

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE PIP PARKING LOT\*

A couple of weeks ago, I headed to the PIP for an early evening meeting of our PIP Advisory Board. The PIP is located right on Main Street, and I circled around to park in the rough dirt and stone parking lot directly across from the main entrance. It's early Fall/twilight time, the busiest time of day at the shelter.

I sat in my car and watched out the windshield at the scene in front of me. Folks were milling around, smoking a cigarette, standing around, sitting around, waiting to go in, whatever. Not more than minutes after I parked, a white wagon followed me into the parking lot and then drove right to the back entrance. At first, it looked like one of those old white Hoodsie trucks, and I was ready to place my order. Then I realized it was a patrol paddy wagon, and that the Worcester Police had arrived with one of our prospective guests. As the two patrolmen opened the back door - it still looked like a refrigerated operation to me, but I know it was just my eyes deceiving me - and helped the man stumble out of the back, they were met by two of our staff. One took each elbow and guided the man inside.

As I'm sitting there watching this, probably because of the time of day, the famous quote from Hubert Humphrey floats into my mind. You know, the one about society's responsibility to care and put its resources to those of our residents who live in the twilight areas of life. I'm quickly shattered out of that musing when the old phrase "Dump the Hump" roars into my mind. Back in '68, I was already "Clean for Gene," having spent the summer of '68 in an ROTC Training Camp program, the initial step of a rather unspectacular and rather uncomfortable short-lived military career. I thought, what arrogance we had back then. I wonder what our community would be like, and our nation would be like, if the "Happy Warrior" had been elected instead of the paranoid nutcase and the pack of war criminals that ran the country in the late 60's and early 70's.

Recognizing the unproductive nature of this musing, I headed inside. In order to reach the meeting room on the third floor, you have to go by the front desk and through the Day Room with its metal chairs and benches bolted to the concrete floor. The place was pretty quiet and pretty crowded. I said hi to the staff and looked around the Day Room at the folks there. Hollow eyes and flickering spirits. Many were bundled up even though it was a fairly warm evening. Bundled up against something

other than the weather, I suppose. Most of the folks in the Day Room just sat there and stared, not even possessing enough energy to carry on a conversation. How did we come to this? How could any provider or agency take the government's money to just shelter people? Another unanswered but equally futile question, I suppose.

Later on, after the meeting, I'm driving home, reflecting on the evening's meeting, when my mind drifted to the numerous "battles" our agency has been fighting over the past year or two, both in Framingham and Worcester. The vitriol and hate are sometimes tough to take. Everyone has the right to question. Everyone has the right to have their questions answered. That's now what's been happening. As my mind played some of these scenes out, I had this realization that the fight over our attempt to establish a new site for the Sage House program is not the real battle that our agency is involved in. The fighting issues in Worcester are not the real battle that our agency is engaged in.

The real battle that our agency is engaged in is very different and very specific, and it varies in each individual to whom we provide services. The real battle that the agency is engaged in is the battle to pull people out of that twilight and through contact, services and resources, move them to a better place, move them to a place of greater independence and self-sufficiency. That's the real battle we're engaged in, a battle that goes on each and every day in each and every one of our programs. To go into that twilight, rip an opening in the twilight, and help individuals and families emerge. That's the real battle.

Sometimes it's uncomplicated, helping an elderly couple to remain in their home by installing a new furnace; providing WIC vouchers and nutritional counseling to a young mom about the best way to keep her family healthy and to raise her son or daughter. Sometimes that battle is more complicated and more difficult, and the individuals in the twilight are more reflective of those sitting in the Day Room of the PIP enduring the passage of one more day. Sometimes all folks need is a helping hand, a word of encouragement, a pat on the back, a kind greeting. Sometimes folks need to be shaken and pushed and prodded to get out of the twilight and into a fuller life. As I said, it's always different.

That's the battle that we fight each and every day, and that battle is reflected in the folks that we honor at our Annual

Meeting, our Employees of the Year, Beth Connolly, speaking words of encouragement to a young woman trying to restart her life after serving time for a foolish mistake. Leon Ouellette, providing an example to some of the younger Maintenance people about how things are done right so that they, too, can make the transition from shelter to work to independent living. That's what these two folks do every day and they are representative of what goes on every day in our agency across a broad spectrum of service delivery models.

Look at our Managers of the Year, setting an example. Peggy Dame, helping the staff understand that kind words and clear rules and connecting to supportive services are the model that each staff should use working with the psychiatrically disabled people in our supported housing programs. Carolyn McHugh, for 25 years helping teachers work with families in our Head Start program.

That's what goes on in our agency every day. That's the real battle. Sometimes that battle can be won with a kind word or a pat on the back. We must never forget that professional services are important. It is the kind word of encouragement, the smile at greeting, the handshake and pat on the back that often provide the critical difference in how help is received and how effective our help can be.

You know that the fight over our site in Worcester, the fight over how we provide shelter and how we are going to close our shelters in Worcester and Framingham, those fights will be finished, they'll be resolved. Our agency will move forward, focused on its mission each and every day. But we cannot be sidetracked by them, we cannot be deterred and misled, because that would be going down a false path, to think that is the battle that our agency is engaged in. The true battle our agency is engaged in each and every day is the battle to help someone move out of the twilight into the light, into independence and self-sufficiency.

I commend each and every one of our staff for their willingness, their passion and their commitment to engage in that battle each and every day, because it is through the passion, the commitment and the dedication that I know that battle will be won.

Jim Cuddy  
October, 2006

**\*Based on remarks that I gave at our Annual Meeting 10/17/06.**