A Successful Journey to Sobriety and Stability

By Father Alfred Center graduate Michael C.

My first experience with St. Anthony’s was when I was homeless. I would come here and eat. I was like a ghost. I was embarrassed I was getting food given to me.

I’ve been with the Fr. Alfred Center for 13 months. Living in the program gives you time out in your life where you can really focus on things you need to work on.

My use of meth and my ability to lie to myself allowed me to break into offices to steal whatever I could find to support my habit. I finally got caught and I was scared.

I was given the opportunity to go through drug court. They take all of your charges and they’ll excuse them. The financial aspect of it, they’ll get rid of it for you. I went through the Father Alfred Program because I was homeless and I needed a place to live. They offered me a live/work environment.

The first phase is about 60 days long. You are really getting used to sleeping again, eating regular meals and having a place to call your own. When you start going through that process, you start remembering things, and you start having to deal with the things you’ve done in your past. I worked through the detritus of my life, all of the people I’ve had in my life that I’d hurt, and all the bad things I’d done.

I started working more closely with individuals, my peers as well as my counselors, and really listening to the message that they were bringing. It’s important to be around a bunch of people who are going to be there for a long time. You start building friendships again.

The second phase is really the backbone of the program. You have more responsibility. We bring others up who come into the program. You try to be a good example. You hold each other accountable. For me it had been years since I had surrounded myself with people who were living in a solution rather than slowly killing themselves.

The third phase, you are introduced to the Tenderloin Tech Lab. You work with the people there to build your resume, learn computer skills, and do mock interviews. In the fourth phase, you go out looking for jobs. Before I became a criminal, I was a chef. I went to culinary school. I had a career. But then, after years of neglecting my life, I wondered if I was still employable.

I got a job! I can’t remember the last time I was paid minimum wage, and it was humbling. Now I manage a gym and we make sure that all of the machines are working and clean the studios and do laundry. It’s different than my other career path, but I’m really happy. It allows me to put my recovery first. It allows me to give back to St. Anthony’s by volunteering or going back and being part of the house at the Fr. Alfred Center.
Taking a Closer Look at a Difficult Problem

When asked why people addicted to drugs use them in street, St. Anthony's guest Sandra looks incredulously. It's the worst option, she says, but “if you don’t have any other place to do it, what can you do?”

Sandra has been visiting the Dining Room for more than fifteen years. It has been a beacon of stability in a turbulent life on the streets. She is a likeable, approachable and intelligent person who is keenly aware of the toll that drug abuse has taken on her, her friends and her community.

When passers-by see addicts use drugs, she says, they are “saving someone at their lowest point.”

“That’s the last of your dignity. To be out there in people’s faces, looking for change. It’s bad enough living in a street, but when you can’t find somewhere to live… It’s bad enough living in a street, but when you can’t find somewhere to live… It’s bad enough living in a street, but when you can’t find somewhere to live… It’s bad enough living in a street, but when you can’t find somewhere to live…”

Rebecca, a peer counselor, tells us that being a part of an organization that works with people who are homeless helps her deal with the stress of living on the streets. She is an example of how being part of a community can improve one’s quality of life.

St. Anthony’s plays a key role: “When I come in here I don’t feel judged or looked down upon. Staff interact with people instead of just walking around like security guards.”

“Do you stop people from coming off the streets? Because it’s safe,” says Sandra, “and it’s private — most people don’t want the whole world seeing. Safety-wise, if somebody OD’d there would be somewhere on hand. You’d be saving people.”

“Let’s find the lives of the streets which is uppermost in her mind: “It’s very cruel out there. There’s no such thing as a friend. If you OD, they rob you before you get help. Or they rob you and leave and still not get help. It’s happening.”

“Why does she feel about the abuse she receives every day? Nobody has to tell someone who uses about themselves because we beat ourselves up every day. Some days you don’t even want to look in the mirror.”

Restoring self-esteem is a crucial stepping post on the road to coming off drugs. “Until you have your self-worth,” Sandra says, “you’re not going to feel like a viable person. Especially when people can tell from how you look that you’ve had some type of rough lifestyle.”

“Start feeling that there’s no point trying to get clean.”

St. Anthony’s plays a key role: “When I come in here I don’t feel judged or looked down upon. Staff interact with people instead of just walking around like security guards.”

“Until the point arrives when addicted individuals can stop taking dangerous drugs it is important to have the conversation about reducing the harm that these drugs cause to the users and to the community of which they’re a part.”

Please let us know your views. Contact community@StAnthonySF.org or call 415-592-2736.

Senior Support!

Rosita has been volunteering at St. Anthony’s for almost 16 years. She arrived in San Francisco with her husband in 1994 — beneficiaries of a special program that gave preferred immigration status to Filipino veterans who had served in the U.S. military abroad.

She remembers that St. Boniface – the church next door to St. Anthony’s – became home to an increasing number of Catholic Filipino immigrants. And, both because of the proximity and the shared faith, it was only natural, she says, for Filipinos to begin volunteering in the old Dining Room.

“Right from the start, she was made to feel welcome,” says volunteer coordinator Rebecca. “I liked volunteering here very much because it meant a lot of nice people.”

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Back to School!

Hundreds of children from low-income Tenderloin families converged on St. Anthony’s to receive “back-to-school” clothes, shoes, backpacks and supplies during a day-long event in August. The colorful event is already a firm fixture in the calendar of neighborhood families and aims to get children heading to school feeling excited, confident, and set for a great year.

Volunteers from our Young Professionals Council helped prepare for the occasion, and on-site support was provided by helpers from longtime St. Anthony’s partner GAP.

Thank you to all of our volunteers, donors and supporters for making this much-needed event possible. We’re already looking forward to making next year’s Back to School Day just as successful.

Guests Get Tech Support from Craigslist Founder

Our homeless and low-income neighbors received a boost this fall when free public Wi-Fi launched across all of St. Anthony’s buildings – including our iconic Dining Room.

The Tenderloin is an island of digital isolation in uber-connected San Francisco. Access to Wi-Fi helps our guests find stability, and makes it easier to look for work, find childcare, access services, stay in touch, and much more.

At the launch, Dining Room guest Raphael said: “It’s a necessity. Without it, you can’t even go to job interviews until after you put all it all online and send in your resume – so it’s a big help.”

The service was funded through generous donations from a group of tech-focused supporters including Craigslist founder Craig Newmark, who is a long-time supporter of our work. Craig was present to switch the service on and to present a check for the handsome sum of $25,000.

Barry

A WORD FROM BARRY STENGER

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This year the Feast of St. Francis in October also marks the 65th anniversary of the founding of St. Anthony’s. It’s a time to reflect on the countless ways we have served our community, but also to prepare for the challenges our guests face now and in the future.

Since Fr. Alfred opened the doors in 1950, St. Anthony’s has been a beacon for the entire city. We have weathered storms – literal and figurative – and always retained a constant, reassuring presence: not only providing much needed services but doing so in a way that maintains the dignity of our neighbors.

Today, more than ever, we try to think carefully about preparing to meet our guests’ needs. For instance, we know that the community we serve is getting older. Today, one in three of our guests is a senior and we see a much greater proportion of female guests than in previous years. Being able to rely on a rock-solid platform of support gives us the confidence to plan to serve the specific needs of a changing community in the future.

There was another important milestone reached this year: the serving of the 42 millionth meal in our dining room. Those occasions are always a poignant moment for St. Anthony’s. We’re enormously proud of our 66 years of service to homeless and low income San Franciscans. We are hugely grateful for the staunch support of our donors and volunteers over these years. And yet, at the same time, we wish deeply that the services we provide were not needed at all.

Election season is upon us. This means that we will once again run our successful voter registration drive – which seeks to ensure that our community has the chance to make its voice heard. When I speak with our guests I’m always struck by the range of issues that they are interested in: education, healthcare, our standing overseas…and I’m delighted that we play our part in keeping them engaged and involved in the public square.

Regardless of the political climate, and the ebb and flow of partisan tides, we have always acted together, ourselves, to make a real difference in the lives of our vulnerable neighbors. I hope you’ll accept my thanks for your steadfast support — past, present and future. Without the help of generous donors and volunteers like you, our work simply couldn’t happen.

St. Francis invited his followers to trust in the abundance of a loving God. Because of your generous and steadfast support, here at St. Anthony’s, that abundance overflows into the lives of so many.
Technology Training Grounded in Empathy and Service

Maria has spent a year working in our Tech Lab through a program that matches those with a desire to serve with organizations that help underprivileged people.

She is the eighth Jesuit volunteer to work at St. Anthony’s. It’s hard to exaggerate the profound impact technology training can have on people’s lives. Maria’s time at St. Anthony’s is testament to this.

“A guest visited us to take our basic computer skills class,” says Maria. “During his orientation he told me that he had been in prison for 20 years, and he needed to learn how to use a computer because technology has changed so much while he was incarcerated.

“He could have gotten frustrated or discouraged by all the years he missed, but he kept working and asking questions in those classes.

“He had a huge smile on his face the whole time he was working and, whenever I saw him, he’d excitedly tell me about something new he had learned. He was astounded at what you can do on the computer. His warmth and enthusiasm really inspired me.”

Many guests start the beginner class with no computer experience but they make quick progress.

“Just the other day, a fairly new guest to the lab stopped by the front desk and said, ‘I can’t even begin to express to you how thankful I am that this lab exists and how much it’s changing my life.’ That made my day!”

If you would like to know more about volunteering opportunities in our Tech Lab please visit www.StAnthonySF.org/Volunteer or call 415-592-2794.

Have you moved or changed your email address? Please let us know by emailing info@StAnthonySF.org, or calling 415-241-2600.

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