

JANUARY, 2000

I sit down to write this shortly after the new year arrives. As usual, the words come tumbling into my mind, and I struggle to structure and give some semblance of order to them. I write to honor the new year by communicating a reflection, a dedication, a wish and a hope.

First, a reflection.

Since we frequently measure the passage of time in decades, the start of the first decade of the new millennium marks my fifth decade of working in the human service field. I admit to a bit of hyperbole on the front end, since my career began at the start of the last quarter of the last year of the 60's, but I guess it counts.

Anyway, as I continually examine what I do, and what has meaning and what has sense, I inevitably come back to this point, and here it is. The most important ingredient in the work of helping others is the individual act of compassion. At the essence or the kernel of the helping process lies the human touch, both literally and figuratively. All the fancy treatment programs, medication schedules, case management, social service delivery systems - they are barren if delivered without this element. We know this, yet often we pretend or discount in a misguided attempt to elude the powerful emotional impact that simple acts of compassion can effect.

Now, the dedication.

I write this for Joan, who recently left us. She knew better than most of us, certainly better than me, this lesson. I know this was a lesson she tried to teach by example every day of her too short life. The image of Joan, arm draped around a student in our Career Center, as they turn the page of a book together, comes to mind, her simple gesture conveying more than any amount of words ever could.

In keeping with this dedication, and inspired by this example, I have a wish.

My wish is for Margaret, sitting in her office at the adult shelter she now directs, listening intently to Mike, for

what I am sure is at least the twenty-first time; tell her that this time he is going to stay sober, get his life together, get a job and get a place of his own; and believing him.

This wish is for Sadie, whose reserved, respectful, and almost regal presence at the head of a makeshift dinner table covered with white paper tablecloth, on which rested aluminum bowls of food, brought a sense of community and sharing to a group of formerly homeless adults now living independently, beaten down but not defeated, and sustained by Sadie.

My wish is for John, who, by placing his arm around a big bodied but fragile spirited adult in one of our DMH group homes, helped him get through ceremonies dedicating the house to the memory of his mother.

My wish is for Darlene, rushing around the day before Thanksgiving, cajoling turkeys from the community to deliver to the lodging houses she manages so that the residents would all be able to enjoy a turkey dinner in their own homes.

My wish is for Arthur, who I imagine works every hour of his professional life, and many other waking hours, at making his dream of insuring that every one regardless of means has a warm and well-heated house a reality. It's going to happen.

My wish is for Emma, who I observed one day at the front desk, signing a greeting to a hearing-impaired individual, followed by directions that would help him find the program he came looking for, not realizing that it had just moved. As Emma signed, the apprehension drained from the man's face, replaced with a smile.

This wish is for Harry, who demonstrates the same level of loyalty and dedication to our organization's mission and governance process that I imagine saw him through the Battle of the Bulge and the liberation of a concentration camp nearly 55 years ago. His belief in the human spirit has not diminished one iota in his 81 years on this planet.

And finally, this wish is for everyone who works in our organization, who, countless times during the course of their working day, remembers and responds with compassion,

care and determination to make the world a better place for one individual or family and for the community.

Here is that wish.

Find a quiet place. For some, maybe it's a rock, under a tree, off a path in the woods. For others, maybe it's the sanctuary of a house of worship after the other congregation members have left. Or maybe it's just a comfortable place in the confines of your own home.

Sit quietly. Then still your mind. Then find that place within you that allows you to reach out and touch the lives of other people. That element of strength that makes a difference between providing help which is effective and that which is not. Cherish this strength. Nourish this strength. For it is through this strength, coupled with some transfer of resources from the haves to the have-nots, that we will be able to abolish homelessness, that we will be able to eliminate poverty and hunger.

Therefore, this is my hope for the first year of the first decade of the first century of the new millennium.

James T. Cuddy