A Brand New Set of Tools

When Charles and Shirley turned to St. Anthony’s programs for help in getting clean and sober, their business skills blossomed as well.

Charles and Shirley have walked a long road in a short time. Staff, volunteers, and guests at St. Anthony’s have walked with them much of the way. A year and a half ago, they were living on the streets, held hostage by their addictions. “I’d been put out of my mother’s, and together we lost her apartment,” says Charles, pointing to Shirley. They began eating at the St. Anthony Dining Room, where a former guest told them about the recovery programs for both himself and Shirley.

One autumn night, Charles was up all night alone, using drugs. He decided he couldn’t live that way any more, and made a decision to begin his recovery. After detoxing for 72 hours, he made his way to St. Anthony’s, and found recovery programs for both himself and Shirley.

“Gary was a great influence on us,” says Shirley. “When we came and we spoke with Gary, he said, ‘You all can do it. I have faith in you. You have to not use and come in.’” Charles’ first three days at St. Anthony’s San Francisco based recovery program, the Fr. Alfred Center, were spent sleeping. Then he was assigned to food prep in the Dining Room, cutting onions, carrots, and celery. After a few days, he asked to work in the scullery because he wanted a harder job. He told riddles to the visiting children who brought their dishes to the scullery window. Upon graduating from the one-year program at the Fr. Alfred Center, Charles signed up for charitable work at the church where his grandfather had once been the pastor, and got a job in construction.

In the meantime, Shirley had entered recovery in another program with help from counselors at St. Anthony’s. When she finished her program, Shirley returned to San Francisco so that she and Charles could get married. St. Anthony’s found her a bed at their shelter for women while Charles finished his program. In time, she got a home care job and regained custody of her children.

Most recovery programs discourage romantic partnering in the first year of sobriety. Charles and Shirley struggled with this. While indeed, romantic relationships can put more pressure on substance abusers than their recovery can stand, Charles and Shirley were convinced they could support each other in their quest for a better life.

“I know her and she knows me, so we fought this battle together,” says Charles. “Where we live, it’s drug infested,” says Shirley. “We walk through the fire every day.”

Charles and Shirley are still part of the St. Anthony community. They visit at least every two weeks, talk with counselors and chaplains who helped them, volunteer in the Dining Room, and most importantly, encourage and support the men at the Fr. Alfred Center in their sobriety.

“We don’t want a whole lot out of life,” says Charles. “We just want to give back.”

Less than a year after their program completion, Charles and Shirley now own and operate Smith’s One Man, Four Hands, Maintenance and Handyman Services. Today, they hold a maintenance and housekeeping contract with twelve child care centers. They considered a bid for a second large client, but decided it would be too much, too early.

“We’re not going to have failure stories, we’re going to have success stories.” —Charles

In conjunction with his recovery program, Charles attended classes at St. Anthony’s Employment Program and Learning Center. There he learned the tools to start their business. He developed a business idea and learned how to produce marketing materials and use the Internet for outreach.

On Sundays, Charles now preaches at his church. The couple’s living circumstances are challenging, but life in several St. Anthony programs has prepared them to face it. “Where we live, it’s drug infested,” says Shirley. “We walk through the fire every day.”

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It wasn’t until I was volunteering that I understood why the women and families got served first. Sometimes when you are homeless and you are in the midst of your life, you forget that there’s life out there. When you see the kids you figure there’s a purpose to life, that there’s something beyond, bigger than yourself.

Although still in the grasp of a harrowing addiction and scheduled to volunteer only one day a week, he began showing up nearly every day to see if he was needed. One day after volunteering, he had an epiphany of how to help himself so he could better help others. He entered a recovery program and didn’t return to the Dining Room until he was clean and sober. With the help of the letter of recommendation he received from the Dining Room Volunteer Coordinator, he secured a banquet catering position, a position he still holds today.

“Part of what I do today as a banquet waiter is what I learned volunteering at St. Anthony’s. It’s making someone smile. I look at it as being part of my service, part of giving back. You don’t know how bad someone’s day is, you just don’t know where someone has been the moment before they step through your space. And part of my being of service in my work is to make people feel welcome and to put a little cheer in their life if I’m able to. And part of that is always smiling.”

Nearly one-third of the rehabilitation admissions in California have been for Methamphetamine addiction.

—Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA)

In his crisp white shirt and smooth silver hair, Muhamad exudes a manner of grace usually found in diplomats and Sinatra-era entertainers. Known as MuMu to his friends, it is easy to imagine him hosting dinner parties in his Bernal Heights condo, or in his former careers as personnel director or insurance liaison. It is far more difficult to imagine him in his other life, as a homeless crystal methamphetamine addict who ate his meals in the St. Anthony Dining Room.

Muhamad graduated from college with a degree in linguistics and education. Although always a hard working student, once in graduate school, Muhamad discovered he had an affinity for alcohol and marijuana. He soon dropped out of his masters program, entered the work force, and with his newfound income, began his relationship with crystal methamphetamine, an extremely addictive stimulant. As with many meth addicts, it was only a matter of time before his addiction led him to lose his job, his apartment, and his friends.

Muhamad learned about the St. Anthony Dining Room from other homeless addicts he met. The Dining Room soon became one of his favorite places, and the dignity and respect extended to Muhamad as a guest in the Dining Room helped him hold onto a feeling of self worth that would some day be essential to finding his way to recovery. As he talks about the significance of the Dining Room for him during those critical days, Muhamad loses his composure for a moment and quickly wipes tears from his eyes before continuing.

“The volunteers would welcome us in the Dining Room, and the people serving were so nice. Back then, a smile went a long way because so many doors were shut to me. To see that smile, to me meant I belonged somewhere. So St. Anthony’s was that for me. And I felt safe here.”

The St. Anthony Dining Room, which serves an average of 2,600 meals a day, is guided by an operating principle of treating each guest with dignity and respect. Volunteers and St. Anthony’s staff know how difficult it is for guests to move to a place of stability when their self esteem has been shattered by the many struggles of poverty. They serve compassion, smiles, and encouragement 365 days a year in the Dining Room along with the hot meals. Muhamad hungered for that kindness, and counted on it as much as the Dining Room meals to sustain him.

His connection with the compassion he found at St. Anthony’s moved him to become a volunteer. He had no idea how being on the other side of the line would change his perspective.

Service with a Smile

Muhamad found a much needed smile in the St. Anthony Dining Room. Today, he returns the smile and much more as a Dining Room volunteer and as a professional banquet caterer.

I
Advocacy: Planting the Seeds of Change

Years as a nurse did not protect Barbara from poverty. After getting help at St. Anthony’s, this senior woman tells state lawmakers her story.

F YOU TELL BARBARA COLEMAN THAT
there is a bill coming up in Congress
that relates to poverty or hunger, her first
response is, “When do we go? I need to talk
to those people.”

As a formerly homeless woman who has
fought many battles with poverty, hunger,
and homelessness, Barbara felt that the story
of her survival fell on deaf ears at many of
the places she turned to for help. But she
knew that her story was representative of
so many around her — people who were
struggling to piece together enough food
to eat for a day, a safe place to sleep for
the night, or medical care when they become
ill. In working with St. Anthony’s Advocacy
program, Barbara has learned that her story
is important for policy makers and other
advocates to hear.

“When representative Mark Leno’s office
called us last year to see if we had any clients
that were going to Sacramento to provide
testimony at the food stamp bill hearing for
the Assembly Human Services Committee,
we immediately thought of Barbara,” noted
St. Anthony’ Advocacy Coordinator, Colleen
Rivecca.

While testimony is usually heard by policy
experts and academics, Assembly members
were captivated by Barbara’s story of how
demeaning and complicated it was for her to
struggle to piece together enough food to
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As a follower of St. Francis, patron of
this beautiful city, I try always to be open to the ways that nature reveals the amazing presence of God’s power and love.

Francis rejoiced at the sights and sounds of spring—melodies infused with the rhythms of renewal, visions of colors transformed, death making way for life, and the promise of abundance.

But just as Francis’ love of nature is of a piece with his compassion for the poor and rejected, my springtime revelations about transformation and new life always lead me back to the streets of the Tenderloin and St. Anthony’s. I hear the sounds of spring at St. Anthony Foundation in our Dining Room when a word of gratitude is shared between a guest and a volunteer. I catch a glimpse of the transformation when a homeless woman stands to share her story with a senator. Dreams that have died come back to life as the residents in our recovery programs twist free of the bonds of addiction. Green shoots rise in sometimes inhospitable soil.

At St. Anthony Foundation hope is the
great common bond that ties us all
together. I’m humbled and filled with hope when I realize how supporters
like you make the conscious choice
to participate in this work, because they
know the rewards of helping to change
a person’s life are far greater than many
other investments being made today.

Signs of spring, signs of hope. When I
look out my office window I’m given a
powerful sign of hope for the future of
St. Anthony’s. The workers are putting
the finishing touches on the new “green”
direct services building at 150 Golden
Gate Avenue. St. Anthony Foundation is
ready to serve the poor and homeless of San Francisco in new facilities that will
allow us to be responsive to their needs
and show them the dignity and respect
that is their due. Like spring’s promise, we
too will continue our mission, to provide
all our brothers and sisters nourishment
to begin anew.

Gratefully,

As an organization that accepts no government money,
St. Anthony Foundation’s funding is not directly affected by the
changes in interests or initiatives of governmental support. But
being on the front lines of social services in one of San Francisco’s
poorest neighborhoods, we share a painful awareness that a red
line on an assembly bill can drastically and immediately affect the
lives of those who need help the most. Every day, thousands of
people whose basic needs are not being met turn
to St. Anthony’s.
Elena Rossi says she hates to see people hungry. “St. Anthony does something good with the money it receives,” she said. “It feeds people. You know it doesn’t go for fancy overhead. It’s such a real outfit.”

Most of her charitable work is linked to feeding the hungry. In addition to being a long-time contributor to St. Anthony Foundation, she’s served early morning breakfasts to the poor at St. Mary’s Cathedral.

The impulse to ease hunger was something shared by her late mother, a long-time St. Anthony supporter, and, like Ms. Rossi’s father, a native San Franciscan and a 1906 earthquake survivor. “She didn’t talk about the earthquake and fire much,” Ms. Rossi said. “She didn’t want to give away her age.”

Her mother’s death prompted Ms. Rossi to revise her will by making St. Anthony Foundation a beneficiary of her estate. “My will did not really reflect my interests. My mother’s death reminded me to take this kind of planning more seriously.”

Ms. Rossi is an enthusiastic cook who has studied culinary arts in Tuscany and Provence. She favors French cooking because of its use of fresh produce. The joy she finds in good cooking and dining with friends makes the sight of the homeless and hungry more distressing to her.

“I love to cook and I love to eat,” she said. “That’s why I support the hungry.”

Feeding the Legacy of Hope

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