



NEWS

Date 05/01/2008

**Volunteering Drives Unity House
G.R.A.C.E House Consumer's Recovery**

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G.R.A.C.E. House consumer Plattner
(front)
Program manager O'Conner (back)

AUBURN – For G.R.A.C.E. House consumer Tommy Plattner, there's no questioning the fact that giving back to one's fellow man and community is an essential part of recovery from his chemical dependency illness.

“I wouldn't be as far along in getting better if I didn't give back to the Auburn community what the G.R.A.C.E. House programs and services have given me,” grinned Plattner, referring to Unity House's chemical dependence residential recovery program in Auburn, N.Y. that he has been participating in for the past four months. “It makes me feel good to give back and try and help another human being now. It's a real spiritual experience for me. I know from experience now that volunteering is important to recovering and staying that way.”

Plattner volunteers from 8 p.m. to midnight several days a week at the Chapel House Homeless Shelter, temporarily operating in the Holy Family Church's gymnasium on North Street in Auburn. Now open 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily, wholly reliant upon volunteers, and able to shelter up to 19 clients (currently men only), Chapel House originated after the Auburn/Cayuga Homeless Task Force's 2007 homeless count demonstrated that people in Cayuga County were indeed living without shelter and also revealed that over 40 county residents could lose their

homes. Upon learning the reality of homelessness in Auburn and Cayuga County, Holy Family pastor Rev. Dennis Shaw approached his congregation during services one Sunday late in 2007 about using the parish's gym as a temporary shelter. Parishioners readily agreed, and Shaw recruited one of them, Sandi Mettler, to coordinate, open, and move to formally establish the shelter as a 24 hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week facility offering a full array of appropriate services.

“We hope to have our own building and be more officially organized and recognized in June of 2008,” says Mettler, the office manager for Upstate Paving in Auburn and a former director of a Red Cross emergency shelter in Oneida County. “My experience with some disaster work and all the regulations you have to deal with to set up and run a shelter, from the health department's to the fire department's, helped convey the need for and fundamental business of a shelter to Father Dennis. We navigated all that and set up shop. Our goal is to help clients get back on their feet and return to self-sufficiency and independence. We'll look to fund ourselves through grants and other means.”

At the shelter Plattner says he identifies almost immediately with each and every client he works with and helps.

“I really didn't know what to expect at first, after I volunteered after Father Dennis asked for help,” he shrugged. “But the first thing I noticed was that the shelter was a peaceful place, which I liked and which helps when you're trying to relate to the clients. I just sign in each evening, help feed folks maybe make beds, care for people and spend time with them. It's about giving them the hope and a chance like I got.”

G.R.A.C.E. House Program Manager Pam O'Conner pointed out that volunteering a minimum of ten hours a week is required of all program participants. She added that the new shelter at which Plattner and another G.R.A.C.E. House consumer volunteer is an excellent

example of a much-needed community service that helps fill her consumers' time and service needs.

“It’s another very good place for our consumers to spend time and experience the gratitude that comes from helping another,” she declared. “Volunteering at a shelter will really help those of our consumers like Tommy who may have been in the same position as the shelter clients before they sought and got the help they needed. Helping the clients at the shelter with their needs and interacting with them will just make our people that much stronger. That is what is happening to Tommy. His and other volunteer’s work there will also help spread the word about the shelter and the help people in need can get.”

O’Conner said that Plattner has turned out to be a superior shelter volunteer.

“We hear nothing but terrific things about Tommy and the shelter clients,” she beamed.

Mettler agrees.

“Tommy is a big part of the shelter’s success to date,” she said. “We really enjoy having him at the shelter, he is a great, great young man who’s always sitting with clients and talking to them and offering encouragement and hope. He’s very positive. We have trained him on intake, which he does very well because he’s so thorough. Our clients seem to identify with him right from when they meet him.”

Plattner’s observation that he is seeing more and more people enter the shelter service is borne out by data provided by O’Conner’s husband, Tim, who was one of the original supporters of the shelter concept and who helps manage the volunteering process for Mettler and volunteer Diane Kudla. Employed at Dal Pos Architects in Syracuse and spending between eight and 12 hours a week helping with the shelter, he said the number of clients served there has risen from 33 in December 2007 when it opened to 104 in March of this year.

Plattner says he has gotten so much from volunteering that he can't imagine not doing it in some capacity for the rest of his life.

“It’s really important like I said for me to realize that I’ll stay recovered if I can always remember to try and help others when they may be worse off than me,” said Plattner, who plans to pursue photography courses at Cayuga Community College upon completing his recovery program at Unity House. “It’s that age old thing about helping others like you’d want to be. It always seems to make me feel better.”