Linda’s Story

My trip to John Graham started after living in Bridport with my daughter at a house for farm workers helping run a farm. While I was there I became sick. I was really bad and could hardly walk. Once and awhile my daughter would take me to the store, but I pretty much just stayed on the farm. I had lots of nurses coming to see me and the owner of the farm said that he didn’t want to have anyone falling and since he had new workers coming in we had to leave.

“My started the gardens because it was a way for me to give back... It’s also something for everyone to enjoy”

My daughter brought me to the shelter after talking to Pete Kellerman, the assistant director. I was immediately offered space and have been working with them to get to where I’m supposed to be.

Everybody here has been really good to me. They helped me change my address and get food stamps. I started off at the Main St. location and then they offered me space at the Green St. location in Vergennes. I have been here for a few months and it’s a really comfortable place. It’s peaceful and homey. I started a little garden out here and an even bigger garden over at the Main St. location. I started the gardens because it was a way for me to give back for all they have done for me. It’s also something for everyone to enjoy. I have become attached to all the people that have lived here too...everybody calls me mom. They even like my cooking too. (Continued on page 6)
A Midsummer Night’s Barbecue

On a perfect summer night more than sixty people gathered for a Thank You Barbecue sponsored by the North Ferrisburgh United Methodist Church for the staff and residents of John Graham Housing and Services.

The church playground was “joy in motion” said one church member, as kids of all ages enjoyed the swings, slides and climbing wall. Two teenage boys from the church youth group entertained anyone who wanted to practice their soccer skills.

Parents shared tips on parenting. Elders doted on babies and children.

“I had a lovely conversation with a woman in John Graham housing who is now working full-time for an elderly services program in Burlington. Then she also works in the evenings for Homeshare people helping them with cleaning. I was amazed at how hard she was working. She represents just one of a huge number of people the Shelter is helping to get back on their feet and give back to the larger community.” said one church member.

“I was amazed at how hard she was working.”

The Church’s Men’s Group provides support to John Graham with painting and cleaning services, members give rides to residents, and the youth raise funds for the food shelf at the Shelter.

“The barbecue was a celebration of everyone working together,” said Pastor Kimberly Hournung-Marcy. “We probably gained the most. We made new friends, gained a much deeper insight into what John Graham does, and broke away from stereotypes on who uses a homeless shelter,” she said.
The Fragility of Privilege: by Katie Corrigan

Before this past month, I had never brushed elbows with those in poverty outside of a sterile volunteering environment. In coming to John Graham through the Middlebury Privilege and Poverty Internship, I have been able to confront my own shortcomings, judgment of others, and my ignorance of what it is like to be homeless or struggling.

I am what people may call “rich kid poor,” in that I over-draft my checking account, but never feel truly in danger. Then there’s my $60,000 a year education and the graduate school that will come after it. (continued on page 4)

“I didn’t know what methadone is, or why someone might have to wake up every day at 5 AM... to take it.”

Katie installs energy efficient light bulbs at the shelter.

Saving $$$ with Energy Efficiency

John Graham is using long summer days to get ready for winter and to ensure all five of our houses are energy efficient. Heat and lights are a big part of any budget. And energy can drive up the cost of housing for families once they get a place of their own. So we decided to partner with Efficiency Vermont to reduce energy and water bills and carbon footprint for our own units and for families we have helped to find housing in the community. This month, we visited over 20 homes, installing energy efficient light bulbs, low-flow showerheads, and hot water pipe wrap. In addition to buttoning up our own units, our Home Energy Team is meeting with tenants and homeowners to provide resources and information to help reduce electricity use. We also help them apply for grants for replacing inefficient appliances and for home weatherization. A Home Energy Visit takes about 1 hour and all energy products are provided free-of-charge. During the next year, we hope to visit 150 homes in the Addison County area.
The Fragility of Poverty (continued)

I even have the privilege and power to write the narrative of my experience at the shelter from my biased, upper middle class perspective.

Now I’ve been shown what I’ve taken for granted, and begun to understand how poverty recurs over and over in people’s lives. In my first week, a child finds a penny. I squat next to him, looking at the tarnished copper in his hand. “Do you know who’s on the penny,” I ask him, expecting the correct answer. He’s nine; of course he knows this. I receive a blank stare before I fumble out my explanation, “It’s Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president.” The boy’s mother is in the kitchen, wrangling food shelf ingredients into a meal for her children. “Wow, I just don’t know how you know that stuff,” she says. In that moment it was like zooming out fast in Google Earth until I -- and all my experiences and the roads that I travel -- are nothing but a speck. I see how small and lucky I am to just know who Foucault is: all a direct product of my privilege growing up. And I see they create a barrier between the residents and me. And the onus is on me to bridge the gap.

“I’ve always got plans. Or I just do stuff without plans that seem to make sense,” says Joan, a middle-aged Vermont woman. This is the cadence of our conversation. Just like me, Joan wants to be liked and have someone to listen to her, and I gladly oblige in the mornings, when I’m barely awake and slowly wiping down the kitchen counters. I ask what her plans are for the day, what her children are up to, and search through donations for purple clothing—her favorite color. She rummages through the bin of cast off items with me, caching things for other people out of care, generosity, and the same desire we all have for some validation from our peers: a Carhart sweatshirt for one resident, a graphic t-shirt for another. With these moments I ease into the rhythm of the shelter day. Simply through listening and chuckling along and giving her that space to simply Be Joan, I try to deliver exactly the support she needs.

The myth of the meritocracy is a hard one to
The Fragility of Poverty (continued)

It is hard for us as privileged people to come to terms with the fact that our life outcome is not because we are special personally, but because our position in society is special and affords us opportunity. It can be discouraging, and can fill you with guilt. It is much harder to live in poverty. No one “deserves” to live in poverty, as the “bootstraps myth” would have you believe. Addiction can attack anyone, disease can strike anyone, and anyone can get behind on rent. The only thing that makes me different than those I serve is the balance in my parents’ bank account and their willingness to support me.

I didn’t know what acronyms like DCF or CVOEO stand for. I didn’t know what methadone is, or why someone might have to wake up every day at five am to catch a bus to Rutland to take it. I thought it was a given that you simply open mail and bills, instead of looking at them in anxiety.

I have become aware of my positionality in the broader systems of inequality in the U.S., and it helps me hamper my own elitism in providing care and support to the residents. I believe that meeting people where they are at emotionally is the best service I can provide. I only hope that those in shelter this summer take away as much from my presence and care as I already have from my experiences at John Graham. I give parts of myself and hope that every person I support will leave with a home and feel the love I put into my work every day.

“No one ‘deserves’ to live in poverty, as the ‘bootstraps myth’ would have you believe. Addiction can attack anyone, disease can strike anyone, and anyone can get behind on rent.”
Linda’s Story (continued)
I have finally received a housing voucher and I was tickled. I’m even more relieved now that I’ve been offered the apartment at the North Pleasant Street house. I will move in next week! My grandson has been working on a farm for a little over a year. He has been working with sheep, milking and shearing them and even making cheese. Now he has his state certificate in meat cutting and he was so proud.

He even wants to move in with me! We are working on getting all the paperwork filled out so he can live with me at my place. Since he’s been here he’s done quite a bit, he’s doing really great and I’m proud of the way he’s doing. Now I’m feeling better and doing better, I’ve got my own place. I’m getting back on my feet. Going to start putting money in the bank and save for a down payment on a house!

Thanks to the Vergennes Lions, Addison County churches, farmers, businesses, and individuals for all you do.