



Breaking the Surface: A Lifeline with Victory Programs

Greg's story begins in his childhood neighborhood. Others saw where he grew up to be a dangerous place plagued by poverty and crime, but it was all Greg had ever known. "We lived in a drug-infested area. I saw a lot that a kid shouldn't see. But at the time, it was all I knew. I understand that I had a pretty rough childhood, but at the time, it didn't seem rough to me," he reflects.

Things started to change for the better once Greg met his grandparents at eight years old. Having never met his own father, he quickly developed a deep bond with his grandfather and found solace, stability, and guidance with every weekend visit. "My grandfather was my rock, I really looked up to him like a dad," Greg recalls with a hint of nostalgia. "He and my grandma instilled discipline and respect in me that I had never experienced before. That was something I gravitated towards and something I really held on to. Even at my worst, I did my best to hold on to that discipline."

A few years later, his mother's boyfriend moved in with his son. "I didn't have an older brother, so I thought he was so cool. I wanted to do everything he wanted to do, and unfortunately, drinking was a big part of his life," says Greg. So, when he offered 12-year-old Greg a beer, he accepted with no hesitation.

"I took to drinking easy," he admits. "For the first time in my life, after drinking, I felt comfortable in my own skin. I didn't care what everybody else thought about me." As a shy preteen, he struggled to be the confident man his grandfather taught him to be, but any apprehension was released once he began to drink. He says, "I was a social drinker until I was 17 years old. That's when my grandfather passed away. After that, my



*"...I came here, and I'm still here.
Now I can start to build the life
I've always wanted."*



Reflecting on the transformative power of community support, Greg says, "For the people that donate to help this place run and lay down the foundation for Victory Programs to help people like me, thank you."

drinking just skyrocketed. Alcohol wasn't about helping me come out of my shell anymore. I drank because I didn't want to feel the pain."

Despite his family's efforts to help him over the years, Greg cycled in and out of recovery programs, ultimately leading to periods of homelessness. He says, "I was missing that one thing, that key element. I did not want to give up drinking. I defended my right to drink almost to my death."

Greg likes to describe alcohol as a 100lb weight he is holding onto at the bottom of the ocean. "I know that my tank is running out of air and that I have to get back up to the surface in order to save my life. But I'm trying to figure out how I can get to the surface so I can live my life without letting go of that weight. It's just impossible," he explains. He goes on to say that there were times when he would let it go, race to the surface, and get the things he needed; however, he'd try to take that version of himself back down to the bottom of the ocean. But the weight wouldn't budge. It was one or the other.

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A Message from Sarah Porter, Executive Director

Larry Kessler, activist, advocate, and friend extraordinaire, passed away on February 1st. I am grateful to have crossed paths with Larry during his time as Program Director of the Boston Living Center (BLC) shortly after the program merged with Victory Programs. I often said it was a genius move to lure him from retirement to step into that role at a pivotal, critical time in the program's life. He was known. He was respected. He brought expertise and commitment to the efforts that BLC members needed and deserved. I dare say he saved the BLC.

I loved sitting with him in the lunch room, listening to his stories of the AIDS Walk, organizational change, pinching pennies, and caring for people that no one else would or could. One particular tale was about sitting outside lawmakers' offices at the State House, waiting to be heard about some



necessary legislation. He would take up residence on the ground outside their door and wait for someone to talk to him. "Don't let them ignore you," he would say. "Be willing to wait. Don't take no for an answer." When I asked, "What happened? Did you get what you wanted?" He answered, "No," and shared that he had gone home before the day ended. "Why?" I asked. "Oh, my back started to hurt." I loved that story. The humanity of leadership. The balance of personal and professional. The long, slow efforts that change requires. Larry's impact was undeniable. He transformed the BLC not just as a physical space but as a beacon of hope for those affected by HIV. His leadership saved lives, his encouragement bolstered employees' morale, and his passion inspired unwavering loyalty.

His funeral was a proverbial who's who of the HIV service field in Boston. In addition to the tears, there were countless hugs. I overheard many people ask about someone else's health, retirement, and next steps. It was a vision of aging activists—a team he recruited, trained, inspired, and loved. Nearly every single person is still doing similar work—making good trouble, pushing for change, and advocating for the needs of those whose voices are brushed over.

The very same week after Larry's passing, Victory Programs' IT system



upgraded, and I have never felt older. I've been told the new system is intuitive for the "younger generations." Perhaps that is true, but it has highlighted to me that I am no longer considered part of that younger generation.

As we navigate the shifting landscape of this post-pandemic world and the evolving demands of millennials and Generation Z, let us remember the lessons we learned from legends like Larry. His legacy is a testament to the power of perseverance, balance, compassion, and humility. Let us carry his spirit with us as we advocate for those whose voices are often overlooked, even when our backs ache.

Victory Programs Welcomes Support from Our Partners!



Patrick J.
McGovern
FOUNDATION

Victory Programs is deeply grateful for the unwavering support of our partners, The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation and Life Science Cares Boston!

The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation generously granted Victory Programs \$150,000 to assist in efforts to modernize IT infrastructure. This investment not only enhances our efficiency but also expands access to essential services, empowering the Victory Programs team to make an even greater impact.



LIFE SCIENCE CARES
BOSTON

Life Science Cares Boston has granted \$125,000 to support operational capabilities. This invaluable contribution not only fuels existing programs but also enables Victory Programs to launch new initiatives to better serve the increasing number of individuals and families in crisis.

Together with our partners and donors, we're building a stronger, more compassionate community where everyone has the opportunity to heal and thrive. Thank you for believing in our mission and joining us on this journey of transforming lives.



Empowering Change: Help Victory Programs Reach Our Year-End Goal

As we approach the end of our fiscal year on June 30th, Victory Programs stands at a pivotal moment in our journey to create positive change in the lives of those we serve. With your continued support, we have the opportunity to make a profound impact together.

As of March 2024, we have made incredible strides, raising 74% of our goal! However, there is still work to be done. Your generosity is crucial in helping to fulfill our mission to provide shelter, supportive services, and healing to those who rely on our programs.

We extend our deepest gratitude to all who have supported us thus far. Your contributions brought us closer to our goal and inspired hope in countless individuals and families.

As we enter this final stretch, we invite you to consider the following ways you can support Victory Programs in reaching our year-end goal:



- 1. Honor a Special Woman This Mother's Day:** Reflect on the influential women in your life! This Mother's Day, celebrate their strength, support, and love by making a gift in their honor or memory. Your generosity will pass on that love to the women and children we serve in our family shelters.

To make a gift in celebration of Mother's Day, scan the QR code or visit www.vpi.org. Be sure to include your honoree or next of kin's name and address with your gift. To have a personal conversation regarding your gift, contact Kelly Whalen, Chief Development Officer, by phone at 617-318-3434 x148 or email kwhalen@vpi.org.



- 2. Fulfill Immediate Needs Through In-Kind Donations:** Consider donating essential items through our Amazon Gift Registry to support our clients' needs, allowing them to focus on their journey toward stability and empowerment.

To see our programs' urgent needs and explore our Amazon Gift Registry, visit www.vpi.org/wishlist.

Together, we have the power to create lasting change and build brighter futures for those in need. Thank you for standing with us on this journey toward hope and healing.

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Throughout his life, Greg says there have been a few moments of clarity that have propelled him forward on his journey toward healing. But no matter how hard he tried to use the tools and lessons given to him, he'd find himself back underwater. It took a relapse while living at Victory House, one of Victory Programs' recovery programs for men, for everything to change.

"It was my first month here, the day of the Super Bowl," Greg recalls. "I snuck out to go to the store and I got me a beer. And then I got another one. And another one. And I kept getting more until the store closed. I took it too far, and everybody noticed I had been drunk." The next morning, Greg was called into the office. He was sure they were going to kick him out, but their response shocked him. "They said to me, 'What can we do to help you to make sure this never happens again?' And I almost felt like crying," says Greg.

Guided by the principles of structure and discipline instilled by his grandfather, Greg is embracing the holistic approach to recovery offered at Victory House. "I like to say this analogy about my earlier attempts at recovery. I had all the tools necessary to stay sober. The only problem was they were all still

in their original packaging," he explains. "I'd go to meetings, but that wouldn't work. So, I'd talk to my sponsor, but that wouldn't work. These people here [at Victory House] are showing me that it's not one thing that will help me. These pieces all work together to keep me on my path."

This compassionate approach marked a turning point for Greg, igniting a newfound determination to confront his demons head-on. "I realized that I didn't have to face this battle alone, and that gave me a glimmer of hope," he says. "Victory House is helping me look at everything differently. If I feel like drinking, the key is not to hide or block those feelings. I got to acknowledge those feelings and talk to someone about it, and they'll help me get through it... I'm taking it all in. There's a lot I'm learning here."

With each passing day, Greg takes strides toward a brighter future—one defined by sobriety, resilience, and unwavering determination. "I'm getting a late start in life," he admits, "but I'm grateful for how far I've come. I made that first small step. I came here, and I'm still here. Now I can start to build the life I've always wanted."

Volunteer at the Boston Living Center!



Are you ready to make a tangible difference in the lives of others? Step into action with the Boston Living Center (BLC) and experience the transformative power of service firsthand.

Volunteering at the BLC is more than just cooking and serving meals. It's about creating moments of connection, comfort, and joy, where everyone feels valued and supported. It's not just about the food—it's about the impact we make together.

There's no better feeling than knowing you've made a real difference in someone's day, and all it took was a nutritious meal and a warm smile.

Are you ready to make a meaningful impact? Volunteer with us today and be a part of something extraordinary!

Shifts are available Monday through Friday, with opportunities to serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

You can volunteer solo or with a group! A shift at the BLC is a great way for your company or community group to support Victory Programs while bonding with fellow employees or group members.



Scan the QR code to learn more, or email volunteer@vpi.org to schedule your shift today.

DONATE

Visit www.vpi.org to make a gift today. Questions? Email development@vpi.org

VOLUNTEER

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