



NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

EDUCATION | SUPPORT | EMPLOYMENT | HOUSING

Gifts of Hope

Center helps vet move beyond past of abuse and alcohol

"With demands for services continuing to rise, Wicked Local has designated the nonprofit as this year's recipient of its annual Gifts of Hope fundraising campaign."

The second in a five part series of reports being published in December in local papers throughout Greater Boston, Gatehouse Media and www.wickedlocal.com selected the NECHV as the 2012 recipient for the "Gifts of Hope" features.

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Barbara Barnes, a homeless veteran got help from the New England Center for Homeless Veterans in Boston

WICKED LOCAL **NEWTON**
WITH NEWS FROM THE NEWTON TAB

By Dave Eisenstadter
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Boston — Barbara Barnes never expected to be homeless.

Approaching the New England Center for Homeless Veterans on Aug. 31 in downtown Boston, she wasn't sure she could walk through the door. Only the fact that she had kept herself sober for six years gave her the confidence she needed to step inside.

Utilizing the discipline and organization she learned during her time with the military and aided by the support network of the center, Barnes searched for the next three months and found herself an apartment. Soon, she will move in and hopes to be on her way to finding employment.

"What the center has done here, it's like the nucleus of a cell," Barnes said at the center's headquarters at 17 Court St. "They directed me to organizations outside of the shelter as well as inside, and I've been able to get housing."

The New England Center for Homeless Veterans, the focus of this year's Wicked Local Gifts of Hope fundraising campaign, helps out 1,000 veterans such Barnes annually.

A career of drinking

Barnes described herself as nerdy growing up. Her father was an accountant, she got good grades in school and at church she played the organ.

But beneath the surface she struggled with painful trauma – she was molested by a close family member at age 6 and was raped in college at a fraternity party. It was in college at the age of 17 she began to drink.

"I was a blackout drinker from day one," Barnes said. "It took the issues I was really struggling with and they just floated away."

That began what Barnes called her "32-year career" of drinking. During that time, her addiction to alcohol and pattern of getting into abusive relationships had an effect on every aspect of her life, she said.

Following a divorce in 1984, she joined the Air Force, which added some discipline to her life. She was in active duty from 1984 to 1986 and served in the reserves until 1990.

"It was an experience that forever changed a lot of my life," Barnes said. "Everything had to follow a streamlined process and I learned to organize. I was a wizbang at that."

Barnes found the Air Force intellectually stimulating and it caused her to reflect on the nature of sacrifice. She was present during military funerals as part of the honor guard. Her work duties included working for the legal department and making sure each person had completed a last will and testament.

While she never had to serve in a war – her discharge came just a month before the 1991 Gulf War – she assumed leadership roles and learned of the camaraderie of the military. "You're trained to be a cohesive unit and watch out for one another; you don't leave a friend whatever the case can be," Barnes said.

But in the years after her discharge, alcohol abuse plagued her life. She lost custody of her children from a second failed marriage, leading to her drinking even more heavily, she said.

A turning point

It wasn't until 1996 that she tried to get help, being hospitalized for depression, and even then she relapsed.

Her mother had paid most of her expenses.

"She and my dad, they were always there for me paying the bills, which is not a good thing when you're an alcoholic," Barnes said. "It was enabling."

At first, the alcohol would seem to offer a sense of relief, but her problems resurfaced. Eventually, there was not enough alcohol to chase away the overwhelming thoughts of her life's traumas and troubles, she said.

During a night in March 2006, she had a turning point.

"I went out to drink and I didn't even want to come back," Barnes said. "I went to the bar, started drinking and woke up in my apartment and didn't know how I'd gotten there. I drove home, obviously.... I just dropped to my knees and said I have to change."

Her mother had died in 2001, and she decided then she would never ask her father for money again even though she had no other way to pay rent, she said.

But she was able to get help through Veterans Affairs.

"I came to the VA through AA," Barnes said.

Barnes didn't know that her service as a veteran entitled her to help from Veterans Affairs; she had believed it was only for those who served in wars.

The VA office in Charleston, S.C., where she lived, was small and did not offer the services she needed, so she came up to New York City and eventually made her way to Boston. She spent months in a substance abuse recovery program through Veterans Affairs.

"The key to sobriety is acceptance; the key to ending my homelessness was acceptance. I spent my whole life with people giving to me and I never did know how to take care of myself," Barnes said tearfully.

Getting help

Her recovery has been progressing for six years, but during the summer, she quit her job to move to Tennessee to be with her ailing father. He passed away in September.

Homeless again, she came back to Boston for help, and found the New England Center for Homeless Veterans.

Immediately, she was introduced to Daniel Leonard, her clinical case manager. Given that many veterans come to the center with mental conditions including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the Center offers clinical and mental health services.

"For Barbara, who was coming off of her grief when she came here, it was important for us to let her know this is a safe place to let some of that out and to come to terms with that grief versus dealing with it alone," Leonard said.

With homelessness of any kind, the issues that caused the homelessness must be addressed first, Leonard said. As such, clients with addiction issues are immediately placed in treatment programs. The Center is an alcohol-free building, he said.

Above all for Barnes was the safety she felt in the building. The Center houses and serves many more men than women, but the women are together on a secure floor, she said.

Beyond safety and shelter, the Center offers three meals a day and AA meetings almost every night. Barnes only had one suitcase of clothes when she returned to Boston, but she was able to get more clothes from the Center's clothing room.

"Everything I'm wearing today all the way down to the shoes I got here," Barnes said. With those basic needs in place, Barnes was able to turn her attention to the important task of finding her own apartment, something she completed in the relatively short span of three months. She worked from 8 to 5 every day, searching Craigslist and making calls until she had secured a place.

For others with less experience than Barnes, the center offers job skills courses and works to get veterans into classes at Bunker Hill Community College in Charlestown.

And on top of all that, Barnes said she liked the camaraderie felt in the building. Veterans tend to work well with one another, and she described the mood among those who use the Center's services as very supportive.

Stephen Cunniff, director of community affairs for the Center, said most veterans are with them for less than two years and less than a year is average. After they go out in the world, the Center stays in contact with them for the following year.

"There is follow up," Cunniff said. "On Thanksgiving Day there were a lot of alumni, I call them, who came back for the meal."

Barnes said she was happy to be moving on to the next stage of finding a job and becoming even more independent.

"It's been a great experience," she said. "What the Center has helped me to do is become stronger and more confident. I've grown leaps and bounds. I can feel it inside."

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How you can help

You can donate money to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans.

Send a check or make an online donation. Check may be mailed to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans, 17 Court St., Boston, MA 02108 ATTN: Gifts of Hope. Or visit www.nechv.org or call 617-371-1882.