



After a 40-Year Battle, Cynthia Declares Victory

If you know Cynthia, you know how deeply she cares about her family. Given the chance, she could boast about her children and grandchildren for hours. Through all of the loss and pain Cynthia experienced throughout her life, family has been her one constant – no matter what she is going through, they are always there for her. Cynthia's substance use spiraled out of control after she lost her mother and son within a year of one another in 1980. "Here I am, I just turned 18 years old, with no mom. And then I had my son die. I just lost my life. I lost myself," says Cynthia. This ignited a nearly 40-year long struggle with substance use.

Cynthia comes from a large family—six sisters and too many cousins to count—and her father, along with many extended family members, struggled with substance use disorder. Cynthia had hoped she would be able to break this familial cycle, but after two more children and struggling with her own addictions, Cynthia had no intention of seeking help. "One day, I gave my children to my cousin because I wanted to go on another suicide mission. I was going to try and kill myself again, but it didn't happen. I would OD, but it wouldn't happen," she recalls.

Then, during a short jail sentence, she was diagnosed with AIDS. "You know, finding that out killed me," Cynthia told us. Once released, she tried to stay off the drugs, and with help managed to do that for a year. But she ended up relapsing. "As my life went on," Cynthia recalled, "I was suppressing my feelings and medicating myself. I had to stay high. I couldn't deal with life." Cynthia's family helped her raise her children while she struggled with her substance use. "I could see them and I could take care of them physically, but I couldn't be there for them mentally. My kids knew I was using and they understood. They're my best friends," she says. From the early 1990s to the early 2010s, that was her "normal" until a near fatal car crash changed the trajectory of her life.

Lying in a hospital bed with broken ribs and a broken back, Cynthia fell into a coma for 42 days. But her children never left her side. After she woke up, she spent months learning how to



When we met with Cynthia, she couldn't stop talking about a dream come true: a recent family vacation to Disney World.

walk again. This wasn't her second, third, or even fourth chance at life. But Cynthia knew this was her last chance.

"My time with Victory Programs opened up a lot of doors for me and they still are. I want to be a motivational speaker. I want everybody to know that they can still live, you know? Life goes bad for you, but you can still have a positive attitude and it'll be okay."

In 2018, Cynthia entered Victory Programs' Living and Recovery Community (LARC) for people living with chronic health conditions and diagnosed with substance use disorder. "Listen to me when I tell you that those people [at LARC] saved my life," says Cynthia. She attempted recovery many times before, but this time was different. She wasn't doing it just because her family wanted her to. She was finally doing it for herself. She was determined to pay attention and gain the necessary tools to stay sober.

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A Message from Sarah Porter, Executive Director

As I reflect back on the past two years, I'm filled with pride for everything Victory Programs has accomplished during this health crisis. Yes, there have been countless meetings where we looked at each other around the table with shrugged shoulders wondering "Who knows?" What's the best plan in this unprecedented situation? But there have been just as many conversations filled with excitement as new plans come to fruition and goals are achieved.

Since its very beginning, Victory Programs has grounded its work in harm reduction – meeting people where they are with individualized services that focus on their strengths and support them in making life-sustaining decisions. Forty-five years ago, harm reduction was a hotly debated and often maligned approach. Having pieces of that theory and practice become mainstream is remarkable. Hearing the benefits of a harm reduction approach at the State of the Union... well, that's just amazing.

But we've stepped into deeper water, taken on bigger challenges, and we've done so with persistent, albeit often tired, spirits.

In November, we opened new transitional housing for 41 individuals exiting the encampments at Mass. & Cass. It is a beast of a project that has challenged many of us at every turn. But it has also been glorious to watch.

Victory Programs has used the tagline "Health, Housing, and Hope" for many years. This project confirms that these three components are inextricably linked. Watching individuals settle into their new space; watching staff settle into their roles; watching delicate and daring changes starting to emerge – it's powerful stuff. Individuals are hesitant to sleep in the beds out of fear that they will "become soft," that they will forget how to live on the streets. I had a conversation with a man who just could not believe that his stay would be for more than two weeks.

But, as the pandemic has reminded us, hope can be collective. One of the primary functions of every person who works in that building is to hold true to that statement. They demonstrate and encourage hope. Isn't that what we all need sometimes? Someone to come alongside us and buoy up our own fledgling feelings of hope.



Every day I get to interact with people that motivate and impress me. People who willingly lean into someone else's pain; people who create room in their beings to absorb the needs of another, people who work hard to provide access to judgment-free healing. The staff doing the work are extraordinary.

Friends of Victory Programs, we thank you for your support always, especially over the past few years. You have made a significant difference in the lives of those seeking change and those partnering with them to find it.



Please consider making a gift to Victory Programs to ensure that families and individuals in crisis can continue to turn to us for housing, health, recovery, and hope. Scan the QR code or visit our website at www.vpi.org to make a cash donation and to view our full In-Kind Wish List.

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Cynthia stayed at LARC for three months and moved her way through a few of our programs, graduating each one. "My time with Victory Programs opened up a lot of doors for me and they still are. I want to be a motivational speaker. I want everybody to know that they can still live, you know? Life goes bad for you, but you can still have a positive attitude and it'll be okay," she says. "I'm not gonna let nothing defeat me today because if I do, that can make you go use. I'm not there today. I know Victory Programs saved my life and I can call them any time."

Cynthia is determined to find the silver lining in all aspects of life. "My doctors don't believe all of the things I've been through," says Cynthia with a loud laugh, "and yet I'm still a happy-go-lucky person. I'm just grateful to be alive, but I have my days." And on those bad days, Cynthia finds solace in quality time with her family.

“Back in the Swing of Things” at ReVision Family Home

Rosemary Panzner, Program Director at ReVision Family Home, is a world-class juggler. It's impressive how many balls she can keep in the air. While conducting this interview, Rosemary, who oversees this emergency family shelter for homeless pregnant women and women with children, was working the front desk, answering phones, taking on the role of case manager, and greeting moms and their kids as they came through the door. Amazingly, and not surprisingly, no balls were dropped! She also simultaneously managed to speak with us about how the program got through these last two stressful years and what the future looks like.

While considered an “emergency shelter,” ReVision Family Home is just that – a Family Home. And it's one of three Family Homes operated by Victory Programs, all providing stays of up to two years. While with us, residents receive case management, family benefits screening and enrollment services, financial capability services, and job development. Residents work with a dedicated Rapid Rehousing Specialist and can receive short-term rental assistance. Intensive case management is provided for up to 12 months after families transition to permanent housing. Last year our Family Homes served 187 mothers and 101 children under the age of 18.

Right now, all of the children living at ReVision Family Home are under the age of five – too young to be enrolled in school. During the pandemic, when daycares were forced to close their doors, the kids in the program had to stay in the house. Without any volunteers to help with childcare due to COVID protocols, the moms needed to stay with their children. If they were working or taking any classes, it was all put on hold. “During the worst parts of the pandemic, we had to get really creative,” recalls Rosemary. “We did a lot with the families, providing them with activities that they could do with their children, especially during the day. The kids could still get that developmental piece that daycare provides, which is so important.”



Rosemary Panzner, ReVision Family Home Program Director



Revision Family Home kids had a great time decorating Halloween pumpkins at ReVision Urban Farm – just one of the many activities created to give families a chance to have fun and spend quality time together.

Two years later, Rosemary and her team at ReVision Family Home are still doing what they can to ensure that all the moms in the program can accomplish their goals – like Jacqueline, who gave birth at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic. Since moving into ReVision Family Home in February 2022, she's been focused on securing her own place, completing her GED, and finding a job to support her baby.

“The best thing now is there are new ways to do things,” says Rosemary. “Previously, doing things like ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) classes, they had to go in-person. Now they can do them over Zoom. They can do things like that. There are more job opportunities that are work-from-home. Having those options when the children are sick or they don't have daycare yet has been really beneficial.” The new virtual world has really helped Madiane, a resident since February 2022. She is able to continue taking her ESOL and CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) classes online so she can be there for her child.

Rosemary, the rest of the staff at ReVision Family Home, and the residents are easing back into how things used to be. “We're making sure that we're providing really great workshops, bringing in outside presenters, and having the Horizons for Homeless Children volunteer Pals come back to spend time with the kids which is awesome. Some of our moms can get a break,” Rosemary told us.

And she added, just before answering another call, “Right now, we're just trying to get back in the swing of things.”



Victory is Just Around the Corner!

A Thank You to Our Funders

Victory Programs relies on the generosity of numerous corporations and foundations to support our mission, and we are extremely grateful for their partnership and visionary approach to philanthropy. Support from private and corporate foundations is key to both sustaining and expanding our programs; it also allows us to improve and innovate.

Here are some foundation funding highlights from this past fiscal year (July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022) which also demonstrate the variety of support that we receive:

- **The Anna B. Stearns Charitable Foundation** awarded a \$10,000 grant to support our efforts in strengthening the education, independence, and/or socioeconomic stability of the women and children at our Family Homes which provide two-year stays for homeless mothers and their children and for pregnant women.
- **Gilead Sciences** awarded a \$47,500 grant which has enabled us to enhance our work in the following areas: racial equity/inclusion, board governance and diversity, human resources department analysis and improvements, and social media, marketing, and communications.
- **Life Science Cares** chose Victory Programs as a new LSC Nonprofit Partner, awarding a \$50,000 grant for a new program to serve those experiencing homelessness at Mass. and Cass. LSC will also leverage life science companies and their employees to volunteer and provide their expertise.
- **Patrick J. McGovern Foundation** awarded an unrestricted \$150,000 grant to support our existing health, housing, and prevention services, and new initiatives like our low-threshold transitional and permanent housing programs.
- **RIZE Massachusetts Foundation** awarded a \$5,000 grant to underwrite the purchase of a wide array of harm reduction supplies for our Mobile Prevention Team.
- **United Way of Massachusetts Bay & Merrimack Valley** awarded a \$20,000 Family Fund Grant which will support grocery and Visa gift cards, public transportation cards, and short-term housing assistance for the clients in our family shelters, low-threshold housing programs, residential recovery programs, and for use by the Mobile Prevention Team and the members of the Boston Living Center.
- **Macy's and Walgreens:** Macy's donated \$15,000 in gift cards which were used to purchase essential items (kitchen appliances, linens, etc.) for our new low-threshold permanent housing programs and were also distributed to clients during the holiday season. Walgreens donated \$3,000 in gift cards which are being used as incentives to engage clients in our Mobile Prevention Team services and our Boston Living Center programs.

Build Harm Reduction Kits with the Mobile Prevention Team

The mortality rate of unsheltered adults in Boston is 10 times that of the general population. Across the state, six people die every day as a result of opioid overdose. Our Mobile Prevention Team is on the streets and at shelter and day programs distributing harm reduction kits that help keep people alive. From naloxone to first aid supplies and hygiene products, these kits are essential for ensuring that individuals can remain safe until they're ready to access the support and services they need.

You can help our Mobile Prevention Team by volunteering to build harm reduction kits! Shifts are Mondays from 12:30 pm to 3:30 pm and Wednesdays through Fridays from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm. Volunteering a couple of hours of your time can help support our Teams' life-saving services.

Email volunteer@vpi.org or call (617) 318 3434 ext. 147 to schedule your shift today.

Help our ReVision Urban Farm Grow!

Victory Programs' ReVision Urban Farm is a small slice of farmland in the heart of Dorchester with a big impact. Our Farm team, through forward-thinking and innovative approaches, figured out how to utilize and maximize every square foot of the land. Even though we are small, we are mighty. And our Farm team is always looking for volunteers to help us grow and provide access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food to residents of our ReVision Family Home and to our extended community.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN HELP:

Seedling Sale: Stop by the Farm on May 14th to purchase our easy-to-grow, high-yield seedlings. Visit our website and download our 2022 Seedling Catalog to see this year's offerings.

Find Us at Local Farmers Markets: We sell our fresh vegetables, herbs, and flowers directly at the Roslindale Farmers Market, 4236 Washington St, Roslindale, MA 02131, every Saturday, June to November, 9 AM to 1:30 PM. We hope to add more farmers markets as points of purchase. Follow ReVision Urban Farm on social media for updates.

Volunteer: Individual and group volunteer opportunities vary with the season – from preparing growing beds in the spring to harvesting in the summer and fall. Shifts are Mondays – Wednesdays and Fridays from 9 AM – 12 PM and 1 PM – 3:30 PM, with the option to sign up for the full day.

To learn more about how you can keep our ReVision Urban Farm growing, email volunteer@vpi.org or visit www.vpi.org/revision/.



@ReVisionFarm



@ReVisionUrbanFarm



Staff from Rockland Trust spent the day volunteering as part of their Let's Do Lunch! Sponsorship.

Let's Do Lunch!

At the Boston Living Center, we believe that food is medicine. Please consider a Victory Programs' Let's Do Lunch! Sponsorship. Your company, organization, or community group can underwrite nutritious, free breakfasts and lunches for Boston Living Center members, the vast majority of whom depend on the BLC as their primary food source.

Many thanks to our current Let's Do Lunch! Sponsors:

- Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center
- Boston Medical Center
- Gilead Sciences
- Rockland Trust
- Tito's Handmade Vodka
- Donald Vaughan and Friends

For more information about Let's Do Lunch!, please contact Corporate & Community Engagement Manager Eve Rabinowitz at ERabinowitz@vpi.org.

Addressing the Continuing Crisis at Mass. and Cass

In January, the City of Boston dismantled the homeless encampments in the Mass. and Cass area with the goal being that everyone “evacuated” would be offered supportive, low-threshold housing. Victory Programs is pleased to be playing a crucial role in this effort: With city, state, and private support, we opened a low-threshold transitional supported living program at the EnVision Hotel in Jamaica Plain for people coming directly from the streets and two low-threshold permanent supported housing sites for recently homeless individuals. These programs are operating at full capacity and the residents are making progress towards stability.

Understandably, people have been asking us if the crisis has been solved. While the new housing solutions have been a lifesaver for many, our Mobile Prevention Team is seeing the number of homeless individuals at Mass. and Cass returning to levels seen in early fall of last year.



On March 10th, we hosted a virtual roundtable to highlight our new low-threshold housing programs and to speak about solutions to the public and humanitarian crisis unfolding at Mass. and Cass. It proved to be a powerful discussion with three program staff addressing what it takes to help people exit street life. We encourage you to scan the QR code or visit our YouTube Channel ‘Victory Programs’ to watch this video.

Meanwhile, as Victory Programs grows to meet the urgent need, keep in mind the words of panel participant Rich Baker, Mobile Prevention Team Program Director: “It is going to be a very long trajectory resolving this crisis. Many of the individuals on the streets have serious mental health conditions, and there are significantly more potent drugs available to them as well... In short, a lot of complicating factors will continue to bring people [to Mass. and Cass]. But the more they can connect with others and with services, the better off they will be.”

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Email development@vpi.org

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Visit www.vpi.org to learn more or email volunteer@vpi.org

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The Doorway: Your access to Victory Programs news & information