

## DAYS LIKE THIS

Tuesday, 1/24/12, 11:00 a.m.

I'm barreling down I-290 coming out of Worcester, heading to Framingham, when my cell phone announces its presence through the Bluetooth system. On the other end of the line is one of our Board members bringing to my attention a situation that he hopes we can intervene in. He begins to lay out the situation. 47 year old guy, living in a little boat behind a building in downtown Framingham. Jim had gone to school with the guy. Let's preserve his anonymity and call him Benny. Had lost track of him. Had occasionally seen his relatives and been recently contacted by his relatives and had reached out to Benny. Benny was in trouble, on a long slide downward. A skilled carpenter, he had lost his job, his skill set, his confidence to addiction. He was staying in a boat behind a property that is family owned, right off the downtown section. It was getting cold, he was scared. He knew he had to do something.

For the next 20 minutes or so (after I slowed the car down to about 55), Jim and I traded several phone calls. Benny had ten days' sobriety. The boat was a euphemism for just a piece of wood with a cover on it. He was running electricity from the building to operate a space heater. He was afraid of being mugged. He was afraid of dying. He had been going to the noontime meeting over at the Drop-In Center. "Ten days," Jim emphasized to me. My one question was, "Is he ready to come in?" Jim said yes.

So, here's what I did. Since Jim told me that Benny knew who one of our Outreach Workers, Dougie, was, I tracked down Dougie and asked Dougie to go to the noon meeting and catch up with him at the Drop-In Center. I had Jim tell Benny to connect with Dougie at the Drop-In and we would find him a place to stay.

When I got to work, I went down to the Common Ground and looked at the big board with all of our housing continuum. We've got very few vacancies these days or, for that matter, any day. But there was one that I spotted, a sober house right in downtown. I talked to Mary Shanahan. She

was going to be out but she would make sure that Dougie, when he brought Benny in, would connect with Ron Texera and that we could move him into this sober house. Mary, bless her soul, asked me about rent, and I said that Jim would pay Benny's rent while we stabilized him. That's all she needed to hear. I connected with Jim and told him we had things worked out, we could get him a room, Dougie would connect with him. This whole thing could happen today.

Benny could come in out of the cold this afternoon.

I asked folks to close the loop with me, and later on I got an email from Ron Texera that he sent to me and cc'd Mary and Dougie. Here's exactly what the email said.

"Jim, I met with 'Benny' after the noon meeting, talked to him about recovery, supportive housing, and all those things to help put him at ease. We then went to \_\_\_\_\_ Street and, fortunately, there were a couple of the guys there who greeted him like a long-lost brother! I showed him a room and, within minutes, he said, 'Yes.' He'll be at the house tonight. I drove him back to work and one could feel the relief he seemed to exude. We do good work, don't we??? We can only hope he continues on his journey."

Ron

You're right, Ron. We do good work. Sometimes we're successful. Sometimes we're not. But we do really good work.

That's kind of it, you know. There were a lot of other things that collided with me during the day. I was coming in from Worcester that morning after spending two and a half hours at the 701 Main Street site. I'm always depressed when I leave the building because of its physical condition. For the first two hours, I had met with two City Councilors, having them tour the place and then talking about our plans for a new permanent site, and neighborhood advisory groups and input and public safety, etc., etc. I've got to say I was on my best behavior. Later, after they left, I went upstairs and sat in on the staff meeting for a few minutes and thanked the staff for all the work they're doing in Worcester. I looked around the table at the meeting in Worcester and I said to myself, "If anybody can do this (ending homelessness), these are

the folks who can. They've been demonstrating that every day and I know they're going to continue to demonstrate it. Undermanned, it would be easy to be overwhelmed by the challenges of Worcester, but they're not."

So I've got to tell you, on my way back to Framingham, before that phone announced its presence in my car, I was sort of bumming. Bumming about that building, bumming about all the challenges, questioning whether I can get my job done the right way, questioning whether I can hold my end of the deal up and keep pushing that wheel up the hill.

You know, when I got into Framingham and I walked into the Common Ground, saw the vibe there, looked at that wall, saw that vacancy, I knew the answer. A resounding yes. As all this great work by our folks was going on, I snuck out for my midday swim. It's one of the routines I keep to every day when I work. There's something about the quiet, the solitude and, of course, the exercise. During my swim, a lyric from a Van Morrison song wandered into my head.

"Everything falls into place like the flick of a switch."

Things fall into place. Benny's sleeping inside, not worrying about being mugged, not worrying about freezing to death and thinking about how he can maintain his sobriety with the help from people in the house. The flick of a switch only happens when you have people like Ron, Dougie, Mary and everyone else come together and make a better reality happen for people who are struggling. There are days like this when things fall into place.

Jim Cuddy  
1/27/12