



HOUSING ACTION

Village Revealed | A Resident's Journey | Harmony Forever



Everhart Village opens

by **Melissa Daugherty**

Speaking at the Open House celebration for Everhart Village in December, CHAT co-founder Bob Trausch reflected on the past decade of efforts that culminated in the build-out of the new facility, which was constructed with the capacity for 20 villagers to live on-site.

“We were learning all through this process how to build our ability to work with people with mental illness,” said Trausch, Vice President of CHAT’s Board of Directors.

Part of that education was understanding how homeless people with mental health diagnoses face extensive barriers, such as losing (or theft of) their medication. Often, they end up in jail or the hospital, he said.

Trausch and other CHAT co-founders visited places like Seattle, Wash., and Eugene, Ore., to learn how those cities were helping homeless individuals. There, they met with community stakeholders to learn best practices to bring back to Chico.

The result: A plan that eventually would be called Everhart Village.

Created in partnership with Butte County Behavioral Health, the facility is specifically for people with mental health diagnoses who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Such individuals are among the most difficult to transition off the streets.

Everhart Village was designed to provide participants with safe emergency shelter and

(Continued on page 2)



wraparound services conducive to mental and physical wellness while working on the goal of permanent housing.

In addition to receiving lodging, food and enrichment programs, participants are offered case management, education services, life-skills training, job training and employment assistance. Meanwhile, county Behavioral Health professionals provide mental health services.

For the villagers, the combination of having their basic needs met and simultaneous access to services is the key to accessing long-term housing.

The concept of the village was developed by CHAT Social Services Director Amber Benedict. It was her grad project while she was attaining her master’s in social work (MSW) at Chico State.

CHAT staff have conducted extensive research to locate similar programs in the nation, but they’ve found nothing as comprehensive in a single location. As such, Executive Director Nicole Drummond thinks Everhart Village could serve as a model for other regions.

“It’s exciting to not only help people in Chico, but also potentially other communities searching for solutions to chronic homelessness,” she said.

Drummond said construction could not have been completed without the donations and volunteerism of CHAT’s amazing supporters.

“They truly believe in the potential of Everhart Village to be a life-changing program for people who are unable to access other available solutions,” she said.

CHAT co-founder and Board President Leslie Johnson concurred.

During the Open House, Johnson also reflected on the past, giving credit to the late Dan Everhart, for whom Everhart Village is named. She recalled his insistence that something be done to help people suffering through a particularly brutal winter a decade ago.

Johnson noted that Everhart himself was a disabled veteran who used a wheelchair. His determination to overcome life’s challenges and help others was an inspiration, she said.

“I just like to remember Dan, because he did kind of get us launched and get us going on this path.”



Executive Director’s note

Homelessness is a complex issue with a multitude of contributing factors, and making a difference can seem daunting. The easiest thing to do is to view the man in the wheelchair sleeping in the bushes as someone else’s problem, or automatically blame him for his situation. Conversely, not looking away takes courage. Hearing stories of adversity takes courage. Helping people takes courage.

Indeed, it’s much more challenging to pause, listen, and decide that, collectively, we are responsible for creating the kind of society we want to live in. I’m talking about communities that decide everyone is worthy of having a safe place to sleep after medical bankruptcy, a violent encounter, climate disaster, or a mental health crisis. I dream of a place where people who are unable to meet their basic needs get the help required to lead rich, fulfilling lives.

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Here in Chico, CHAT is working to that end.

In our programs, people who have largely been discarded by society are rediscovering what it feels like to have a good night's rest. While housing is the first step, the wraparound services CHAT provides are essential for people to reach their potential as contributing members of our community.

This is true at Everhart Village, where we are honored to be able to move in some of Chico's most vulnerable individuals. The village truly is the culmination of the community coming together courageously to help those in need begin their healing journey.

CHAT creates opportunities for those who would otherwise be in shelters or on the streets, and we're able to do so because of the donations of our wonderful supporters. Fact is, we need help to sustain and grow our programs. Right now, with so many teetering on the verge of homelessness, our programs are more critical than ever.

Yes, at times the issue of homelessness is daunting. However, I remain hopeful. I'm inspired by the people who move from the streets to stable housing, as well as the CHAT supporters with the courage and conviction to help their fellow humans. Thank you for your contributions that allow us to continue this life-saving work.

-Nicole Drummond



Since becoming a CHAT resident last April, Tina has been recovering from the emotional and physical toll of being homeless for four years. The stability a home provides has been central to that recovery.

"It's helped me work through a lot of things," said Tina, whose name has been changed to protect her privacy. "I think I have a little PTSD from the streets, and it's just nice to have somewhere to go."

While reflecting back on her years being homeless, primarily sleeping in local green spaces, Tina used words like "scary" and "stressful." She recalled being severely beaten while sleeping in a park.

Though she felt helpless at times, Tina said she tried to stay positive. "I kept telling myself this isn't forever, and just tried to make the best of it out there," she said.

Today, Tina lives in a two-bedroom apartment she shares with a roommate. Her bedroom came furnished with a bed, desk and dresser—all donations from CHAT supporters—that made the space cute and homey. "It's my sanctuary," she said.

Among the many positive outcomes Tina has experienced is reconnecting with her family. She enjoyed spending the holidays with them, something she hadn't done in at least six years.

Tina said she's proud of herself for getting to this point. She's regained a little bit of confidence, and is continually working on self-improvement, as well as goals for the future. On that note, Tina said she hopes to someday work as a homeless outreach liaison.

Through CHAT, she has a Housing Support Coordinator who is there to provide guidance. As for how she feels about being a CHAT resident, Tina noted that it's unlike any landlord-tenant relationship she's experienced.

"The people are so nice," she said. "They genuinely care, and it's hard to find that." -MD

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**MARCH 31
2024**



Harmony Forever

CHAT resident Benson will never forget the day he moved into Harmony House seven years ago. It was December, and the temperature was “freezing cold.”

Having lived on the streets for the majority of the previous three years, Benson (pictured above) was exhausted from constant searches for places to sleep. It was a great relief to finally have a safe, warm home, especially in an idyllic old Chico neighborhood.

CHAT had just secured the residence for its master lease program, and Benson was the first person to move in. In fact, he named the residence Harmony House.

“I thought if there’s one thing I needed in life to survive, it was harmony,” said Benson, a longtime local activist whom readers may know from his efforts feeding homeless folks and advocating on their behalf at city of Chico meetings.

Benson is extra grateful for Harmony House these days, as CHAT closed escrow in February on the property. It’s a big deal for numerous reasons, according to CHAT co-founders Leslie Johnson and Bob Trausch, both of whom worked feverishly to fundraise money for a down payment.

The stakes were high after the owners told CHAT they wanted to sell the house.

“Everyone in there is low-income and rents would have gone up dramatically had someone else purchased it,” Trausch explained.

When Trausch and Johnson talk about Harmony House, it’s clear they are talking about a special place.

For starters, with eight bedrooms and four bathrooms, the Chico duplex has a large capacity. But more important, the home is a place where residents with mental health diagnoses are provided with on-site case management and other services that help them maintain housing stability.

In addition, there are social opportunities that, as the name implies, keep Harmony House harmonious. That’s by design.

“We create families,” Trausch said, noting that it’s not uncommon for people with mental health issues to lose touch with their biological family members.

Harmony House was initially the third rental house in CHAT’s master lease inventory, which has since expanded to include other homes under the banner of Harmony At Home, just one of CHAT’s permanent supportive housing programs.

Johnson and Trausch emphasized that CHAT ownership makes the home affordable. The purchase was possible only through public support, Johnson said.

“CHAT can only survive with the help of the community,” Trausch added. “It’s the community that’s keeping us alive.”

For that, they are incredibly thankful.

Benson echoed them, stating how relieved he is that the community stepped up to help buy Harmony House.

“I’m just grateful, grateful, grateful,” he said. “Every day I wake up, it’s another day of CHAT. Another glorious day.” -MD

CHAT would like to extend a huge round of applause to local middle-schooler Lily Tao (pictured), who organized a classical concert to honor the late Dr. Robert Bowman—the renowned local music educator, accomplished musician and CHAT benefactor. Thirteen-year-old Lily did everything from inviting the participating musicians and scheduling rehearsals to performing piano and emceeing the event.

“Music was his everything,” Lily told CHAT. “It was his life, and I’m glad we were able to commemorate him through it.”



All of the proceeds raised at the memorial concert were donated to CHAT. -MD