

The Place with the Red Door

Victory Programs celebrates 50 years of service

Offering services, treatment, support and care for everyone who needs it is the backbone of this venerable organization. From young adults experiencing homelessness who are seeking support in an LGBTQ+-affirming space, to people experiencing substance use disorders and much more, the people at Victory Programs see a need and try to fill it.

The organization began as one small program all those years ago.

It was a safe space for men coming home from the Viet Nam war with addiction issues, feeling like outcasts in their own communities. It was a place where those with HIV could seek support and services. There was a small team of people with an even smaller budget, operating on a come-as-you-are model. In an attempt to spruce things up a bit, the staff painted the front door bright red, and the word spread: "If you need help, go to the place with the red door—they take everyone."

"And that is still who we are," says Victory Programs Executive Director Sarah Porter. "I regularly tell the story of how we began, opening Victory House in a brownstone in the South End. And it's still operating there today."

Figuring how to get services to people who need them is what they started with, and it still rings true today. "We're so proud to have held onto that model over the course of 50 years, through all kinds of political environments—not just federally but on a local level too," said Porter. "Boston has gone through so many changes, but we have remained consistent."

The fact that Victory Programs has had only four leaders in its history probably has a lot to do with that. There were the two founders—Ted Cantone and John de Miranda—and then Jonathan

Scott became CEO after having been an intern under those two founders. He stayed for 43 years, with Porter coming on when he left.

"That's a small legacy under a very large legacy," said Porter.

Today, the organization has dozens of programs, centered on helping individuals and families experiencing homelessness. The wrap-around services include help with substance use disorders, chronic health issues like HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C and mental illness. The team is committed to helping people regain their health and restore their hope through immediate access to safe and stable housing.

Marking half a century

There is so much to celebrate!
Don't expect a gala event, however. "Our events tend to be community-based,

grassroots events," explains Porter, "so we won't have a speaking program—no clients telling their moving stories or anything—just a party for our community. With dancing and drinks." (There will also be hors d'oeuvres, mini plate stations and desserts.)

The event, to be held on November 6, is about celebrating the history of Victory Programs within the fabric of Boston, and honoring the many path-builders, going back to the origins. "Naturally," smiles Porter, "it is a fundraiser, because any time you put more than two people in a room, and you don't ask for money, you're missing out."

There may be no speaking program at the event, but it's not that they don't have moving stories. Porter recalls in particular a woman they met 18 months ago. "She was sleeping in the airport. We helped her get services and a shelter bed. Today, she is moving into permanent housing, and—get this—she has a job at the airport."

In the works

Celebrating 50 years of anything is a big deal, and Porter spoke of celebrating hope. "So many of the people we work with are being targeted by executive orders, being scapegoated more than they've ever been. Stigmas are just blowing up all over the place. But we're here to say that hope still matters. It's alive and well here, and that feels really important."

The organization purchased a hotel in December, to use as a shelter for those individuals who, for one reason or another, couldn't be in the shelter system. So far, they have sheltered an impressive 350 people, but finding permanent housing for those individuals will be challenging. Not surprisingly, the staff has come up with an idea, to turn the hotel from a shelter model into permanent housing. Stay tuned to see how they make that into a reality.

And so the Victory Programs team will continue to find solutions to new problems as they arise. As long as there are people in need, there will be a need for Victory Programs. ■



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