

# GMC NEWS



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GEORGETOWN MINISTRY CENTER

## OVER THE YEARS

Over the years, many homeless people have walked through the doors of Georgetown Ministry Center. Some we were able to help with housing and others we gave a safe place to rest and take a shower. Ever since I started working at GMC there has been the same old question of what success do we have with getting people into housing? Sometimes I get so caught up in the helping that I tend to lose sight of the many people we have helped who are still in housing as a result of GMC. Due to their fragile state, some need continuing support to stay in housing.

Over the years, GMC has taken on the role of representative payee for six such individuals. This includes ensuring they are paying rent and utilities and giving whatever support is needed. We connect our clients to mental health agencies that can help them with their mental health issues and medications.

I remember one such client, and we shall call him Jim Sour. Jim was in a really bad way, living on the canal in Georgetown for years. One day Jim was injured and ended up in the hospital in Arlington. Working with the appropriate agencies there, we were able to help Jim move into his first apartment. Jim is mildly retarded and possibly has a mild form of schizophrenia not likely to respond to medication. Jim is now connected to a mental health agency there. He has a support team to help him with food shopping, making doctors' appointments, and whatever else a normal person would have to do to survive.

As representative payee, GMC ensures all Jim's bills are paid. At times we have had to gather volunteers to clean Jim's apartment. The first time it was infested with roaches, and recently there were bedbugs. All this was needed so that Jim would not lose his housing. Even though Arlington County pays a large part of the rent, they still partner with private landlords who will evict someone not living up to legal standards. Jim is one of our most demanding clients, but we love him still.

GMC currently has six rep payee clients and has helped place at least eight people in housing within the last year. We are currently working with clients who have been approved for housing but are resisting, and we continue to engage them daily to persuade them that housing is a good choice. We hope the continuing support for these folks is not as demanding as for Jim, but even if it is we will give them the support they need.

—Roy Witherspoon

## BART: A CASE IN POINT

Homelessness has many causes. Severe mental illness is one cause and it is indeed difficult to treat, though not impossible. Not only can a person be locked in a system of beliefs that are not based in reality ("I'm here on the streets because it is the safest place to be when the Government is trying to kill you."), but a basic degree of trust is lacking. How can you expect someone to believe that you are trying to help when, in the hospital, you give him strong medication that both resolves the psychosis and also makes his body twist and contort painfully, deadens his thought process, and makes him walk stiffly and slowly? This is a difficult "pill" for anyone to swallow! So many of our homeless men and women have superficially pleasant relationships with us while remembering that just "around the corner" are potential abuse, neglect, lies, abandonment, and yet another person who is "trying to use me for their own needs." But this mistrust doesn't start with the first hospitalization or with the doctor who administers medication for the mental illness.

Take Bart for example. He was raised in a chaotic household and subjected to physical and sexual abuse by the men his mother took in to help with paying the rent and buying food. She had to do it. With five children, she had no choice. Drugs and alcohol were present in the house mostly all the time. While his mother and her current boyfriend were off getting high or drunk, Bart had to raise the children. He was 11 or 12. His mother told him that he was "good for nothing" and that he was a burden on the household. "You never should have been born," she told him frequently and forcefully. Maybe she was trying to toughen him up to learn how to survive in a harsh world, but these are not the things you say to a child who is strapped with responsibility way beyond his means. By all accounts, she was just mean, selfish, and addicted.

Bart got out of that situation as soon as he could, at age 13 or so. He had no place to go but the streets. He had to prostitute himself to make money, he learned to lie and steal, and above all, he learned to trust no one. People who tried to help needed something and took what they could get from Bart. After 20 years of this, an idea that had been in back of his mind took shape: "I am a very, very special person. It must be that I am

(Bart, cont. on p. 3)



*(Bart, cont. from p. 1)*

being tested because I am so important and great.” And this idea took off in his mind and in just about everything he did. In short, Bart became delusional. More ideas like this were added to his thought process. “Why am I on the streets? Because I know some great government secret and my life is not safe. It must be that locked somewhere in my brain is a plan to save all of humanity and that’s why I am in danger.” Sound unlikely? It isn’t. Many of our homeless men and women harbor such delusions.

There was a history of mental illness like this in Bart’s family. His grandfather had schizophrenia and an uncle was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. When his mother stopped alcohol or drugs long enough, she had racing thoughts and spent more money than she had and was grandiose. For Bart, on the day that he determined to live out his life’s destiny to be the savior of the world and to trust no one, the perfect storm had arrived: His mental illness emerged and his inability to trust anyone enough to get help coalesced into the situation that would leave him homeless and mentally ill until the day he died at age 50, about three years ago.

Bart’s story is sadly not unusual. But most of us will not get close enough to homeless people to learn their stories. We prefer to see them as “sick,” “destitute,” and “unwilling to get help” because to learn about how a person ended up on the streets (and stays there) is not an easy or pleasant endeavor.

Breaking though the lack of trust barrier is the most important and difficult task that we have in working with people who live on the streets. We have good medications for mental illness, much better than before, but these medications are useless until there is a ready and willing person who can take a leap of faith to trust someone else. You can imagine how difficult this is for someone whose experiences in life have taught him or her that trusting is dangerous. Joining someone in a trusting relationship may take years. Happily, we have seen some successes.

For Bart it was too late, and for many of the men and women who have died on the streets of D.C. through neglect or by their own hands, it was because they were afraid to reach out when they needed help the most. So it is our job to take the first step. We shake a hand, look into someone’s eyes, and the journey of repairing a life of pain, psychosis, poverty, homelessness, and especially distrust begins.

Thank you for your support of our work here at Georgetown Ministry Center.

—Dr. Ronald Koshes

*Editor’s note: Dr. Koshes has written and self-published a number of books including Mad Mark, a novel about a mentally ill man.*

## HELP THE HOMELESS

Here is a healthy way to help the homeless! Join us in the Help the Homeless Walk on November 22. Registration is \$15 for youth under age 25, \$25 for anyone over age 25. All but \$5 comes directly to GMC. The \$5 pays for the T-shirt you will get and wear proudly. The walk is on the National Mall on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Get up early, take the bus or Metro down to the Mall, join us for a healthy 5K walk, and then take the family out to breakfast. It doesn’t get any better. Register at [www.helpthehomelessdc.org](http://www.helpthehomelessdc.org).

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## TASTE OF GEORGETOWN

Come sample some of Georgetown's best restaurants at the always exciting Taste of Georgetown on Saturday, October 10, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Located along Wisconsin Avenue, N.W., the Taste of Georgetown promises to entice taste buds around Washington with samplings of high-end cuisine from regionally recognized restaurants.

This year's event will showcase the spectacular cuisine of 30 of D.C.'s finest restaurants, highlighting many local culinary personalities and featuring nearly 60 delectable dishes to sample, as well as wine pairings and the jazz talents of Blues Alley. This annual celebration of food, wine, and music has become the premier food and wine festival of D.C.

Entry into the wine pavilion is \$10, individual tasting tickets are \$5, and a packet of five tasting tickets is \$20. Taste of Georgetown tasting tickets will be available for purchase on [tasteofgeorgetown.com](http://tasteofgeorgetown.com) at the beginning of September.

Sponsors include Marten's Volkswagen, Foley and Lardner, LLP, *Washingtonian Magazine*, and *Washington CityPaper*.

For additional information, please visit <http://tasteofgeorgetown.com>.

Georgetown Ministry Center  
1041 Wisconsin Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20007

## SPIRIT OF GEORGETOWN

On Wednesday, October 14, Georgetown Ministry Center will hold its annual Spirit of Georgetown benefit. We are thrilled to announce that Dr. Tina Alster and Paul Frazer have graciously agreed to open their newly renovated home for this important fundraising event.

The home is the original Smith house of the famed Smith Row, in the West Village. Built in 1810, it has undergone a complete renovation that was completed this year. Internationally renowned Georgetown resident Hugh Newell Jacobsen served as the architect. The house will be featured in an upcoming issue of *Architectural Digest* and is a perfect setting for the Spirit of Georgetown benefit, which is always a festive fall gathering.

This year's very capable event co-chairs, Shannon Pryor and Maral Skelesy, are busy planning an exciting evening you will not want to miss.

The proceeds from this event provide the Center with a significant amount of its operating budget. More information is available by emailing us at [spirit@gmcgt.org](mailto:spirit@gmcgt.org).

Please support GMC through the Combined Federal Campaign: CFC# 31661.

**22 Years of Service to Georgetown**