Ezekiel’s Story: How HOME changed his life

Ezekiel, an 18 year-old single man, came to us from Ohio. He had previously lived in two different shelters in two different cities. He came to Buffalo looking for new opportunities and a fresh start. Ezekiel’s journey to HOME came courtesy of the BRAP program. Working with Senior Counselor Nichelle Brown, Ezekiel found himself a person that not only cared about his needs, but gave him additional advice and steering about life.

BRAP is a rapid rehousing program intended to minimize the length of homelessness for individuals and families. The program features a partnership of several agencies in the area, such as, 2-1-1, Buffalo City Mission (including Cornerstone Manor), Catholic Charities, Crisis Services, HOME, Homeless Alliance of Western New York (HAWNY), Matt Urban Center, Neighborhood Legal Services, and the Salvation Army Shelter for Women and Children.

Eligible clients are individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 and homeless families with at least one family member under the age of 5. These clients must also reside in either the Buffalo City Mission or the Salvation Army. Ezekiel had several misconceptions about how the program worked and life in general. Nichelle had to continuously inform him about not only the BRAP program, but also social services. Ezekiel wanted to go school and was concerned that if he was on social services, he would be in eligible for assistance with his education. Working with Nichelle, Ezekiel learned much about his options for the future.

Since his experience in the BRAP program, Ezekiel is now in an apartment, has a new job, and is facing a very promising future. When he came to HOME he was a shy and misinformed boy, but by the time he left the program, he was a more confident young man.

Source of Income Discrimination: Catch 22 for Section 8 clients

By Alyssa Bergsten

For many low-income families in Western New York, the promise of receiving a Section 8 voucher can mean the opportunity to live in housing and communities that they may not have been able to afford previously. These places are generally neighborhoods with lower crime levels, lower poverty rates, and better access to resources like health care, education, transportation, and employment opportunities. These factors can determine a great deal about an individual or family’s chances to thrive. The demand for vouchers is such that waiting periods are long and waiting lists are often closed, but those who do receive vouchers are able to have rental assistance for as long as they need it (as long as they remain eligible.) In theory, these individuals have a distinct advantage over low-income tenants without assistance in terms of their opportunities for decent, affordable housing in good neighborhoods. Indeed, HOME’s Community Housing Center Mobility Program aims specifically to assist new Section 8 voucher holders with taking full advantage of their housing choices by providing information, listings, and financial assistance with security deposits.

The opportunity provided by having rental assistance, however, is diminished in areas where housing providers are at liberty to deny people due to their source of income. Currently throughout Erie County, the City of Buffalo, the Town of West Seneca and the Town of Hamburg are the only municipalities that have fair housing ordinances to protect people on the basis of their legal source of income. This provision means that in those three areas only, landlords cannot legally deny someone due to a lawful, verifiable income, such as Section 8 rental assistance, Social Security Insurance, unemployment benefits, or any other legal way of paying the rent. Conversely, Section 8 tenants seeking to live in the remaining areas of Erie County can legally be denied, even if their income and supplemental rental assistance would make the housing affordable. Regardless of the reason, (lack of knowledge about the program, reluctance to deal with Section 8 agencies, or inaccurate perceptions of low-income tenants, to name a few) this results in thousands of low-income and disabled people in Western New York being denied access to decent, affordable housing. It also prevents them from enjoying the benefits of residing in communities that often have superior schools, safer streets, and better opportunity for upward mobility.

Unfortunately, even the existence of a fair housing ordinance does not mean that tenants will be immune to income discrimination. Through HOME’s work with Section 8 voucher holders in the Mobility Program and its efforts to advocate for victims of housing discrimination, staff members are routinely reminded of the prevalence of lawful source of income discrimination in Western New York. In fact, 28 percent of discrimination complaints received by HOME last year were on the basis of lawful source of income. One woman, for example, recently received a Section 8 voucher, joined the Mobility Program, and has already contacted HOME with over 15 separate instances of denial due to source of income. She recently shared that she has been homeless (Continued on Page 5)
SPOTLIGHT ON THE FAIR HOUSING TEAM

HOME would like to extend a fond farewell to our legal intern, Daniel J. Corbitt who we had the pleasure of working with this past summer. Dan, a law student from UB is scheduled to graduate this coming May and holds a BA in Anthropology from Buffalo State College. Dan served in the US Marine Corps for nearly 10 years and believes that his desire and record of serving the community began with his military service. During his tenure at HOME Dan was very busy! He provided paralegal counseling on fair housing and landlord tenant law, drafted various forms of client correspondence and researched legal issues. Dan believes that the experiences garnered from his time at HOME will assist him with his personal and professional development and his goals for the future. According to Dan, his summer at HOME has left him better organized and he has learned to work in a human service capacity more confidently and efficiently. What will he miss most? Being a part of HOME’s team and working on the issues that he is passionate about – justice, equal rights and civil rights. What will we miss? Dan Corbitt.

In addition, HOME welcomes two new additions to our staff: Catholic Charities Service Corps (CCSC) Member Mikaela Binsfeld and intern Patrick Collins.

Mikaela, born and raised in Vadnais Heights, Minnesota holds a B.A. in History and a Minor in Spanish from American University in Washington DC. Prior to joining the HOME staff, Mikaela held positions at Teach For America, the District of Columbia Public School Central Office, Capitol Partners and Foundations 4 Education. As HOME’s Mobility Counselor, Mikaela will assist clients of the Community Housing Center and the Buffalo Rapid Re-Housing Program in locating safe and adequate housing. During the year commitment of CCSC, she hopes to gain a greater understanding of housing issues as well as the role that an organization can play to support those seeking housing and facing housing discrimination. Additionally, she expects to gain many valuable personal and professional skills through close interaction with clients as well as the extremely talented and knowledgeable HOME Staff. Following her experience at HOME, Mikaela plans to continue working in social services, although her specific future plans are yet to be determined.

Patrick joins HOME as an Intake Volunteer whose tasks will include providing housing counseling and information services to tenants, landlords and agencies. He is currently a student at UB and is expected to graduate with a B.A in Political Science in December of this year. Patrick, born and raised in Buffalo is a graduate of Hutch Tech. He has recently become more interested in not for profit work in civil rights. Patrick is glad to be a part of the HOME team and is enthusiastic and eager to become a part of the fair housing community.

As a not-for-profit, volunteers are the heart of HOME. We have experienced the uncertainty that occurs when dealing with issues of staff turnover, and it is important for HOME to continue to demonstrate that effectively serving our clients is our primary goal. It is committed staff such as these individuals, who are willing to contribute their time to the fight for civil rights that keeps HOME supporting clients in the best possible ways. If you are interested in becoming a HOME volunteer, please call Collin at 716-854-1400, Ext. 26.

WELCOME HOME

What exactly is your job?

I am the receptionist and I assist Office Manager Margaret D. Brown in her numerous projects.

What is the most exciting thing that has happened since you came on board?

I can’t speak to one specific event or incident because there is something going on here all the time, but I am amazed at what the staff at HOME does. Their knowledge of landlord and tenant rights is extremely impressive. I’ve also learned quite a bit since joining the HOME team.

When you’re not working, what do you like to do?

Outside of being heavily involved with my family, I am currently working with a group of women whose main focus is to work with parents of the Board of Education students. We provide an ear and support for parents who are having a difficult time maneuvering the school system.

You will most likely hear Leta’s beautiful voice when you call the HOME offices on Mondays and Fridays between 9AM and 1PM. She can be reached at 716-854-1400 ext. 11 and at lhooser@homeny.org.

In June, we welcomed Leta James-Hooser to the HOME family. Here we catch up with “Miss Leta” as she is affectionately called and learn more about this fascinating woman.

Where did you grow up?

I am a life-long resident of the Eastside of Buffalo. I reside in the Utica-Jefferson area of the city.

Where were you working prior to HOME?

I was employed at an agency called Supportive Services Corporation. This organization assists job seekers 55 years of age or older, as well as, employers seeking qualified job candidates throughout Erie County. They also operate the Senior Community Service Employment Program which provides part-time community service work to eligible individuals at participating local non-profits, governmental or public agencies.

What made you want to join the HOME team?

I was familiar with the organization, not to mention I jumped at the idea of working in the beautifully remodeled building.

In this issue we catch up with several members of the HOME family. Here we get to know more about Patrick Collins, Dan Corbitt and Mikaela Binsfeld.
Seven Questions with . . .
Margaret D. Brown

By Collin Gehl

With 2013 being HOME’s 50th year, Insight will feature an interview with a team member. Meet Office Manager Margaret D. Brown, who joined the HOME team in 1988. Here she reflects on her adventures, successes and challenges with the agency as well as sharing her hopes for HOME’s future.

1. What is your earliest memory of HOME?
My earliest memory of HOME, is working at our 1490 Jefferson location. It was quite small, with a long hall and three small rooms for offices for the Executive Director, Assistant Director and the Housing Counselor. The largest room, which was at the end of the hall was where I sat as Administrative Assistant and received all the calls for the office, also it was used for all our meetings, bulk mailings and was HOME’s storage area for files, brochures, etc.

2. What would you consider your greatest accomplishment at HOME?
My greatest accomplishment was working for HOME at the time we received funding for the start of the Community Housing Center. We expanded our staff from six to fourteen, walls were taken down and offices and partitions were erected. It was an exciting time for the staff and board of Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. We were not only making our mark in defeating housing discrimination in the WNY area but not we were assisting individuals with housing, moving individuals and families out of high poverty areas. It was very gratifying and still is as we continue today.

3. How have things changed since you began with HOME?
It has changed a lot; we still continue the fight against housing discrimination and educating people regarding their rights as landlords and/or tenants. It’s still very exciting; we are in our OWN building at 1542 Main Street, something we have wanted to do for years. Of course, staff has changed, I think with each new person we get new ideas and different approaches to things we have done in the past. But that’s what you want in a business, we need to be up with the times and different situations of the day.

4. What were some of the challenges that HOME faced during your tenure?
The main challenge we faced at HOME and still do today is funding, funding. It’s a shame that many things we are so political; that you have to smile and nod your head to get funding to combat housing discrimination, to advise landlords and tenants about their rights either as homeowners of property or for those who want to live comfortably in housing of their choice. It should be as one of the founders of HOME – James Hecht - wrote in the book “Because It is Right”. But we continue to keep HOME in our prayers; at least I do.

5. What are your hopes for HOME for the next five years?
My hopes are that for the next five years, we continue to advance towards eliminating housing discrimination. We have surpassed a lot of other agencies that are no longer in existence. That says a lot about what we have done and continue to do.

6. How has your life changed since you first began at HOME?
Oh goodness, my life has changed so much since I started at HOME! I have four children, nine grandchildren and one great grand. I’m quite busy with church, my hobbies of sewing and reading, and working as a volunteer with Juneteenth Festival.

7. What is next for Margaret Brown?
I hope to soon end my tenure with HOME at the end of this year. It will be hard to say good-bye, but as they say at HOME, I never say good-bye but I’m always around or peeking my head in to do something here at the office on my off days. So, who knows? But, I hope to spend more time with family and travel a little more.

New to the HOME Team

Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. would like to welcome our new Director of Development and Administration Jody Harvey, CFRE. Jody brings a background that is both varied and well suited to the HOME community. Her work with organizations such as the Salvation Army, Hopevale, the Buffalo Community Center Collaborative and a number of cultural and school organizations has given her a unique perspective on the Western New York community and its people. Her perspective combined with her love of people and “get involved” attitude allows her to have a keener understanding of an organization and its funding needs and challenges. Supported by education and years of fundraising experience Jody is able to make her work more personal and successful for those she serves.

On a personal note, she is a long time resident of Western New York, is married and has three children. She is looking forward to a very successful fundraising season here at HOME and to meeting with each of HOME’s fair housing supporters. Jody can be reached daily at 716-854-1400 ext. 17 or jharvey@homeny.org.

To report discrimination, call 716-854-1400.
A guide for those with questions about fair housing, landlord/tenant rights, and everything in between.

Dear Nichelle,

I recently moved out of my apartment and my former landlord issued me a check, which was the return of my security deposit. Unfortunately, the security deposit bounced. The landlord will not return any of my phone calls or e-mails. What can I do?

Sincerely,

Arianna

Dear Nichelle,

If you continue to be unable to get a hold of your landlord, then I am going to recommend taking him to small claims court. If you do go to court, be sure you take a copy of the bounced check as proof that the apartment was left in satisfactory condition (hence the issuing of the check).

All the best,

Nichelle

Dear Nichelle,

How can I get access to material on Landlord Rights?

Sincerely,

Brittany

Dear Brittny,

The Guide to Landlord’s Rights is available in HOME’s offices for a minimum fee. Please feel to come into our offices at 1542 Main Street, purchase the guide online or purchase over the phone (716-854-1400).

All the best,

Nichelle

Dear Nichelle,

Does HOME provide listings for vacant apartments? I am finding Craigslist to not always be the most reliable.

Sincerely,

Brad

Dear Brad,

Yes, HOME provides apartment listings from Belmont Housing Resources. New listings are available each Wednesday, so please contact us at 716-854-1400 to get your copy today.

All the best,

Nichelle

Nichelle Brown has been a Senior Counselor in Housing Opportunities Made Equal’s Fair Housing Unit since 2008. She has five years of counseling experience and is currently attending Daemen College to obtain a Bachelor’s Degree in Social Work. If you have a question for Nichelle, please contact her at nbrown@homenery.org or weekdays at 716-854-1400 ext. 20.

From the Director: Proposed Regulations to Further Fair Housing

By Scott W. Gehl

During the tumultuous week which followed the assassination of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Congress passed and President Lyndon Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act. In addition to prohibiting individual acts of discrimination, the new law required that the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development administer federal programs in a manner which would affirmatively further fair housing.

Although HUD was charged with assuring that federal grantees (such as local governments and housing authorities) take proactive steps to address segregation, most observers would agree that the agency has fallen considerably short of that goal. Since 1995 HUD has required its grantees to conduct analyses of impediments to fair housing, to formulate action plans to overcome impediments, and to keep records about those action. Yet for years HUD never even required grantees to submit those studies. (Imagine what would happen if the IRS required people to complete tax returns, but never required that those returns be submitted.)

While some communities have been conscientious about affirmatively furthering fair housing, a larger number have not—with no discernible impact of their future receipt of federal funds. Now HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan has proposed new regulations which would establish a clear definition of fair housing, to include “taking proactive steps to foster more inclusive communities and access to community assets for all protected by the Fair Housing Act”. In addition:

• HUD will provide communities with standardized data on segregation and guidance;
• Explicitly incorporate fair housing into the existing planning process;
• Encourage regional approaches to fair housing issues;
• Require enhanced community participation to include people “historically

(Continued on Page 5)
Proposed Regulations to Further Fair Housing
(Continued from Page 4)

excluded” from the planning process; and
• Foster accountability among governments and other entities receiving federal assistance.

In the view of most advocates, new regulations on affirmatively furthering have been a long time coming. HUD will be accepting comments through September 17th.

A Departure
It was ten Septembers ago that a young woman joined our staff, succeeding Leah Mervine as HOME’s Coordinator of Development. Shannon Koehn worked very hard—initially supervising the work of two full-time support staff and then taking on the lion’s share of their work when diminished resources prevented our replacing departing staff.

Shortly before her third anniversary, Shannon felt she had done all she could for us and moved to another well regarded not-for-profit—but she never quite managed to leave HOME. Ten months later she returned, with title Director of Development & Administration. By this time the idea of a permanent Home for HOME had become less a dream than a definite goal—if only we could find a feasible site, obtain $2 million to build affordable housing, and raise more than half million dollar goal.

But Shannon was more than an effective fundraiser. With the title Associate Director, she became a true partner in moving HOME forward. In the words of one of my favorite HOME members, Rosa Norman, “Shannon just lights up a room”.

There is an episode of the celebrated sitcom Seinfeld in which Jerry explains to George the secret of showmanship: “Always go out on a high note”. For Shannon, that would have been HOME’s record-breaking 50th Anniversary Gala.

Shannon has now moved on to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—to become the executive director of a small non-profit with the large mission of “supporting and empowering mothers to create personal and social change”. A non-profit with the large mission of becoming the executive director of a small non-profit with the large mission of becoming the executive director of a small non-profit with the large mission of becoming the executive director of a small non-profit with the large mission of becoming the executive director of a small non-profit with the large mission of turning heads up a room. Shannon Marie Koehn is a woman of considerable ability and greater potential. We are fortunate to have known her.

While it was our incredible volunteer Janet Meiselman who assembled public support for the ten apartments above my head, Shannon took the lead on raising funds from foundations and individuals long devoted to fair housing. Sometimes with a board volunteer but more often with one another, we sat down over countless coffee, breakfast, lunch and dinner tables to explain how the Main-Ferry Project could be an important component of assuring the future of HOME. Ultimately, we surpassed that half million dollar goal.

SOURCE OF INCOME
(Continued from Page 1)

for a full year—even though she has had a Section 8 voucher for six months. She describes her situation as a catch-22: although she has the means to pay rent through her own income and Section 8, and the ability to get help with the security deposit through HOME, she has yet to find a decent, affordable home that is Section-8 friendly. Another client with Section 8 has been living out of a car for weeks due to her inability to locate a landlord who will accept Section 8 payments. Because these clients were denied housing in the City of Buffalo and Town of Hamburg, HOME will be investigating the incidents with an aim towards enforcement of the local fair housing ordinances.

There are efforts by some to further the scope of protection, such as Governor Andrew Cuomo’s Women’s Equality Agenda, which called for a state-wide protection of tenants based on their legal source of income. Additionally, the state of Oregon recently passed a law protecting Section 8 recipients statewide, and the H.R. 2479: HOME Act of 2013 introduced this year into the House of Representatives would pass lawful source of income protection nationally. These efforts do show a growing understanding that discrimination based on source of income is detrimental to low-income and disabled tenants around the country, not only in their housing but also consequently in most other areas of life. The likelihood of source of income becoming a federally protected class, however, seems faint in the near future, with so few areas currently covered. To protect tenants and ensure that people have equal opportunities for housing regardless of their type of lawful income, there must be a continuous push in all areas of the country not only for legal protections but also for consistent implementation of the protections. Until there is both acceptance and enforcement of proper regulations, the adverse effects on low-income and disabled Western New Yorkers, and others around the country, will continue.
**Looking for some good theater which discusses the issues of civil rights?**

Please consider going to see the following presentation from the Road Less Traveled Production:

**CLYBOURNE PARK** by Bruce Norris

WNY-premiere by Road Less Traveled Productions, at the 710 Main Theater (formerly Studio Arena)

November 8th, 2013 – Dec. 1st, 2013 (Performances: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays/Saturdays at 8:00 p.m., Sundays at 2:00 p.m.)

Clybourne Park is a ferocious expose of segregation, white flight, and ever-shifting cultural insecurities, calculated by turns to amuse and to disturb. Bruce Norris’ play is the winner of nearly every imaginable major drama prize, including the Tony and Olivier Awards and the Pulitzer Prize. Though set in Chicago, it’s a story sure to resonate with Buffalonians; RLTP is very proud to present this important production at the 710 Main Street Theater.

Tickets are available by phone at 1-800-745-3000, online at www.ticketmaster.com or at Shea’s Box Office, located at 650 Main Street (M-F 10a-5p and Saturday 10a-2p) More information at [www.RoadLessTraveledProductions.org](http://www.RoadLessTraveledProductions.org).

As this issue of *Insight* goes to press, RLTP Artistic & Executive Director Scott Behrend and HOME Executive Director Scott Gehl are discussing a number of exciting collaborations made possible by this production of *Clybourne Park*. Watch HOME’s website (www.homeny.org) for details.