Lifting Up Westchester Welcomes New Executive Director

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From its grassroots beginnings four decades ago, Lifting Up Westchester has become one of the major nonprofit social service agencies in the county, providing food, shelter, education programs and hope to thousands of those who need a helping hand.

The organization recently welcomed the third executive director in its history, as Tarrytown resident Anahaita Kotval took over for Paul Anderson-Winchell, who retired after 11 years.

The daughter of Indian immigrants, Kotval became interested in social justice as a student at Woodlands High School in Greenburgh. She graduated in 1984, studied law at Harvard and got involved in prison rights work before switching to the prosecution of white collar criminals for the Securities and Exchange Commission.

After her children were born, she went to work at an investment bank, which she called "my mommy job," for 13 years.

"Somewhere in the middle of that 13 years, it struck me that I wasn't doing any of the things I was supposed to do when I grew up," she said.

Kotval began doing volunteer work for the Pro Bono Partnership, which provides free business and legal services to nonprofits. The more involved she got, the more she gravitated toward "my first love" of working for social justice.

When her children went off to college, Kotval took a job at Inspirica in 2011. The Stamford, Connecticut-based nonprofit nearly mirrors Lifting Up Westchester in terms of the services it provides the homeless, hungry and those who are just down on their luck.

"I just wanted to be useful, and I thought I could contribute," she said. "For me, it ended up really being the right focus."
The move to Lifting Up Westchester was a natural for Kotval, who has long been aware of the challenges facing the needy in her home county.

"There is a homeless issue in Westchester," she said. "There's a homeless issue in every wealthy community, because of the gap between wages and the cost of housing."

Her job now, Kotval said, is to help educate the public on the nature of Westchester's problem and the ways Lifting Up Westchester tries to address those issues.

It's an organization that began as Grace Church Community Center in the 1970s, a local volunteer effort to take on the emergency conditions of the homeless and hungry in White Plains during the 1970s and 1980s when there were virtually no emergency shelters or soup kitchens.

From those modest beginnings, the agency has evolved into a multi-armed organization with a $12 million budget in 2016, serving hundreds throughout the county.

Grace's Kitchen serves more than 200 free meals a day. The Open Arms men's and Samaritan House women's shelters house 25 percent of Westchester's homeless. Last year, more than 1,300 homeless men and women, including 860 considered chronically homeless, were provided with emergency shelter through Lifting Up Westchester's outreach program.

But feeding and sheltering those in need on an emergency basis is just the first step. The real work and focus, Kotval said, is to help adults get back on their feet permanently, and to provide the boost their children need to break the cycle of homelessness. Other programs include:

- **A Supportive Housing program** helps people avoid eviction, provides supportive services such as budgeting help, rent subsidies, legal assistance, referrals and case management for individuals and families. The program serves 283 individuals and families, and is the county's major provider of housing for people with AIDS/HIV.

- **The Neighbors Home Care program** provides trained aides who help the elderly and home-bound with services such as grocery shopping, escort to appointments, laundry,
housecleaning, meal preparation and basic healthcare and medication management. Most of the aides are trained by Lifting Up Westchester, which hires them after they have been screened and obtain the necessary licenses or certifications.

- The Brighter Futures Youth Services program provides after school mentoring and homework help for 240 at-risk students, with the goal of helping them succeed in elementary and high school and go on to college.

Kotval said there are many misconceptions about who the homeless are and how they became homeless. The bottom line, she said, is that anyone can find themselves in need of help.

"There are life stress events that happen to every human being," she said. "We're not fundamentally better people than those in need — we just have a better financial reserve and an emotional support structure that helps see us through the hard times."

In a place like Westchester, she said, "you don't see people living in the streets like you did years ago, because of agencies such as ours. At the end of the day, the health of our community is measured by how we treat our most vulnerable."

**About Lifting Up Westchester**

Lifting Up Westchester receives slightly less than half its funding from government contracts. The rest comes from fundraising efforts, grants, investments, program service fees and contributions. Visit [www.liftingupwestchester.org/](http://www.liftingupwestchester.org/) to find out more about the agency.

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