



# MERCY MATTERS

SUMMER 2020

## CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER *During The Pandemic*

When COVID-19 put us under stay-at-home orders, residents resisted being stuck in the house without leaving. Staff struggled with enforcing it, as women would sneak out early before case managers arrived. It's understandable; they're living with strangers under the stress of a lockdown. So we worked to get residents to follow our safety protocols, holding meetings to help them understand what COVID is, how it spreads, and why it's important to stay at home, socially distance and always wear a mask inside.

We now serve meals in shifts, with one person per table instead of four. We reduced the number of residents from 31 women to 22, along with seven children. Kids stay with their moms and use play areas as one family. All common spaces are sanitized regularly by residents as house chores, checked by staff to ensure all is done properly. We hold each other accountable, knowing that *"what you do affects me, and vice versa."* A few ladies have health conditions, so their areas need to be extra clean to keep them safe. We set up empty rooms for possible short-term quarantine in case someone gets sick, to isolate before moving to a city-run quarantine hotel. Thankfully, we have not had a single resident test positive for the virus, and we remain super-vigilant to keep it that way.

We are grateful for a \$40,000 grant received from a fund established by the City of Philadelphia to support



COVID-19 relief efforts. That assistance enabled us to purchase computer cameras so that women could participate in telehealth visits, Intensive Outpatient Programs, and NA/AA meetings via Zoom. The grant also helped with purchasing PPE, games and craft activities for residents, and child monitors for our moms. The city's Office of Supportive Housing and Office of Addiction Services have also been incredibly attentive to any needs we have had during these challenging times.

This has been a wake-up call to the women to accept the responsibilities of community living, built on respect, trust and interdependence. We constantly reinforce the message that this is all about mutual care: our staff caring for them, and them caring for each other and for us. We are in this together.

*Message from our interim*  
**PROGRAM DIRECTOR**



As the interim program director for Mercy Hospice, I can honestly say that this has been among the most challenging yet inspiring times I have experienced in my 23 years within Catholic Social Services (CSS). Having served as Assistant Director of CSS Homeless Services for four years now, I always appreciated the dedication and hard work demonstrated by our staff here. But it is amazing to see their commitment every day as we continue to serve women in recovery while quarantined together during a pandemic.

As precious as our residents are, my staff are just as important. We all go home to our families, and need to stay safe so that we can continue serving these vulnerable women. I am so proud of my Mercy staff, who pulled together and rose to the challenge. One day we heard that SEPTA buses would stop running at 1pm. Our second shift comes in at 4pm, and not all drive. Everyone scrambled to help staff get in and residents at treatment programs get home, on our phones calling Ubers until everybody was taken care of. They did the same later to get overnight staff here. Everybody pitched in to get it done, which shows how our staff thinks: *"This is our job. All hands on deck. We can do this."*

The racial unrest happening everywhere has also been a challenge. Our resident population and staff are diverse but mostly Black, so there was a lot of frustration and anger that required a safe space for people to talk and understand what they were feeling. Our goal for the short time that women are here is to create a sense of family and community, where mutual care and understanding are the foundation. Our staff have been trained in trauma-informed care, so they are always checking in on each other and our ladies, asking *"You good today? Need a break? How can I help?"*

Besides being confined to the building during this time, recovery from addiction is also a confinement from negative unhealthy environments while staying in places and relationships that keep you safe and whole. I admire women trying to be good moms while fighting the battle for recovery every day without the support of spouses or family that we take for granted. The other day, a mom wanted to take a shower, so I took her five-month-old son on my lap while working on my computer. There we were, me and him typing together, so mom could have some personal time. We are also doing things like movie nights just for our single women, who have their own needs for friendship and bonding.

I want to close by sincerely thanking all of you who faithfully support us throughout the year. I am moved by your generosity as I see your donations coming in each month, and want you to know that we work really hard to be worthy of the trust you place in us to support the ladies of Mercy Hospice. It's because of you that we can continue to help them choose a better life. Thank you and God bless you!

“*My goal for our women is that they believe they are worthy to be treated as ladies, and deserve the respect a lady should have, and that starts from within. I want them to walk out and be women that love and believe in themselves, to say every day: "I deserve better, and I'm going to choose better."*”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Renee Hudson-Small". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Renee Hudson-Small, MSW, Program Director

## I JUST FOCUS ON LIVING WELL TODAY

Sharon

CURRENT  
CLIENT

Sharon is 65 years young, and this is her second time at Mercy Hospice; her first was 20 years ago. Born and raised in Reading, Sharon attended church as a child and participated in gymnastics, choir, Girl Scouts, and dance classes. She recalls, *"I was busy all the time, but had no real friends, and suffered from loneliness and boredom. I felt alone in school and my neighborhood as a middle-class black kid. My father was a prominent dentist who provided well for us, but was emotionally distant, and my mother was a stay-at-home alcoholic. My addiction started there, seeing her drunk all the time."* She left for college and graduated from West Chester University with a degree in public health, then moved to Philadelphia and began a 20+ year career in pharmaceutical and medical services sales.

Her addiction started with alcohol, but at college she *"smoked weed to try to fit in"* and experimented with pills and acid: *"I tried everything except shooting up because I'm scared of needles."* Nobody knew she was suffering from an addiction, because her drug use never caused problems academically. But she had few friendships: *"I have led a lonely life for the most part. Three older brothers were never involved in my life. That's just the way it's been for me."* She stayed single, but had a daughter with a man she met in her mid-thirties. A few years later, her addiction worsened, causing her to lose jobs for excessive absences or suspicious behavior. She left her partner, got pregnant with someone else, and placed her child for adoption as an infant. Now 30 and 24, her daughters both live far away, and she only has a motherly relationship with the older one; *"my baby never calls me mom, I'm just Sharon to her."*

Sharon went to rehab a few times but says, *"I never hit bottom because I was always able to bounce back with my degree and work experience. I always had a source of income, even though that was deteriorating."* About 15 years ago, she moved in with a man who supported her so she stopped working, but continued to be active in her

addiction. Then a year ago, he was diagnosed with lung cancer and died four months later, and reality hit her: *"I didn't have money to both buy drugs and pay rent, so I decided it was time to straighten up and do things right. I was sick and tired of being sick and tired."*

*"Every day, I thank God. I just want to stay clean and sober and be the best person that I can be."*

After rehab, she was overjoyed to return to Mercy Hospice: *"This is an absolutely incredible program that gives you the opportunity to set your life right if that's what you want to do."* She was apprehensive being around other women with addictions, but quickly bought into the process: *"Since I've been here, I'm just so blessed. I feel 20 years younger, looking for a job again, and I know I'll get one. I'm going to intensive outpatient, and grateful to wake up every morning and feel good. I accept who I am and what I've done. I don't blame myself, I just look towards the future and focus on living well today."*







## I'M OKAY WITH MYSELF TODAY. IT'S A PROCESS...

Cassandra is 48 and grew up in North Philadelphia, one of three children of a single mother. Sexually abused as a teenager, she began smoking marijuana and drinking at age 16. After graduating from high school, she got pregnant and had a son, and started working with the Salvation Army and then Trevor's Place as a residential advisor. Her drug use progressed to crack-cocaine and drugs started taking a toll on her health and her relationship with her teenage son: *"I always took care of him. He always had a roof over his head. I was just never around to be the mother that he needed me to be."*

“*Mercy Hospice is a place to come to turn your life around. Mercy gives you hope, and brings life back into you.*”

She hit rock bottom a few years later when her addiction caused her to lose her home and nearly everything in it. She and her son entered a shelter for about a year and a half. When she finally got her home back, her son was of age to move out on his own, so she was left alone. Depressed and suffering from bipolar disorder and anxiety, she went back to drugs, hit rock bottom again, went into rehab and stayed clean for five years, only to relapse again. As she recalls, *"I would get high, but still paid my bills; it just gradually took its toll on me. I got sick and tired of doing the same thing and expecting different results."* She had had enough, checked herself into rehab, and then came to Mercy Hospice.

She has been at Mercy for four months now, and says that all of her previous efforts at getting clean failed because *"I wasn't ready to stop what I was doing. I was still playing, not sincere about it, I just came to get it together and then go back out there, only to do the same bad stuff again."* This time she came ready and willing to make a commitment to real change: *"When I came to Mercy, I had finally surrendered. I've shared about the things that I had never told anyone, stuff that you keep deep down inside. And I let the people here who know how to help me, actually help me. Whatever they suggest I do, I do it. My motto is, if I follow the rules, there are no rules."* She says that she learned she can't work recovery by herself, she needs the help of a sponsor and a home group, and most importantly, she has to work the program. She calls the staff *"remarkable"* and cites how they supported her when her ex-boyfriend died a few months ago: *"The staff were so supportive, they showed me love and told me if I ever needed to talk, just come to them."*

She has been able to reclaim a strong and healthy relationship with her son, and is confident about the future: *"I'm okay with myself today. It's a process, but I get up in the morning, and I don't complain, I'm thankful for the meal I eat and the shower I take. I know that if it wasn't for Mercy Hospice and the God that I serve, I wouldn't be where I'm at today. I pray every day to tell him how grateful I am to be alive."*

## I KNOW NOW THAT I WANT TO LIVE!

T'Lene

FORMER  
CLIENT

T'Lene is 34 and lived at Mercy Hospice for 7 months, until a few weeks ago. Born in Northeast Philadelphia, as a girl she loved art and singing in the choir. But smoking marijuana at age 14, she began cutting school and dropped out in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She began using opioids and cocaine, got arrested for theft at 15 and was sent to a residential treatment center in Pittsburgh. Upon return, she lived with her grandparents, but then went back to drugs again. As she says, *"I was reckless, running in the streets, doing whatever I could to buy drugs."* Overdosing multiple times and being saved by Narcan injections, she admits, *"I am lucky to be alive."* She lived as a prostitute in hotels, then moved in with a man and had two children. Still, she could not break her addiction and eventually returned to life on the streets.

T'Lene tried to get clean a few times and even got a job and returned to live with her mom, but always fell back into her drug habit. She says, *"I wasn't ready. I did rehab to show others I could, but was never serious about stopping, until now."* She hit rock bottom last year after sleeping in a car for three nights, checked herself into a crisis center and rehab, and then came to Mercy in December. She found the structure and encouragement she needed to focus on her recovery. As she says now, *"Mercy staff helped me so much, they're always there to lean on, talk to, and help you find a job or a place to live. I really grew as a person and learned coping mechanisms like exercise, prayer and reading my bible. This is my new normal."*

*"Mercy Hospice is a wonderful place to find yourself, grow and become that person you were meant to be. Mercy felt like home, where you are safe and get support and love. Mercy saved my life."*

After 10 months clean, she says this time is different: *"I know now that I want to live. I don't want to just exist. I have a real job getting a paycheck for working legally. It feels good to be me and to live the way that God wants me to live."* She is now in Sacred Heart residence, a long-term recovery house run by **Project Home**, is in daily contact with her 7-year-old son, Aiden, and hopes to regain partial custody soon. A baptized Catholic, she didn't go to church much, yet never stopped believing or praying to God. I feel like God was always telling me, *"T'Lene, this is not for you, you got to go home."* She says that Mercy was a big part of her journey home, to healing and recovery, and she can smile and even laugh again: *"I thank God every day for giving me the strength to get where I am today."*



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## I'M LIVING LIFE, AND I THANK GOD EVERY DAY

Lori

SUCCESS  
STORY

As she stands in front of a **Joy of Living** recovery house where she is now Program Director, Lori LaPorte proudly proclaims, *"I just share what I was taught at Mercy Hospice with the women I work with here. I brought what Mercy taught me into my life, and try to pass it on to others in recovery."*

Lori, now 49, recalls with sadness the drug use that started in high school and later caused her to drop out of Temple University. She married at 21, and her addiction progressed to heroin and cocaine by the time she gave birth to daughter Danielle. Amid half-hearted efforts to stop using at the behest of friends and family, she admits *"I had no desire to put serious effort into stopping. So I ran away and abandoned my sweet little girl."* Lori left her daughter in the care of in-laws and was absent from her life for 11 years. She lost jobs, friends, was homeless, arrested multiple times for possession and prostitution to support her habit. She would be locked up, released, and right back on the streets using.

*"I'm grateful that Mercy Hospice helped change the trajectory of my life. I found new life there. It all began for me at Mercy."*

That destructive cycle ended when she entered a Forensic Intensive Recovery program, which diverts people from prison into intensive rehab and recovery, and eventually brought her to Mercy Hospice. She recalls, *"I was brought in shackles by two sheriffs with just a prison laundry bag; they had to sign a body receipt for me to enter."* Lori feared she wouldn't stay clean in a less restrictive environment with more responsibility for her own recovery: *"For years I never thought sobriety was possible for me. I never trusted myself. But at Mercy, I could imagine my life without drugs."* She spent almost two years at Mercy, and calls her time there a true blessing, with supportive staff deeply involved in helping her to change her life: *"My case managers were like my cheerleaders. They knew I was 100% serious about not using drugs again. I felt safe enough to take the next step because*

*I wasn't struggling by myself. I did what they suggested, and they supported me and nurtured my goals."* While at Mercy, she reconnected with her 13-year-old daughter after more than a decade apart, and they now enjoy a close relationship.



Mercy helped Lori find an apartment in South Philly, where she still lives. She got a job at a local coffee shop and made good on her dream to go back to college. When she was featured in Mercy Matters in 2016, she had just graduated from Community College of Philadelphia. Since then, she has completed her Bachelors in Social Work and is now finishing her MSW at Temple University. Now a Program Director at Joy of Living, a recovery house much like Mercy, she says, *"I had been helped by so many people along my journey to sobriety, and I want to be there for others whose lives are like mine was. I want to be a part of that journey with them."* Lori enjoys a full life now, spending time with her daughter and family, achieving academic success, and serving as a volunteer in her community. She reflects appreciatively, *"I'm living life, and I thank God every day."*

# MERCY MATTERS



## Mercy Hospice

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### CURRENT RESIDENTS - Seanika and daughters Sahar (8) and A'la (5)

*"I love it here. **Mercy staff are very supportive and attentive** to our needs. I am tremendously grateful for them opening their doors to me and my children because I had nowhere to go. **I feel safe and comfortable here** and appreciate having good people who care about me to talk with about my challenges. **They let me know that I'm not alone**, and they have my back. I've been clean a year now, I'm doing well with my recovery, and I think it's only up from here."*

### WALK FOR RECOVERY!

Join Mercy Hospice to celebrate recovery and honor those who heroically battle against substance use. Current and former Mercy residents along with family and friends have been participating in the annual PRO-ACT Recovery Walks for over a decade as part of our observance of **September as National Recovery Month.**

This year, the Recovery Walks will be virtual, inviting us to gather in small groups to participate at our own time. If you want to walk at the same time as others, they recommend Saturday, September 12 or any Wednesday in September. For more information, go to our website [www.mercyhospicephilly.org](http://www.mercyhospicephilly.org)

Let's show our neighbors and the world that we are working together - **and walking together - to support those in recovery!**

### 3 Ways to Support MERCY HOSPICE:

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### MERCY HOSPICE *Mission Statement*

We are a **community** grounded in faith, mutual **respect** and support where women in **recovery** and their families can **heal**, grow and pursue **new beginnings**, on their way to self-sufficient and **sober** living.