Unity House’s drug and alcohol recovery unit, GRACE House, is observing its 20th anniversary in 2015. Founded in March 1995, GRACE House is still helping individuals recover from substance abuse and live sober lives as contributing citizens in their communities. To date, GRACE House has served 1,176 unique clients.

Kevin Hares, executive director of CHAD (Confidential Help for Alcohol and Drugs), wrote the original application for the halfway house in 1993. He explains: "In the development of the proposal, I met with then-Executive Director Monika Lentze to discuss interest in developing and then running such a program, which I believed to be a logical choice due to the fact that Unity House was in the housing business for folks with mental illness and had the resources to implement the program. Monika agreed after speaking with her board."

According to Kevin, the rest is history as the original proposal and development monies were then transferred to Unity House.

"Kevin and Monika had the vision to open a halfway house in Cayuga County," said Carol Colvin, the first director of GRACE House. "The concept was approved in 1994 by the County’s Alcohol and Substance Abuse Subcommittee mainly because of Monika’s expertise in community residential programs."

Carol, now Resource Coordinator for the Auburn Problem Solving Courts, has fond memories of starting the GRACE House program. "We had a really good staff who worked well together as a team and did good work for the community."

The opening of GRACE House in 1995 upgraded the neighborhood above Wegmans. An old crack house at 58 Osborne Street was torn down and the current structure was built on the same spot. It stands today as a symbol of what some might consider to be rebirth from the ashes of a former life, much like the residents it serves.

GRACE House is overseen by the New York State Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS). In 1996, a supportive living facility was opened in Oak Creek apartments in Auburn. That program, for adults in recovery with children or those who have completed the halfway house treatment program and are transitioning to more independent living, has since moved to Osborne Street to streamline services for residents.

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I know I say this every year, but I love the fall! I always feel invigorated coming out of summer. It seems there are so many opportunities for learning, and with behavioral health services going into a managed care situation soon, expanding our knowledge and expertise is more crucial than ever—we have so much to learn.

As I’ve considered how to best situate Unity House for excellence in this new work environment, I realize it will take intense self-reflection on our current systems and processes. It will be a seismic shift to go from a fee-for-service environment to managed care. Many questions arise: What does that mean from a hiring perspective? How will we work with insurance companies? What is the best way to negotiate good rates in order to sustain ourselves? How will this impact our services and our consumers and their families? What about our billing process?

To help us answer some of these questions and more, I am putting resources into looking at all of the systems we have in place in order to prepare us for managed care. I have retained private consultant Amanda Norton to provide an in-depth evaluation of our quality assurance systems. We are redirecting our focus to continuous quality improvement, which is a more proactive method than quality assurance. Amanda is looking at routine auditing processes and billing reviews, working closely with our QA team to brainstorm ways to enhance and modernize our approach.

The agency has also engaged HR One to undertake an intensive analysis of our job descriptions and salary ranges across the board. Unity House has over 350 employees now. Our current salary/grading structure has been in place for more than 10 years, and it really is no longer an effective model. With generous grant funding from the Allyn and Emerson Foundations, we will complete an overall strategic evaluation of our positions and salary levels, making job grading more objective and situating Unity House to be a more competitive employer in our region. It also allows us to be more fair and equitable with our employees, and improve our efficiencies.

I am excited by the direction we moving. Change can be uncomfortable but it brings opportunities too. I intend to grasp them for Unity House as we move into 2016.
The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) celebrated 25 years in 2015, and members of Unity House’s self advocacy group We-ACT joined with others to march in Syracuse this July. We-ACT members first participated in a three-week film series sponsored by the Finger Lakes Independence Center in Ithaca in honor of the quarter century mark.

“More than 100 people were present at the march and they stopped traffic in downtown Syracuse for us,” said We-ACT organizer James Beaumont. “Going to these films and then the parade has led to great discussion about how far disability rights have come and yet how we still need to push things forward as a group.”

When Carol left the agency in 1999, Beth Clark led GRACE House for about ten years, followed by Michele Leonello. The recovery unit is now managed by Allie MacPherson.

“Throughout the past twenty years, GRACE House’s reputation has always been held in high regard,” says Unity House Executive Director Liz Smith. “When I talk with people we have served and to other service providers, ours is viewed as a tough, strict program that works. Some residents say it’s the toughest they have encountered on their road to recovery, but if they are truly embracing sobriety, GRACE House is the right program for them. It holds one accountable.”

“The community residence is like real life,” says Carol. “It provides an opportunity to learn about your disease and how to make healthy lifestyle choices. The supportive living facility brings out behaviors that need to be addressed. It’s a safe place to explore all that.”

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ADA MARKS 25 YEARS

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Your donation has a ripple effect that affects so many in our community. Make a gift to the Unity House annual fund today and see the difference. Thank you!

www.unityhouse.com/supporter.html

Have an even bigger impact on GIVING TUESDAY!
Join with others across the nation on Tuesday, December 1 in supporting your favorite charitable organizations.
Amazing PEOPLE

Unity House employs some pretty incredible staff whose efforts and activities inside and outside of the agency are worth sharing:

GRACE House Program Manager Allie MacPherson recently completed her CASAC (Certified Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counselor) credential. She began the process in June 2013, and passed the final test this August.

Originally from Oneonta, NY, Allie earned a BA in psychology from SUNY Cortland. She joined Unity House as relief staff in March 2012, then quickly moved to senior counselor at GRACE House that July.

“That’s when I learned more about substance abuse and immediately took an interest in this field,” said Allie. “I have always known that I wanted to help people, and I was intrigued. When I started at GRACE House, something just clicked and I wanted to know more about it. I feel that it is my calling and I love working in this field.”

That connection resulted in her obtaining the CASAC credential. This certification enables Allie to advance in her field as a clinician, providing counseling to people with drug and alcohol addictions. The continuing education requirements also ensure that she keeps up to date with changes and new innovations in the field.

“My goals for GRACE House are to continue to move forward and provide the best services for the community and for people with substance abuse diagnoses,” continued Allie. “Especially with the current heroin epidemic, we need to help people to get back to their lives and become successful, independent, contributing members of society.”

As we go to press, Allie has been selected as a recipient of the 40 Under Forty Award in Syracuse on November 19. Congratulations!

UNITED PARTNERS

The United Way of Cayuga County revealed its 2015 fundraising campaign goal at a Doubledays game in September. As a partner agency of the United Way, Unity House receives grant funds every year for agency programs. We are grateful for this support.

Go, United Way!

TAX ADVANTAGE

Would you like to decrease your 2015 income taxes? Unity House might be able to help.

Our Planned Giving Program provides several options for thoughtful gifts to Unity House. Many are tax-deductible and cost nothing during your lifetime. Your financial advisor or attorney can help you choose from many options, including bequests, insurance policies, real estate, trusts, and other giving methods.

Learn more at www.unityhouse.com/plannedgiving.html. Your planned gift can make a big difference – to us and to you – right now.
A farm boy born and bred, Allen really enjoyed his work at Cornell Plantations’ greenhouses this summer. He has worked there for four months now through Unity House’s Pathway to Employment program. Allen especially liked weeding and mulching in preparation for the Plantations’ huge annual plant sale. After the sale, Cornell donated some leftover plants to the agency’s residence on Danby Road.

The Lollipop Queen

All hail! Her majesty Darcie Ellis is in the house!

Called the “lollipop queen” by her parents, Darcie has received services from UES for about a dozen years. Her primary job is to restock some of the Unity House lollipop boxes located at businesses around Auburn. She takes great pride in collecting the money each week, restocking the boxes with lollipops, then placing the full boxes back in their proper spots. It wasn’t always this easy.

“Her UES job coach, Dean Tanner, is absolutely wonderful! Darcie is autistic, so she relates well to someone who is soft spoken and gentle,” says her mother Jinny. “Darcie didn’t speak until she was 21 years old. Dean encourages her to be verbal and social. For years, this was very difficult for her but now I can see a real difference. I am very proud of her.”

Dean couldn’t agree more: “I’ve worked with Darcie since 2010, and in just this past year, I have seen a remarkable improvement, which I attribute to her comfort level. Her reactions to change are much better now, and she’s picking up on social cues around her. Her communication skills have improved significantly.”

It’s A Runner’s World

“Chad has been the anchor in our family. We realized early on what was important, and Chad has kept us grounded…Chad’s running has kept us in the race and has shown by example what is important in life.”

Those are the words used by Chad Elkovitch’s family when they nominated him for the second annual Runner’s World magazine cover search. The nationwide contest attracted more than 1,600 entrants, and Chad placed in the final top 100!

Chad (right) and his brother Nik competed in the New York City Marathon in 2009. The Elkovitch family submitted this photo with Chad’s nomination for the cover of Runner’s World magazine.

Chad has been a runner since he was ten years old. As a baby, he suffered seizures which left him learning disabled and unable to compete in other sports. A solo sport, running has become a big part of Chad’s life, and he participates in 10-12 races a year.

“Chad loves running, and we are goal-oriented people,” said Chad’s father David of Skaneateles. “He has trained and trained, and enters regular races with everyday people. His running gives him a lot of self-esteem and confidence.”

Chad, now 39, has received Unity Employment Services for 18 years, holding down a job in Auburn Community Hospital’s dish room the entire time. There, he works 16-25 hours per week, helping train new people, prepping food trays, and actually cleaning the dishwasher!
Agency Olympians from far and wide converged on the Throop fire hall earlier this month to see if they had what it took to win this year’s Unity House Challenge. A dozen teams of four participated. Predicated on the Olympics, teams dreamed up their country name and then designed its fictitious flag.

Teams competed in a (very) mini triathlon, Wipe Out, Mind Meld, the Gladiator Arena, and finished with Crock Pots of Fire (aka chili cook-off).

Many thanks to all those who volunteered to make the day fun and successful!

Overall winners of the 4th annual Unity House Challenge:

Gold: Mongolia
Silver: PROStopia
Bronze: Jamaican Jerks

THE GREATEST WEALTH IS Health

Director Darlene Podolak and her daughter Lauren helped staff the Unity House booth during the 2nd annual Wellness Day at Vernak Farms Country Store in Borodino, NY. The family-focused event includes educational talks by health care providers, vendor booths, music, artists, a 5K run, and more. Chris and Charlene Vernak received Unity House’s Open Arms Award in 2013.
Grants & Gifts

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

Triad Foundation - $5,000
With generous funds from the Triad Foundation of Ithaca, Unity House will purchase four security computer routers for use at four different Unity House sites in Tompkins County. These new routers will help guarantee that the agency’s electronic data remain safe and secure from malicious activity. The agency experiences a high number of viruses and spam; this technology will significantly reduce those problems and the associated repair expenses.

Auburn Lowe’s - $2,500
Unity House partnered with the local Lowe’s store on two summer projects. The retailer provided eleven window air conditioner units for mental health independent living apartments, and sent workers and materials out to our IRA in Union Springs. There, Lowe’s reps repaired the home’s deck and installed beautiful new landscaping for the residents’ enjoyment.

Foothold Technology - $1,000
Unity House is the winner of a $1,000 training award from Foothold Technology. Foothold Technology offers behavioral health web-based software for human service providers called AWARDS. This electronic health record (EHR) eases the burden of documentation and data management. More than 200 employees who are required to document their daily work in AWARDS will take advantage of this training on Foothold at no cost to the agency.

Allyn Foundation - $15,000  Emerson Foundation - $15,000
The Allyn and Emerson Foundations have most generously partnered with Unity House on a large human resources project. The agency will conduct an across-the-board position description and compensation evaluation utilizing an outside consultant. This best practice will upgrade Unity House’s outdated salary structure, allowing the agency to be a more competitive employer in the region.

Quilt RAFFLE

Just in time for the holidays! Unity House is raffling off a beautiful hand-crafted Mennonite quilt, graciously donated by the Church of God in Christ in Moravia. Quilt size is 6’ 10” x 5’ 10”. The random drawing will take place on Monday, November 30. Proceeds will benefit Unity House people and programs.

Tickets are available for $10 each. Contact LauraLee by calling 607-272-1741 or emailing lweaver@unityhouse.com, or go online www.unityhouse.com/donations. In the “This Donation Is For” section, click “Other” then enter “# of quilt tickets” in the box provided.
The PROSperity Program held a fall food pantry party on October 8. The Men’s Recovery Support Group, in collaboration with Practitioner Martin Seaman, organized the event. This gathering was a collective effort to have PROS participants enjoy a celebration that would also allow them to give back to the community. All PROS participants were welcome to attend, and the admission “price” was one non-perishable item to be donated to Calvary Food Pantry. Refreshments were donated by Mario’s Pizzeria as well as PROS staff members, with Martin providing DJ services during the event.

Scott, Alan and Tom show off food gathered for donation during the PROS fall food pantry party.