

3-2015

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Recommended Citation

(2015) "Alumna Works to Ease the Trauma of Homelessness," *DePaul Magazine*: Vol. 1: Iss. 12015, Article 8.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine/vol1/iss12015/8>

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Alumna Works to Ease the Trauma of Homelessness

By Marilyn Ferdinand

“Falling down is easy, getting up is hard.”

These are the words a person experiencing homelessness used to describe what it was like to be homeless. There are many ways people end up without a roof over their heads, from a devastating house fire to underemployment or a medical condition that makes it impossible to work. “Bad things happen to people, and life isn’t fair for a lot of people,” says Audrey Thomas (SNL MA ’05), CEO of Deborah’s Place. “It’s not for us to make judgments, but to figure out ways to help.” For more than 30 years, Thomas has been doing just that, now for up to 350 single women each year who come to what Thomas calls “a place of healing from the trauma of homelessness.”

Deborah’s Place was founded in 1984 after a survey of social services in Chicago revealed that existing programs did not address the needs of women who are homeless. “At that time,” says Thomas, “many women preferred sleeping outside to staying in a shelter where there were men.” Since then, the nonprofit’s mission has been to open doors of opportunity through supportive housing and services. Women in the program live in one of three types of housing: permanent supportive housing for which they pay 30 percent of their income; interim housing, available for up to 120 days; and safe-haven housing for the chronically homeless and those with severe mental illnesses.

Thomas says, “Supportive housing is an evidence-based practice that is the most humane and cost-effective way to address homelessness, especially for the chronically homeless. A woman is able to remain in housing and receive case management services based on her needs.” Case managers and staff use motivational interviewing to help



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—Audrey Thomas, CEO, Deborah’s Place

women move through the stages of change to reach their goals such as getting their GED, finding employment, addressing chronic health issues and finding and maintaining stable housing. Support continues while they acclimate. “Some women may never have had their own apartment or not had one for a long time,” Thomas explains.

Thomas was attracted to social work because her parents and church community taught her to help others without judgment “because

we don’t always know the bigger story.” Although she had obtained a bachelor’s degree in English, Thomas says she “fell into the work I am doing.” Over time, Thomas says she wanted to add an academic base to her experiential knowledge. After checking into several programs, Thomas chose the School for New Learning (SNL). She comments, “There was a real respect for my life experience and skills, and the program accommodated the fact that I worked full time. The program was challenging, robust, but it was also doable and enjoyable.”

The school also helped Thomas through a very rough time. “Just after I started, both my parents died,” she remembers. “I really couldn’t go to class for several weeks.

My advisor reached out to me and said, ‘How can we help you make this work—make up the work and let you do what you need to do?’ Without that, I don’t think I would have gotten back to it.” She redoubled her efforts and eventually received SNL’s Arthur and Lila Weinberg Award for her spirit of social conscience and activism.

Although social services have become more institutionalized with more data-collecting and reporting requirements, Thomas believes that for social service professionals to be successful, they need to see their work as a vocation. “You’re working with people who are so very vulnerable, and you’re meeting them at this point in their life where they’re so low and in crisis,” she reflects. “I see a lot of young people come into the profession and burn out because they realize they can’t fix people. People are messy, their lives are messy. It really is about building relationships and being respectful that they had a life before you met them. It’s a privilege and great responsibility to walk with them on that journey out of homelessness.”