



After the Fact | Restoring Community: Valuing Dignity

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host, The Pew Charitable Trusts: We're underground, right in the heart of Center City, Philadelphia. Is being here an important place to be?

Candice Player, vice president of outreach and special initiatives, Project HOME: That's right. We are not only at the concourse level, we're at subconcourse level. So, we're about four flights below ground.

Dan LeDuc: Candice Player is showing us around the Hub of Hope, where many of the people living on the streets of Philadelphia can get a shower, clean their clothes, eat a meal, get a medical checkup—and find a welcoming face.

The idea with so much of what Project HOME does is to meet people where they are, especially in street outreach. And the first iteration of the Hub was in the concourse because that's where folks were sleeping and wanted access to services.

Candice Player: And as you can see, this was a train station. You can still see the City Hall signs everywhere. The tiling out there is the original tiling from the train station. So from time to time, we will hear trains overhead.

Dan LeDuc: So that'll be some of the rumbles we hear in the background. OK.

This is "After the Fact" from The Pew Charitable Trusts, and I'm Dan LeDuc. This season, we are exploring ways that people come together to solve problems and build community. In this episode, we're in Pew's hometown of Philadelphia. The birthplace of America is an invigorating place with much to offer. But it also has the highest poverty rate of any big city in America. The Hub of Hope is run by Project HOME, which is showing you don't have to have your own home to have your own sense of community.

Sister Mary Scullion, president and executive director, Project HOME: When we first opened, it was in the Marin Anderson Recreation Center. It was a locker room of a swimming pool. That was the first initiative that we did as Project HOME. We didn't even call it Project HOME. We called it the Night Winter Shelter. We didn't have any real organization or formality.



Dan LeDuc: Sister Mary Scullion co-founded Project HOME with Joan McConnon in 1989. Over the past three decades, Project HOME has developed 22 locations with support services across Philadelphia and nearly 1,000 housing units. Its successes have gained national attention, with *Time* magazine naming Sister Mary one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Sister Mary Scullion: We did an organizational chart when we first started where people that were unsheltered were at the top of the organizational chart. And we reported to them. We formed a board of trustees in the very, very beginning where 50% of our trustees were people who were unsheltered.

Thomas Walker, former resident, board trustee, Project HOME: I met Sister Mary at one of these meetings. You know, I've heard her name numerous times through the hallways and what have you, but I didn't know who she was and she was saying certain things that I disagreed with. And she took it as OK, that's an idea. Let me see what I can do with that. I was amazed, you know? Cause I really never sat with an executive before. But I just fell in love with her because she didn't take my objections as scorn or anything like that. And from that point on, I tried my best to impress her. But that's what Sister Mary is, she's a stretcher of person's abilities.

Dan LeDuc: Project HOME changed Thomas Walker's life and he's not the only one. Wes Mitchell had found his way to a Project HOME residence, and like Thomas, onto its board of trustees.

Wes Mitchell, former resident, board trustee, Project HOME: When I first came out of state prison, I was completely homeless. I had burned all my bridges. I, I just saw everything bad. And the bottom line, I've gotten better because of organizations like Project HOME and the community. It was like every door kept opening another. Sister Mary has such a special talent of collaboration throughout the city. I mean, everybody's involved. And it, it has changed Philadelphia. It really has.

Dan LeDuc: Kristin Romens directs the Pew Fund for Health and Human Services in Philadelphia. She spoke to us about how the city is changing.

Kristin Romens, project director, Pew Fund for Health and Human Services in Philadelphia, The Pew Charitable Trusts: The facts that you hear about Philadelphia, of course, sort of first and foremost, is that it's the poorest of the 10 largest cities in the country. And, of course, this is an important factor. It shapes many of the challenges facing the city, but it doesn't tell the whole story. One of the interesting facts about Philadelphia is that it has a relatively low rate of people experiencing street homelessness despite its high poverty level. Now, in part this is because the cost of living and housing in particular is lower than cities like New York. But it's also because of the tireless work of folks from Project HOME and other organizations



who have really worked with people experiencing homelessness, and particularly those with serious mental illness.

Dan LeDuc: Well, Sister, you created a place called Project HOME. And I was always struck by the name because it's not about, as we know, just serving the unsheltered, it's the family. The home is sort of the beginning of community for everybody. Was that part of your intention?

Sister Mary Scullion: Yes, but it grew into more of an affirmation over the years, how vitally important home is. We made that name up. Joan and I, on a car ride going somewhere. Oh. What are we going to call the organization? That's really true. Well, I said, oh, what about home? H is affordable housing, O, opportunities for employment, and M medical care and E education. And it all worked out. It is funny, but that was a good idea. From day one that was absolutely strategic. And we see those four pillars, housing, education, employment, and health care, as the four really key things to prevent and end homelessness in the context of community. The vision statement, none of us are home until all of us are home, is also something that has stayed the test of time. That was a good foundation. I'm going to say that's God's grace, you know, when we really didn't know what we were doing, but we understood that much.

Dan LeDuc: You don't do a transactional approach to helping people who are unsheltered. How important was it to you from the very start to create a sense of community and the work you were doing as opposed to simply a warm place to spend the night?

Sister Mary Scullion: It was everything from day one. The engagement of people who are unsheltered, people who are sheltered, staff, trustees, volunteers, philanthropists, that by working together we come to a much more powerful result than by working in isolation. Also, in the work of Project HOME, I've seen the devastation of marginalization of people who are unsheltered and feeling invisible and how devastating that experience is. Importantly, it challenges me to see people, engage with people. And it's through each other's eyes, it's through relationship, when someone loves you, it enables you to do things you never thought were possible. One of our former residents said to me that Project HOME is not a distribution of services, but it's a process of transformation.

Music transition

Wes Mitchell: I'm formerly homeless. A recovering person with dual diagnosis.

Dan LeDuc: Wes Mitchell tells us more about his transformation.

Wes Mitchell: And at my darkest, I ended up in, in state prison, with bad behavior.



And it took a lot of work to overcome those feelings that I had developed. And, actually, it started with the prison chaplain. I remember actually physically when my cellmate wasn't there, I looked in the dingy mirror. And I asked my, I was like, are you really just one of those bad people? So, I signed up to talk privately with the chaplain and I finally worked my way up to that question and he was like, absolutely not. And those subtle things can help people. The chaplain, he looked deep and he woke that up in me.

And, when I first came out of state prison, I was completely homeless. I had burned all my bridges, the first bus I got on, I felt people were clenching their purse, or everybody knew, and that was really tough to deal with.

I was living, after released from prison, in this godforsaken shelter. They kept emphasizing recidivism. The first time I was able to go out, most of the cats went right, and that was toward North Philadelphia. If most of them are going right, I'm going left, literally.

And it didn't matter because as soon as I got a couple of good days, I refused the label of having mental health challenges. I was in complete denial because of stigma of mental health. I finally accepted it. I was in a behavioral health center, and I was going religiously, and at that place I heard about Project HOME. One of my group members told me about Project HOME and I was like, that can't be real. I went through a couple of the seminars offered through Project HOME and that was a huge door because Project HOME does so many things.

Dan LeDuc: And now Wes shares his story at schools and with people around the city.

Wes Mitchell: I tried to say to the children, I said, it doesn't matter how fancy your house is, that's not what's important. It's important that you have a home, that you have the good supports. And I, and I try to tell the children, that's what's given back to us is a safe place to get better. I've been in a lot of institutions and facility type-settings and it was always like them-against-us-type atmosphere. And that definitely separates Project HOME, it actually brings out the better outcome. One of our mottos in Project HOME is the beloved community. You don't know who is worker and who is recipient. And that's the beauty of it.

Dan LeDuc: Kristin Romens told us more about what makes Project HOME successful.

Kristin Romens: The uniqueness of Project HOME's approach is really to acknowledge that the barriers to stable housing are not just financial, but can be social and physical as well. And then they really work to serve the whole person. Also, the organization is really relentless in its outreach to those experiencing homelessness.



They're respectful of people's self-determination, but at the same time really committed to building an inclusive community where that self-determination can be expressed and also honored.

Dan LeDuc: That's what's happening at the Hub of Hope. Here's Candice Player, who we spoke with earlier.

Candice Player: The Hub has been in this space since January 2018. Before that, the Hub was actually in a 900-square-foot salon storefront, further in, in the concourse. It was just a seasonal program. So, the Hub in partnership with the Office of Homeless Services and SEPTA moved here to this space, which is about an 11,000-square foot drop-in center.

People can come in and get a shower, laundry, get clean clothes. To get a meal or to speak with a resource coordinator who can connect them to shelter or maybe a safe haven, which is a longer-term placement. The great thing about the Hub is that it also includes a medical clinic.

Dan LeDuc: Project HOME has really distinguished itself not just as a service provider, but as a builder of a community, right? And what is the role of the Hub in that community?

Candice Player: The idea is to provide a safe space, a dignified space where people are welcome. It really is that core mission of meeting people where they are. It's a program for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, but often we have people who come back with their keys and to say, look, I made it to the other side. And it's just such a triumph for them and for the team. And they might still have friends here. So, it's both a space to access services, but it's also a community space.

Dan LeDuc: You know this, there's surveys that show something like three-fourths of Americans worry that we don't trust each other. And you're dealing with people who are doing this through some really tough times. On a given day, how much trust do you have in each other?

Candice Player: Because we try to build a reputation for fairness, people know that's what they can expect. We open the Hub at six in the morning. Occasionally I have been foolish enough to walk from 17th and Callowhill to the Hub of Hope. I feel safer when I get to Dilworth Plaza, and I come down those stairs because I see people who I see all the time who are regulars and I know more or less how they are likely to respond. I do, I feel that folks in here, employees and not employees, have my back. And I felt that, I've seen it, I've experienced it.

Part of the mission statement of Project HOME is emblazoned on the wall in the reception area. And it says that we believe in the transformational power of relationships as the



ultimate answer to the degradation of homelessness and poverty. If you're coming from a genuine place of caring, there's something about that warmth. I'm not going to be Pollyannish and suggest that it is the cure-all, but to treat someone as a human being, I think is a powerful thing.

Thomas Walker: Being a person of the street, I didn't trust anybody; you know what I'm saying? I came up in gangs. I had what you would call a two-sided kind of lifestyle.

Dan LeDuc: Thomas Walker told us more of his story and how Project HOME changed his life.

Thomas Walker: One minute I was in school, the next minute I was in gangs. But Marine Corps straightened all that out. So, I went to straight and narrow from there. So, I owned my own little business at one time. And then I just started doing handyman stuff as I got a bit older. But, anyway, I got sick with Crohn's. Being a veteran, the VA didn't have a place for me that could take care of me at that cause I was under the weather, so to speak, so they contacted Project HOME. Project HOME actually specializes in chronic homelessness, which I had a history of.

Dan LeDuc: Project HOME defines chronic homelessness as living on the streets for a year or more.

Thomas Walker: I was living at a veteran's house, and they transferred me from there to Project HOME for in-house care. I waited for maybe a week or so and got called in and got a room there, and, but a week with Crohn's is a hundred years. I got accepted; got a case manager. She showed me so much affection and care cause my medication had to be refrigerated when it came in and sometimes, I wasn't there. I was at the hospital. She made sure that was happening. You know, OK, this is one person, this is. This is not a Project HOME per se. But as time went on, I started seeing that this was not just one person. It was a life-giving vine into people's hearts. There was so much love and care coming from the janitor on up. Everybody cared about you.

Dan LeDuc: Thomas had to undergo surgery while living in the residence, and he told us that Project HOME's support meant everything.

Thomas Walker: I couldn't do too much of anything, but there was always somebody at my door, I was never alone. On the day of my operation, my case manager, she went to the hospital—above and beyond. I'm a Marine, you know, it's like jumping on a grenade to me. And from there, I laid in recovery and thought about what I wanted to do, and Project HOME always came up first. Fortunately, there were groups in Project HOME that I could join, to help solve some problems of the community. Sister Mary does pay the bills, but the patrons run Project HOME. So I joined quite a few committees, I learned a lot of things that I wouldn't have learned if I wouldn't have been at Project HOME. At this particular time, I'm sitting on a



board of trustees, and dealing with our ongoing problem of homelessness. We've accomplished a lot of things.

Dan LeDuc: You were here at Project HOME and lived here for how long?

Thomas Walker: I left in 2015.

Dan LeDuc: So, you were here about a year. And after a life, as you said, on the street and in some rough circumstances. A year here prepared you for a new part of your life. How would you describe your life today?

Thomas Walker: My life is beautiful today. It's beautiful today. I've gotten married.

Dan LeDuc: Congratulations.

Thomas Walker: I really united with my family. This is not a script, this is real. I'll bring them in if you want, but Project HOME prepared me for that sort of responsibility.

Dan LeDuc: It's a powerful thing, building community to help people prepare for responsibility. We spoke with Annette Jeffrey, who leads development and communications for Project HOME, who told us more about how they do that and how they work to extend this notion of community to the rest of Philadelphia.

Dan LeDuc: This notion of community is really inherent here. Just in the few hours we've spent with you today, we can feel a sense of community that people in the hallways know each other. Part of your job is to extend that sense of community to the larger Philadelphia community and the national community. What is your goal in that and how do you do that?

Annette Jeffrey, vice president of development and communications, Project HOME: It's an invitation. I think that's the most important thing is to continue to invite, please come in, bring yourself right where you are right now, whether that is having experienced street homelessness, or being in a place where you really don't have any idea what are the causes of homelessness, but you want to be part of the solution.

Project HOME started at the very beginning as a partner in the work. So, everything that we have developed has been together with others. There are other tremendous organizations in Philadelphia also addressing this problem. So, we can say, that Philadelphia, though, it's the poorest of the 10 largest cities in the country, by far, we have the fewest number of people on the streets. So that is a testimony to working together, good leadership, and dialogue.

We have partners that help us build the housing. We have partners that help create welcome baskets when people move in. We have activities that we do on sites that people can host.



Bingo, gardening activities, and then the holidays are a great opportunity to do things together. So, we have people that bring in meals, come and play games, bring gifts, and we do that throughout the year. And then through the different activities, through our opportunities for employment, medical care, and education, we build in that community and the opportunity for people to join in. So those partnerships, to me, are a model for what can be done in every other city.

Sister Mary's fond of quoting Desmond Tutu when he said, "I'm a person because of other people." We become people through each other, and we see that happen every single day. When someone who moves in has had a long-term history with homelessness and they start to sense that someone's looking out for them, it brings back a sense of dignity that might have been lost at some point.

Dan LeDuc: What are your hopes for the future and what keeps you going in this work?

Annette Jeffrey: We know that homelessness is solvable. As a nation, we decided that we didn't want veterans' homelessness and we fixed it. It's resources, smart work, together in partnership. We have the model. With enough money, we could fix this. Every city could fix this. That's my hope for the future. People change their lives with the right opportunities. And that's what this place is about. And it keeps me going. It just keeps me energized and hopeful. And I can see someone at their lowest and see them just absolutely transform themselves. That just never gets old.

Wes Mitchell: My life coach challenged my schedule. I was going to a lot of groups and recovery meetings, and she was like, why don't you just try this candle-making? I was like, what? Candle-making? But you know what? It's what I needed. And the art director that ran it, she's the one that said, now let me challenge you. Try this art class, I said, I'm just going to go with a blank slate. And I was teachable, that saying isn't always true: An old dog can actually learn.

Thomas Walker: This is my first home. This is where my lineage come from. These are people that know me. It's like the grandparents' house. It's always there. You always want to go there. It's a place where you can say, well, this is where I was born.

Dan LeDuc: Let's give the final word to Sister Mary.

Sister Mary Scullion: Community is where people from all walks of life come together and are respected and valued and heard. It's the relationships that are built through the engagement and participation that helps to erase the lines, hopefully de-stigmatize and de-label people, and recognize that together we're one human family. Sometimes it's the simplest acts of kindness or just believing in someone when they have stopped believing in themselves.



Dan LeDuc: Thanks for joining us. We're continuing our travels and we'll be back soon with more stories about how communities are forming and strengthening and showing that, maybe, we've got more in common than we sometimes think we do. In the meantime, you can read more about what you've heard so far at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. Make sure you subscribe so you'll know as soon as we publish new episodes. And tell us what you think makes community special. Write us at podcasts@pewtrusts.org. Until next time, I'm Dan LeDuc for The Pew Charitable Trusts, and this is "After the Fact."