Tonite, let’s step back in time to 2006 when I first walked through the doors of On The Rise. To be exquisitely clear, I had never been homeless, nor close to it. And in 2006, I also didn’t know what I didn’t know.

What I did know is what most of us do—a belief that we can recognize homeless people on the street, and the assumption that there are shelters to take care of them.

In 2006, I did not know that women slept with their shoes on & their wallets down their pants. Because anything can be stolen anywhere and at any time, both on the street and in shelters. Or that their single most important possession is their shoes. Not only because they log so many miles, but because they are their only defense against trench foot and hypothermia. And I hadn’t a clue that there was even something called trenchfoot, a condition that surfaced on battlefields in World War I, from wet feet that never dry out. But it happens here too, on our own city streets, because women are afraid to take their shoes off at night. I also could not imagine how shockingly commonplace it was for women to lose toes to frostbite in the winter.

I had no clue what “emergency housing” meant either. That you only qualify if you have acceptable documentation of your emergency status. For example, actual documentation of domestic violence. And if you have all the documentation and evidence to corroborate your housing emergency, your best case scenario is still a 2 year wait. For everyone else, the wait is more like 8 to 10 years. Very few of the women we serve actually meet the narrow requirements or have the documentation to prove it, despite their status as chronically homeless. And the truth of what happens is, people just stop trying.

I guess back in 2006 I had a very different idea of what constituted an “emergency.” Thirteen years later I understand that emergency means an intolerable situation that holds no promises or guarantees of an easy or immediate resolution.
And back in 2006, I hadn’t a clue what shelter life really meant. Or that people might refuse it, choosing what little privacy they have on the streets, over being sheltered with so many people, and dealing with the high incidence of mental illness in shelters. Or that they might choose to stay unsheltered to stay with a pet, a source of emotional support as well as protection on the streets.

I did not know that a typical bed in a shelter is shared in a room with up to 40 people. Nor the fact that shelters impose curfews where nothing you need to accomplish in the outside world lines up with them. Once sheltered at 3 pm, you’re restricted there till 7:00 am the next morning when you are turned out on the streets, but no services are even available. And to receive any services, you need a Massachusetts ID, but it’s virtually impossible to get one if you are homeless and cannot prove your residency.

I did not imagine that your bed was not secure either—that every day you would need to line up to secure one in a lottery system. And if you didn’t get one, it would be too late to make it to another shelter especially on foot. I also never thought about something as basic as not having a place to receive mail. Mail that could be critical to your survival—social security checks or notification of emergency housing that has finally come through. And if you don’t respond within ten days you are kicked off the housing list! This can easily happen. And it happens all the time. And as the years tick by, people legitimately lose track of whether they are even on a list at all.

And what about housing? I couldn’t have imagined the bureaucratic tangle that only works against women finding housing—the vouchers that expire in their hands as they look for apartments, how completely unaffordable it is to stay in the towns where they have resources and connections, the discrimination that is endemic, and the depressingly substandard housing they might end up with IF they’re lucky. Far from Cambridge where they have built support systems and receive services, in faraway towns where they are starting over solo, with loneliness and personal demons as their only companions.
And I never grappled with the idea of how someone living on the streets would receive treatment for a serious health issue. Or if they even would. Medications requiring refrigeration are just out of the question. Receiving care for your mental health needs is also unlikely, with long waits to see a therapist at public hospitals. And on a very basic level, the notion of where someone’s personal possessions might be was simply mysterious. Carrying daily essentials around all day was obviously the norm, but what about the sentimental items accumulated over a lifetime that that aren’t just “things”, but serve as both anchor and memory? For people with no home and no permanence to their lives, these are precious & irreplaceable, and yet sadly they are lost all the time.

I didn’t realize how utterly common it was for people to not even be able to afford train fare, spending the day walking back and forth for services regardless of season because they literally have no income.

And if they can afford it, women routinely ride the T just for refuge without a destination. And I could never have imagined that sitting in an ER might be used the same way...as desperate sanctuary.

And I didn’t fathom the deeply complicated relationship between domestic violence and homelessness. That women routinely choose to live with extremely abusive partners perceiving that as the safer option over being alone at night on the street. And I didn’t know that ALL the women who seek our help have endured childhood violence. This early trauma forms behaviors, like aggressiveness, that while protective at first, becomes self-defeating over the long term, leaving women isolated, and frequently turned down for services. And People who are refused services or fade into the background remain homeless for an even longer time because you absolutely need help when facing the system we have in place because it is so broken and so difficult.

But, most of all, I hadn’t a clue at the resourcefulness that underlied the survival of our fellow citizens on our city streets. What fortitude and courage it takes to go through a day like that. And then get up
again the next day, the next month, the next year, and the year after that, and do it all over again. This dogged persistence and fierce courage has been inspiring, humbling, astonishing.

But here is what I did know with absolute certainty back in 2006. I knew what it felt like to walk through the doors of 341 Broadway. The welcome that greeted me instantly buoyed me and warmed my spirits. And I viscerally felt and understood that this was a place that was not just about “services” but about community...a place where sharing and the comfort of one’s peers was evident each and every day. And I saw how powerful a community could be. It was also a place that tended to the details that get lost in the chaos of homelessless: containers to store worldly possessions, mail slots which are critical, and perched high on a staff member’s shelf, a single Tupperware container, holding the ashes of someone’s mother. And through it all, I saw Xmas parties with more spirit than I had ever witnessed. I saw immense joy and great sorrow and a space that allowed for and embraced all of it.

And with time I saw what else was there. Busy phone lines, where advocates pushed back against the loss of housing vouchers, or mail that never reached a woman informing her of emergency housing that had come through, or discriminatory housing practices. I saw them work doggedly to keep the women engaged and keep hope alive over a horribly lengthy period of time...because here’s the hard and immutable truth: you will not get housing on your own.

In a world that so readily dispenses judgement, rules and beauracracy that hold them in place, whittling away at their dignity and their hope, I saw a place that dispensed hope and love in return. A place that was both refuge and restorer, home and hearth, raw and real, tender yet tough. I saw... On The Rise.

And in the end, I saw you....hundreds and hundreds of you, filling this ballroom year after year. Listening, caring, giving, and ensuring that your legacy is one of hope and one of action.
Bc in the end, what we know and what we feel are **not enough, no matter how much we learn, no matter how much we feel.** They only count if they are the fuel that ignites us into action. Action that is as simple and as powerful as all of you sitting in this room tonite. Action that says we believe in you and the possibility of harnessing your courage and the remarkable resilience you show us every single day. And in return, we will keep showing up, and we will keep opening that door @ 341 Broadway, **each and every day, year after year.** *Letting hope in every time we do.*