learning culinary skills such as food preparation, knife handling and safe sanitization.



Zucchini bread, anyone?

Our PROsperity program folks tended to their raised vegetable garden beds this fall and had some great results. They used PROs-grown zucchini to bake bread during group cooking class.



Ithaca Day Hab enjoys music therapy

Amanda Maestro-Scherer of Maestro Music Therapy offers classes to our folks at Ithaca Day Hab. Amanda is a board-certified music therapist with a private practice. Through her work, your donations fill the room with tunes and joy.



Recruiting takes heart

Unity House leaders are working to make connections in the community. James Beaumont, assistant director of day services and Elspeth Peterson, program manager at Sheffield Road IRA, recently promoted our mission while recruiting new employees during a job fair at the Shops at Ithaca Mall.



Hockey is for everyone

Day Hab participants recently enjoyed a group outing to watch a Syracuse Crunch hockey game against the Utica Comets. Our Day Hab folks appreciate that the Crunch provides sensory kits and accessible accommodations for a more comfortable experience.



UNITY HOUSE WELLNESS PROGRAMS SAVE EMPLOYEE'S LIFE

Elspeth Peterson has been taking advantage of Unity House's biometric screening since it was first offered 14 years ago.

She liked that Unity House offered incentives, including extra time off, to encourage employees to record their weight, complete bloodwork and track other health indicators.

"It was kind of a routine thing," she said. "I didn't really give it much thought at the time."

She never anticipated, however, that the screenings would help save her life.

In 2021, Elspeth noticed swelling in her arms and legs. Then, she began losing her breath climbing the stairs at Sheffield Road IRA, where she has been the program manager since 2008.

Initial bloodwork showed high cholesterol and blood pressure. Her doctor brushed it off: probably a pre-existing condition, he said.

Elspeth knew better.

"We sort of had a little disagreement," Elspeth said. "I went back to work and I had kept all of my biometric results ... I took them with me to the next visit and he was quite surprised."

Elspeth's doctor ordered further testing. She was diagnosed with AL amyloidosis.

The median survival for the rare bone marrow disease can be less than five months. Thanks to the biometric screenings, though, she was able to start treatment early. She underwent kidney and bone marrow biopsies, weekly chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant.



Since 2008, Elspeth Peterson has been the program manager at Sheffield Road, where she supports Crystal, left, and other residents.

Hospitalizations left Elspeth exhausted, struggling to maintain a routine and too weak to go to work at Sheffield. Although she was able to fulfill some of her work responsibilities from her home, it wasn't the same. As soon as she was able, she returned to the people and workplace she loves. Today, she feels much stronger. She looks forward to the last of her post-transplant immunizations this month.



In February 2022, Elspeth underwent a stem cell transplant at the University of Rochester's Wilmot Cancer Center.

Elspeth is grateful to be back at Sheffield. Every day, she gets to empower its residents, and she feels empowered herself.

"It's important just appreciating people for who they are, and I don't think that's just the people we serve," Elspeth said. "Encouraging folks to do what they want to do, to become who they want to be, to try the things they want to do ... I love that freedom."

YOU helped Heather advocate for herself

Heather Rafferty is a singer and a dancer. She loves cats and music. And she knows what she wants in life – a home and a family of her own.

Today, her dreams are one step closer to reality, thanks to SANYS-U, a six-week course led by the Self-Advocacy Association of New York State. She and seven other members of Unity House’s day habilitation program celebrated with a SANYS-U graduation ceremony at the Carriage House Theater in Auburn.

The class, made possible by donors like you, helps people with disabilities advocate on their own behalf. Participants learn more about their rights as well as the legislation and issues that affect their lives.

“This course helps people we support find their voice,” said James Beaumont, Unity House’s assistant director of day services. “It also helps them use their voices together to help each other and all people with disabilities. The more voices, the more powerful they are.”

A SANYS-U class is planned this spring for members of Unity House’s day habilitation program in Ithaca.



Eight Auburn Day Hab participants recently completed a course centered around self-advocacy, which teaches people how to speak up for themselves, identify their needs and better communicate their thoughts and feelings.

Congratulations to Auburn Day Hab graduates of SANYS-U:

- Amy Bean
- Natasha Calderon
- Danny Emms
- Carl Gibbs
- Kathy Hamlin
- Shawn Laury
- Heather Rafferty
- Kelly Smith

Will you advocate, too?

Unity House belongs to two statewide associations that are organizing letter-writing campaigns to advocate for increased pay for direct support professionals. Use the following QR codes to easily send an e-letter through campaigns organized by:

The New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation



The Association for Community Living: Bring it Home



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