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Reconciling Former Prisoners with Society, and Society with Former Prisoners, Since 1986



Front Porch, Rutland Dismas House

Putt-Putt Fundraiser

In Memory of Francis B. McCaffrey

By: Geraldine Burke, Assistant House Director, Rutland Dismas House

Community comes together to remember and play together. This event is one of the many that Dismas Houses have a year. A beautiful sunny day was the backdrop for Rutland's first in person event since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. On Saturday, September 27, the Honorable Francis B. McCaffery Putt-Putt Fundraiser was held at Mendon Mini-Golf & Snack Bar. Rita McCaffery was there to spend time with everyone in attendance.

The Dismas community and its supporters, residents, and staff set off on the course for a round featuring a hole-in-one challenge. Players of all ages participated, and each left with a trophy and a gold towel souvenir. We are most grateful to the Hole Sponsors for their donations, the volunteers who assisted with set-up, registration, and clean-up. A special thanks to all of you who came to play. A fun time was had by all, and it was nice to reconnect after such a long and uncertain time.

This fundraiser will become an annual tradition here at Rutland Dismas House. The invitation to this event was sent to all of those for whom we have email addresses - in an effort to save on printing and postage. If you would like to receive an invitation in the future please visit our new website, where you can submit your email address and subscribe to our calendar to stay up to date with current event happenings within the Dismas community.

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From The Desk of the Executive Director

By: Jim Curran, Executive Director, Dismas of Vermont

Each time I sat down to write this piece, my mind kept circling around housing and homelessness. Recently I attended a training called Homelessness and the Continuum of Care 101. Having been a part of this conversation on housing and homelessness for many years, I thought I would be pretty up to date. Then the trainer asked, write four things that a home means to you. Naturally, I chose family, safety, stability, and shelter. We were then given three scenarios where we would have to give up one on top of another until one remained. Luckily, we got to choose. Family was what I was left with. At this point, I would be in survival mode. No safety, stability, or shelter. Doing whatever I can to protect my family. This brought me back to the understanding of why it is so difficult to get out of homelessness, how people get involved with the criminal justice system, and how it is challenging for many individuals to “get on their feet” post-incarceration. Never mind the lack of affordable housing, or any housing stock for that matter.

In this scenario, I am lucky. I was left with family. Many of those who leave the prison system either have no family left, or are no longer in touch with them due to things they may have done and/or what may be going on at home that would put them back at risk. Others have found themselves incarcerated due to substance use stemming from homelessness. As one resident recently told me, “When you are all alone in the dark, living in your car, you start to use [substances] just to not feel unsafe and alone anymore. There is no family to support you there.”



Let’s ask ourselves and communities how we can expect someone to be a productive part of society if our systems create a structure that doesn’t allow it in the first place?

This is exactly why Dismas exists, and why it works for so many people. The Dismas Houses provide the safety and shelter, while our volunteers, staff, and residents provide the family and stability. Dismas is truly a supportive community. We can do more, though. I am asking you for your help.

Did you know that prison is considered a home by the federal government, and those who are or are coming out of incarceration do not fit the definition of homeless? This adds additional barriers to housing supports and services beyond just those created by the stigma of being incarcerated. Write to your elected officials. Advocate for those who do not know how.

Did you know that landlords have more choices than ever of who they rent to? Let’s make those important connections. Help them understand that what makes a good tenant is not always about what they have done, but what they plan to do going forward and who supports them. Many of our current residents have a job that could afford themselves an apartment, but they just don’t have any options. Advocate for more affordable housing options. Let’s ask ourselves and communities how we can expect someone to be a productive part of society if our systems create a structure that doesn’t allow it in the first place?

Dismas and our residents, both past and present are so lucky to have your support in whichever way you can provide it. Thank you so much for being supporters and allies, and helping to fight the good fight.

[Click Here and Donate to Dismas of Vermont Today](#)

From the Desk of a House Director

By: Kim Parsons, House Director, Burlington Dismas House

I started working for Dismas after I returned from Central America where I was working for UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). Some of the dynamics in the refugee camps were similar to what I have seen with folks getting out of prison. People have been displaced and are getting out of jail without a community. Over the years, I have seen people arrive at Dismas House with nothing. They have made mistakes and are often alienated from family and friends as well as society. I have seen the transformation in people when they have a home and community at Dismas.

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I get to see people in the midst of important changes in their lives and witness the way that housemates and other Vermonters support them.

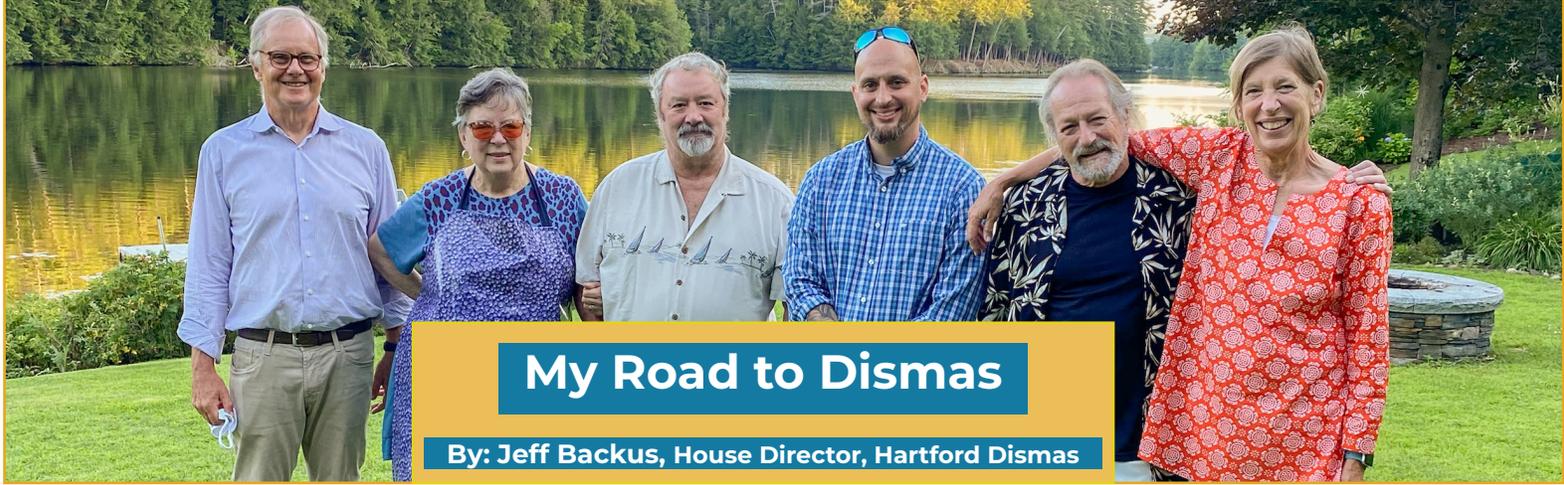
Here, it's about reconciliation and being a part of a community. There is nothing easy about ten adults living together but the Dismas community is a bit like being a part of a large family. There are very real moments of disagreement, laughter, hard work, and celebration. I get to see people who are being deliberate about their choices and wanting to turn their lives around. For some, it may be deciding to attend AA or NA meetings, and for others, it may mean daring to contact their loved ones again.

I get to see people in the midst of important changes in their lives and witness the way that house mates and other Vermonters support them. Some by volunteering to cook and join us for evening meals and some by offering other types of support. Dismas of Vermont is a grass roots organization that was started by Vermonters when they recognized a need. They were a group of regular people who understood that while folks coming out of prison had a lot of needs, the most fundamental need for all of us is to have a home and to be a part of something larger than ourselves - a community.

Follow Dismas. Stay Connected.

Click a Picture and Interact with Our New Website





My Road to Dismas

By: Jeff Backus, House Director, Hartford Dismas

I followed a unique career path that led me to Hartford Dismas House, which I am convinced is the place I'm supposed to be and can have the best positive effect on my community. In 2008, I was midway through earning my college degree and sought out to find a way to make the most money possible with a high school diploma – and that led me to finding employment as a Correctional Officer. I was young and had an adventurous streak so I applied to 26 different states and ultimately landed a position as a Correctional Officer at Pine Hills Youth Correctional Facility in Miles City, Montana. About a year later, I found that my home state of Connecticut was hiring Correctional Officers and I sought to return back east to be closer to family as I completely the application process there. Before any applicants in Connecticut were able to be offered a job, the state instilled a hiring freeze and I found myself stuck without a job. I shortly thereafter found employment as a Correctional Officer at Southern State Correctional Facility in Vermont in December 2009. From there I progressed up the ranks and ultimately became a Correctional Facility Shift Supervisor at Southeast State Correctional Facility in Windsor, Vermont in 2012.

In 2017, it became inevitable news that Southern State Correctional Facility would be closing and I utilized this opportunity to branch out my career in a different direction. At this time I was hired as the Assistant House Director at Hartford Dismas House and then promoted to House Director shortly after in October 2018 – where I find myself today.

The personal experiences that stand out to me while working at Dismas are both the necessity to build interpersonal relationships with the individuals we serve to best achieve a sense of community as well as the large learning curve I've had to overcome in understanding how the non-profit world operates.

With this in mind, in my time at Dismas, there are personal experiences that stand out, of which I will share one. In late 2017, Hartford Dismas House had a resident severely struggling with addiction relapse. It wasn't question of if it was occurring; it was a question of getting evidence that we could return this resident to jail – it was terrible. This resident had lost a lot of weight/muscle and was very clearly sleep-deprived. Paranoia had set in so badly that this resident wouldn't allow anybody else to raise the window shades out of fear of people on the outside looking in. During the nighttime he would sleep on the floor in the basement in a sleeping bag, in the pitch dark, so that nobody would find him. Dale White was new to the house at the time, and I vividly remember him shouting down the basement stairs, "are you okay down there?" And from the pitch black a voice responded "yeah, go away!". Ultimately, this resident had spiralled so out of control that he went on the run from supervision. He didn't get far, a few days later he was located, and promptly returned to incarceration.

Fast forward to 2021. I ran into this resident at a local White River Junction car dealership – and he looked great. He had clearly put on some weight (he looked healthy) and caught me up on his life, to including getting married and having a son. He even had his son with I'm and he was absolutely adorable. This former resident had recently received an award for being the top car salesman in White River Junction. He did not remember his time at Dismas like I did, he thanked me for the opportunity and support, and although he acknowledged some regression he still identifies his time at Hartford Dismas House as positive steps towards reintegration and a second chance at life.

I told you that story to tell you this one: very recently, after return from our camping trip on Labor Day weekend, we had some relapse issues to address. Staff had recognized that three residents had been staying up all hours of the night doing bizarre behaviors such as cleaning vehicles and cutting wood. Another resident even came to me with his concerns that these three had relapsed. The next day at house meeting, I made an open statement that this is generally a tough time of year for relapse with the changes in season and that if you feel you are struggling please see me privately for help before it catches up with you in a far more negative manner. The next day the three residents in question stopped me as I was pulling into the driveway and as a group described that they had talked amongst themselves and had made the decision to admit to a recent relapse and that they are ready and willing to accept treatment. All three residents are still living here today, all three are currently engaged in addiction treatment, and all three are happy with the decision that they made to come forward.

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The future of Hartford is continually adapting strategy. As we better understand the needs of the people we serve, we are finding better ways to fulfil our mission.

This scenario would have been unlikely to happen in 2017. The practice back then that regardless of being caught or admitting to relapse was to be subjected to an “appeal” at house meeting in which the remaining residents would make the unanimous decision to allow you to stay at the house or terminate your residency and you would be returned to incarceration. Although it was rare for an appeal to result in a return to incarceration, the threat was still there.

Long story short, our new adapted policies and procedures are working for the better.

The overall message of Hartford Dismas House is that we, as a community care about your well-being, even if you perceive that nobody else does or even have doubts about how you feel about yourself. We are here to do what we have to help you find success in multiple facets that will lead to life skills long term, long after one leaves Hartford Dismas House, capitalizing on a second chance at life with sustained success and a stronger community.

House dynamics is an aspect that I continually try to improve upon my understanding. Each group of residents carry their own inherent strengths and difficulties. We here try to finesse the group into identifying themselves as a community through our volunteer programs, social outings, and group volunteering. If it all goes to plan, a group of residents will find their full stride between 4 and 6 months, just in time for the group to turn over some and we can start the rebuilding process again. It always has been a very cyclical dynamic to manage, with ups and downs, but we’ve identified that the longer we can keep an individual out of the incarceration system, both the individual and the group generally benefit for the better long term.

With the pandemic, we lost out on a lot of time spent with our volunteer community and it was reflected in our residents. Of course this was compounded with mental health and addiction services going remote and DOC supervision being severely reduced which left our residents in an awkward spot. Without the familiar sense of community at Dismas, remote services, and increased pressure exercise true integrity – we went through some struggles adapting to the circumstances just as everybody else did during the pandemic. We never quite found the magic cure and we did our best and with the reintroduction of our in person volunteers in July 2021 it all changed for the better. Every Vermont DOC resident that was here when the volunteers returned, are still here today, and once again we have found our stride and sense of community.

The future of Hartford Dismas House is a continually adapting strategy. As we better understand the needs of the people we serve, we are finding better ways to fulfil our mission. We will retain what has given us our identity since 1986 – community dinners and building community. However, how we approach relapse and mental health struggles will always be evolving and as I described previously, I truly believe we are headed in the right direction.

Donate to Dismas Today!



[Click Here to Read a Resident Story](#)

A Focus on Our Residents

By: Jose Tollens

Our residents are important to us. Our donors, volunteers and staff allow Dismas to make a change in the lives of the less fortunate. Without the donations of people who care about our cause and see the hard work we do everyday we would not be able to continue in our mission of reconciliation.

Residents are the heart of Dismas and this is why we work hard to ensure that every resident has access to support and guidance. At Dismas we understand the strength of family values and sharing. Use our new website to read about how your donations make a change in the lives of our residents; understand the house dynamics and stay informed about upcoming events you can attend.

Dismas is a community, and its strength comes from everyone who believes in our mission statement. Help us help more residents become productive members of their communities by donating today.

Coming from ten years working in corrections and seeing the potential in some of the residents I worked with, this job came naturally for me. It appears my organizational skills are part of the main focus as well as my years in Corrections. So when my then Corrections Supervisor, Jeff (now my boss for a second time) asked for my assistance, I can honestly say there wasn't any hesitation to be part of Hartford Dismas House. Working with the residents has been rewarding, to say the least. Them knowing where I came from and me knowing where they have been sort of put us on a course that neither of us expected. We are working together for the greater good, which has been rewarding in itself. Seeing and knowing where they have been only serves to impress me with the hard work they put into adjusting to the community. They better themselves by accepting the assistance not only from Hartford Dismas House, but from our volunteers and community partners, this is definitely the bigger picture here. Acceptance, growth and knowing they have done well in their endeavors and knowing I helped to make that happen is better than I could have asked for.

Support at Hartford Dismas House

The Dismas community actually cares to see that you achieve and that gave me hope and changed my perspective on life. Dealing with Corrections and just getting out of jail with no job, or home to go to was difficult, but the support from Dismas made it doable. Hartford House is a positive and supportive environment that was extremely helpful in helping me maintain a positive outlook on my future, even when I thought there was no hope.



In jail your surroundings are cold, but coming to a place like Dismas feels warm and family like. To see the cooks and volunteers come to the house to make dinner and take time out of their own lives to help people made me feel special and seen.



Coming here shows you the importance of community. It is a place where, if you are seeking to take your life in a positive direction, they will support you. I learned that you need to be concerned not just for yourself but for the people around you. Being here, I learned how to care for others. When I was released from jail I was scared I would make the wrong decisions. Coming to Dismas gave me the foundation I needed not to make those same mistakes. When you get out of jail people look at you funny. When I'm here people don't judge me based on the past, but rather on my actions now.



At Dismas they recognize that people can change and I am thankful for that. If it was not for the support and resources this organization has given me I would not have been able to make better choices - I would have ended up in jail again.



Now I see the brighter side of life. I have died and been revived 6 times from overdosing and I'm truly lucky to be here. Luckier still, I have Dismas as a support system to help me start my new life. This is a good environment with the supportive structure residents need to feel included. It is the best program anyone who just got out of jail can use if they have made the pivotal choices to get help, be better, and be a productive community member.

The Dismas structure enables residents to be successful and I'm proof of it. This is the best thing that ever happened to me. I haven't done this well in my life in a long time. I struggled a lot and now, thanks to Dismas, I'm on my way to a better life.

New Staff at Dismas

Kaylee Rankin, Assistant House Director, Rutland Women's House

I joined the Rutland Women's Dismas House earlier this year as an Assistant Director. Prior to working in this therapeutic community, I graduated with a Bachelors in Social Work from The University of Vermont, I worked as a Preschool Teacher for the Rutland County Parent Child Center, and in adoption as a Post Permanence Service Provider at Lund Family Center in Burlington, Vermont. I volunteered at Dismas years ago during high school, and came full circle to work with them again, now. My passion lies in working with individuals that struggle with addiction and their mental health. Growing up in a family where addiction also lived, I hold this work near and dear to my heart. Bearing witness to the transformation of these women's lives is empowering.



Kaylee Rankin, Assistant Director

Cory Bragg, Assistant House Director, Burlington Dismas House

I recently moved to Vermont from Hickory, North Carolina, with my amazing wife. I have had a variety of different jobs and positions before joining Dismas. My resume stretches from being a Pizza Delivery Driver to Regional Director of a medical warehouse. My wife and I had always talked about moving to New England, and after getting engaged in November of 2020, we decided not to wait any longer. I have fallen in love with Vermont and have taken to the beautiful landscapes and communities. I recently took up hiking during the spring of 2020 and have taken happily to the trails and mountains that Vermont has to offer. I have also spent time as an actor. I have performed on stages in DC, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina and am excited to find opportunities in Vermont.

[Event Calendar Click Here](#)



Cory Bragg, Assistant Director. Playing a game of horseshoes with residents at the Hazelett Beach Barbeque.

I was drawn to working for Dismas House because of a strong appreciation for the mission. I believe whole heartedly that everyone deserves a chance to better themselves and that it is essential to do what we can to offer those chances. I also believe that, due to my varied experiences and skills, I will be able to provide a unique toolset to Dismas, and am excited to continue to grow within the organization.

Amy Manning, Resident Support, Rutland Women's House

I grew up in Middlebury, VT. I graduated from Castleton University in 2018 with a Bachelor's degree in social work. I had the pleasure of interning at Dismas House as part of my studies in 2017, and have worked on and off with the organization since. In my free time, I enjoy being in nature. Mostly hiking, and foraging for mushrooms, a recent hobby I've picked up. As someone in recovery for almost eight years, I can empathize with the struggles that women and men face when trying to reintegrate back into the community. For that reason, over the last few years, Dismas has become very special to me. The strong sense of community and support Dismas offers residents is unique and special, and is why I believe Dismas perseveres.



Amy Manning, Resident Support

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Community. Trust. Support.



The strong sense of community and support Dismas offers residents is unique and special, and is why I believe Dismas perseveres.

- Amy Manning

Samantha Shafer, Transition Coordinator, Hartford Dismas House

My story of arrival to Dismas stems from a place of passion. I love helping people succeed in life, and pre-Dismas days, I was a care taker for the elderly. In my free time, I would organize food drives, help the unhoused communities, and fight for better services for people who struggle with addiction, mental health, and homelessness in my town. I am a strong advocate for services over incarceration and I believe that every human on Earth has the ability to succeed. When I found out about the position at Dismas, I very nervously applied as I did not have much career-related experience. For me, coming to Dismas was a chance to turn my passion into a career.

I truly love working with the residents, seeing their excitement when something good happens, when they discover that there are people who care for them and want to see them succeed in this world. There is too much stigma around former prisoners, mental health, and substance abuse. I love being part of a community that works to end that stigma and show that underneath the rough edges we have a group of beautiful souls who are working just as hard as the rest of us to make it through life.



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www.dismasoftv.org