SOUP STORIES

Tales from
St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen
As told by Students of Middlesex Community College
Support

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Professional Secure Assistance, LLC was formed by David R. Hampton upon his retirement following a 26-year career with the Social Security Administration. As principal consultant and representative for PSA, Hampton provides Social Security retirement and disability counseling for individuals, companies and organizations. He is a graduate of Middlesex Community College and Western Connecticut State University and has served on the boards of the MxCC Foundation and Alumni Association since 1979.
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This small grouping of stories tells of the lives of valued members of our community. It represents a culmination of many months of heartfelt and collaborative work, involving the students, staff, and faculty of Middlesex Community College and the support of the Executive Director and Board of St. Vincent de Paul Middletown.

As with most good works, the creation you hold in your hand began with an idea, or maybe even a dream, which was sparked during some self-reflection following a Board meeting at St. Vincent’s. At this particular Board meeting, Ron Krom shared some writing that a volunteer had composed after a summer of working in the soup kitchen. The student’s reflections brought to life the individuals who frequent the soup kitchen and gave us reason to celebrate the mission and spirit of St. Vincent de Paul. These reflections told me that more could be shared with the community about the wealth found within the stories of those who dine at the soup kitchen.

In order to have the stories told, we needed to get to know the storytellers and collect their stories. Who better to do this than the talented students from Middlesex Community College? With this in mind, the process began with students enrolled in an introductory interviewing and counseling course meeting and forming relationships with the guests from the soup kitchen. The counseling students then inquired of the guests who might like to be
interviewed for this book. Once this was determined, the counseling students, along with our creative writing and journalism students, took the guests out for coffee and conducted a fairly structured interview. But don’t let the notion of a structured interview suppose a structured response. As you will read in the following pages, the stories that evolved from the skillful interviewing are rich with poignant detail and colorful elaboration. As told to and written by the students of Middlesex Community College, the stories will evoke delight and pain, joy and sorrow, and will not be forgotten.

I’d like to thank the following students from the Spring, 2010, Introduction to Counseling class for their perseverance, tenacity, graciousness, and commitment to this project: Nicholas Ferraiolo; Joan Gervasio; Kimberly Giannetti; Katelynn Kelly; Natalie Marynczak; Autumn O’Connell; Marcey Santangelo; Emily Ward; Holly Zienkowicz; Claire Williamson; Peter Woolard; Laureen Wilcox.

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Thank you to Pattraporn Likhitlerdart for her astounding and lovely drawings of the guests from the soup kitchen. Her work brought this book to life in ways I had never imagined.
I have been fortunate to work with an incredible group of colleagues from Middlesex Community College who supported the project from its inception and throughout the process: Joy Hansen, whose consistent cheerleading and organizational skills kept us on track; Terry McNulty, editor extraordinaire; Rick Eriksen, whose brilliance regarding graphic design and layout and the details of getting from point A to point B calmed me beyond measure; and Greg Kline, a champion who enabled us to get financial support. Other collaborators include Christine Ruggiero, Dale Griffith, Judith DeGraffenreid, Marlene Olson and Daisy Trahan. The project probably would not have happened had I not had the encouragement of our former college president, Dr. Wilfredo Nieves, and our current interim president, Dr. Jonathan Daube.

I am enormously grateful for the friendship and professional partnership shared with the Director of St. Vincent de Paul Middletown, Ron Krom. His belief in the work of St. Vincent’s and his love and compassion for the guests of the soup kitchen served as constant motivation to keep the project going. His wisdom provided an anchor and a vision of guidance.

And, finally, were it not for the willingness of the guests to open up a window to their lives to give us better vision and awareness, this project would not have succeeded, and we would not be the better for it.

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Introduction

St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) wrote: “Extend mercy towards others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping.” Here in Middletown our mission is to embrace that compassionate vision of caring for our neighbors in need. We provide food (both meals and groceries), financial assistance (for homelessness prevention, security deposits and utilities), supportive housing, and sometimes shelter on a cold winter night. Many people come to us in moments of crisis.

One of the things that I’ve learned over the years is that “the poor” are not a homogenous group of people who fit nicely into stereotypical categories, no matter what our political, social or theological position may be. To provide services to the poor and needy is really a ministry of hospitality — an opportunity to welcome people into our midst and to celebrate their uniqueness, their gifts and talents, their joys and sufferings.

Our Soup Kitchen is really a community dining room where people gather to share meals with their neighbors. Many of them come daily — some because they have very little food or money, others because they are homeless, and others who live alone and prefer to eat with friends. As our staff and volunteers get to know them, we are nourished and enriched by the fullness of their lives and by their amazing capacity to endure in the face of poverty. At the same time, we are often moved to tears by their tragedies, by their struggles with addiction and/or mental illness, by their loneliness, and by their sense of failure and rejection.

Soup Stories has provided an opportunity for some of our guests to share their stories and images with some of you who have never come to our Soup Kitchen. It has also given them a chance to remember their lives and to feel a sense of pride in who they are. We feel blessed to know these courageous men and women and we hope that you will also welcome them into your hearts.

Ron Krom
Executive Director
St. Vincent de Paul Middletown
The Prodigal Son of Middletown
by Noah Golden

He yells hello to a woman across the street, then enters the retro-chic coffee house in Middletown like he’s the mayor. He is a tall, African-American male whose large frame is overshadowed only by his overflowing personality. He takes off his black bicycle gloves and puts them on the table. Sparkly earrings shimmer in his ears. His shirt, shorts and sunglasses are blindingly white, especially compared to his dark skin and black straw cowboy hat. The man is a walking checkerboard. He plops down in a booth and his stories start flowing. Like a starving man in front of a feast who cannot grab food fast enough, the tales of this modern day disciple named Marvin emerge.

Born in South Carolina 55 years ago, Marvin’s story is one of struggle, redemption, and an overpowering love of God. He always has the Lord’s name on his lips. Told in a husky southern drawl, Marvin’s story is full of twists and turns, sometimes spilling out in non-sequitur bursts; other times his thoughts seem stuck in a rut, the mental potholes that are the mixture of age and mental illness.

Marvin spent his youth between the ghetto of Baltimore and the countryside of South Carolina, where his father ran a farm. He speaks fondly of what was an innocent, peaceful time in a life scarred with strife and struggle. Working long hours tending to livestock and crops, Marvin soon developed a strong work ethic.

Marvin’s next move was back to Baltimore with his mother and her boyfriend, Willy. By his early teenage years, he had developed a love of baseball and had ambitions to become a pro-fighter. But he also started roaming the streets and becoming a self-confessed hoodlum, using an excess of alcohol, drugs, and women. While he sometimes went to the church on Edison Avenue, his back was mostly turned away from the Almighty, and he fell in with the wrong crowd. He told stories about him and his friends, who would make wooden paddles in shop class and use them to terrorize the neighborhood. They stole shoes, bus passes, or anything else they could get their hands on.
Marvin’s success in street brawls (he proudly tells how he was undefeated) made him seriously consider a career in professional fighting. Between the ages of 17 and 21, he trained at a local gym to fight under the name “The Jazzy Daddy.” But when his coach put him in the ring with a much older and more experienced fighter, Marvin not only lost the match but his passion for the sport. Disillusioned and defeated, Marvin’s dependency on cocaine and heroin increased. Under the dim street lamps, Marvin would wander Baltimore all night to clear his head of the cocaine. He drifted between jobs but always returned to a pizza crust factory, where a charitable boss kept giving him employment. Marvin’s face softened and memory flickered before his eyes as he talked about this kindhearted boss.

In Marvin’s story, most of the ‘80s and ‘90s came across as an indistinguishable white blur of drugs and women. Details ran together in his tale, some almost impossible to put into a realistic timeline. But Marvin did talk about his rampant drug use, the grief over the death of his father, and a move to Connecticut in the early ‘90s. He carefully listed the four loves of his life and his five children: a son, and a daughter from two different women before his marriage, two girls with his ex-wife, and a boy with a woman before he was legally divorced. While Marvin knows that he has around six grandchildren, he is only acquainted with one, whom he proudly proclaims is a 17–year–old straight-A student.

Marvin’s drug use came to a screeching halt when he was busted during a raid for smoking cocaine. Although he felt that the resulting prison sentence was unjust and unfair, he turned himself in and served time in prison, which was difficult and life changing. For the first time, he was put on medication for mental illness, but he felt overly drugged and sedated. The doctors listened when he asked to be taken off the medication.
When he was released from prison, Marvin was, to quote his beloved Bible, “a stranger in a strange land.” His mother had died while he was incarcerated and his only remaining family — cousins — lived near Middletown. He stayed with them intermittently and he said he deeply cares for them to this day. Around this time, a poor and hungry Marvin met Ulysses, who ran the Saint Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen situated on Main Street in Middletown. Marvin started eating breakfast there, and soon found shoes and clothing from their donation bin. He even brought down his younger cousins to make sure they had appropriate winter apparel. “A lot of people would be homeless or foodless without St. Vincent’s,” Marvin says.

Now three months sober, Marvin participates in the court-ordered program at Middlesex Hospital’s Partial Hospitalization Program. Although he spends his nights at the Eddy Shelter, he simply calls Middletown his place of residence.

Marvin has a long list of ambitions, most of which focus on higher education. “Obama and my aunt said you can always use education,” he quips on why he has made education his focus. Marvin’s goals range from finishing adult ed to getting his barber’s license. He also dreams of becoming a cop to make sure addicts get the best possible treatment. “People like me don’t belong in cells,” he said, “they belong in treatment.”

Marvin now works odd jobs for his pastor, but cites God as his employer. A tough but loving boss, God, according to Marvin, has put him through his exile of sin so that he can now, “keep his nose clean” — both literally and metaphorically. A big part of accepting God back into his life was rejoining a church. Once he found a spiritual home, he was able to listen to God again and let Him guide. And God is telling Marvin to help — in planning a foundation to raise money for cancer, making sure his family is fed, or continuing his own education and sobriety.

Marvin finishes his own life’s Gospel with a sigh and shake of his head. He downs the last sip of a fruity, pink smoothie and takes one last lick of the foamy whipped cream. “You’re gonna make a fat cat outta me!” he says, patting his stomach with a guttural laugh, “I’m ‘sposed to be on a diet, but man that’s sweet!”

He dons his gloves and, with that, this self-titled Disciple of the Soul walks back onto Main Street. He pauses on the sidewalk and rummages through his pockets. He finds a shiny quarter and carefully inserts it into the expired parking meter of a complete stranger. With a smoothie in his stomach and the love of God in this soul, Marvin Jones, the Prodigal Son of Middletown, disappears down the street.
All Smiles
by Amanda Burgess

Alan was born at Middlesex Hospital on April 25, 1951. He is the 9th out of ten children, which includes 7 boys and 3 girls. He talked about how close his family was, and how, no matter their income, they always stayed close-knit. In his words, they were, “raised on love.” His father was an auto-mechanic, and his mother was a licensed practical nurse. He spent his time working on cars with his father. Alan finished 11th grade at Nathan Hale High School in Moodus, where he lived for 22 years. He also lived in Middletown, Portland, and Cromwell. He now stays in Middletown because he wants to be close to his brothers since they helped him out when he was going through a rough time with his divorce. But Alan loves life and is a father to two boys and two girls.

Alan wanted to be in the military but was rejected because of his heart murmur. To earn money, he started working at factories sporadically. He finally found a stable state job working at Whiting Forensic Institute in Middletown. He worked there for 20 years before he retired. Alan explained that the institute was where the criminally insane stayed until they were diagnosed and possibly sentenced to prison time. He said it was a very good job, and it made him mature enough to be the man he is today. On his off time, Alan helps a friend occasionally, details cars on the side, and plays his music at pubs.
Alan had dreams of becoming a famous musician or a mechanic. He said he had a lot of mentors, especially his dad, who helped him out and gave great advice. His dad taught him how to play the first five chords on the guitar, and then Alan began teaching himself the rest. Now Alan loves to entertain and play his electric guitar whenever he can. He calls music his “euphoria,” and he becomes one with the guitar when he plays. He believes it takes all the “badness out,” and he finds music very therapeutic. Alan describes it as a “universal language” because music is in every culture, and therefore everyone can understand this one beautiful thing.

Alan, though, started to come to the soup kitchen because of his brother Arthur. Arthur was homeless, and he went with him for support. Alan goes when he’s low on funds, and started to come more often to meet with his girlfriend. He finds the soup kitchen to be a social place, very friendly, and he likes it because it is church oriented. He stated, “The soup kitchen helps and it doesn’t push anyone away.”

Alan is a strong believer in karma, and he believes in God as well. His mother-in-law started to get him more interested when she would read passages of the bible to him. Alan now lives his life taking it “one day at a time,” and he just goes with the flow. His best advice would be to be grateful and count every blessing, no matter how small. He also believes that people should treat others the way they want to be treated.

Alan’s is a “happy go lucky” kind of person. The entire time he was all smiles, and he had a positive impact on the people surrounding him because of his loving persona. If more people in the world were like Alan, then life would be more stress-free, and it would be more caring. Alan is one of those rare people who make an impact on a person’s life, and he certainly did with me: I learned from him to view the cup as half full. It was a great opportunity to meet him, and it is an experience I will never forget.
“All Knowledge Is Wisdom Applied”
by Evelyn Benvie

Ricky is a middle age man of medium build and height, with a gold earring and a way of tilting his head when he talks. He wears sunglasses to protect his eyes and dark Adidas gloves. His advice is to never give up. No matter what happens to you, what problems you may face, be it homelessness, addiction, depression, or loss – never give up.

The truth is, everyone has problems, and whether they seek help for them is up to the individual. And there are places to go for help, Saint Vincent de Paul soup kitchen in Middletown is among them, although Ricky does not go there often because of the distance involved. But it was one of the places where he started when he first came to Middletown.

Ricky was born in Alabama, but grew up in Norwalk, Connecticut. He was the youngest of five brothers, and as a child was often sick with asthma and allergies. He grew up with a love of music, listening to his parent’s blues and jazz and his sibling’s soul and dance records. Ricky himself preferred rock, and would often attend concerts in nearby cities. One of his early ambitions was to be in music; Ricky still plays piano and sings.

Growing up around the Norwalk projects, Ricky had a pretty quiet childhood. There was a club where the boys hung out after school, but it was not a gang, and it was not like the way things are today. Ricky would usually walk to school, and around town, because everything was nearby. There was only one year Ricky had to even take the bus to school, and he hated it. He preferred to walk.

In high school, Ricky got fair grades and was captain of the wrestling team, with a scholarship to a nice college. All that changed right before Christmas break of his senior year when he was arrested for possession of marijuana in the school parking lot. Ricky had all his credits to graduate at that point except for one English requirement. His class was in the mornings, so he would leave school by 9:00 every day. Ricky should not have even been at school that late the day he was caught trading a stereo for pot. Ricky lost his scholarship and standing at school.
After that, Ricky took odd jobs in the area and was arrested a second time before moving to live with some cousins in the Bronx, New York in the early 1980s. Though Ricky liked the city life and culture well enough, and loved the music, he was grateful his cousins lived only half a mile from the park. “Growing up in the country, buildings start to get to you after a while, and sometimes you need to just see a tree,” Ricky said of living in New York.

That first Thanksgiving Ricky was going to spend by himself in New York, his mother wanted him to come home. But not having a number to reach him, and since Ricky had not called home in a while, Ricky’s mother sent his brothers up to New York to fetch him home for Thanksgiving. And so they found him walking along the East Side near the soup kitchen and brought him back home for a real family meal, and it is something Ricky will always remember.

When Ricky settled down it was in New Haven, which is where he stayed until only last year. New Haven was where both his businesses had been. His first private business, as an investigative photographer for lawyers and law firms, was the most rewarding work he had done. But the pay was inconsistent, and so Ricky also took other jobs, such as a newspaper delivery contract. Ricky’s second business was driving people who had been in accidents to the chiropractors on a regular basis.

Eight years ago, Ricky was involved in an accident driving an uninsured car. He already had some medical problems beforehand, but after that incident Ricky stopped driving. After he stopped driving, he stopped making money. His income dried up, he stayed home all the time, and depression really set in. Ricky did not know he had clinical depression, or that his family had a history of depression, and had never sought help or treatment for it.

Ricky’s family had also suffered numerous deaths in past decade. Ricky’s father had passed away much earlier, when Ricky was 17, but in the years prior to the accident Ricky had lost his fiancé, his mother, his stepfather, and his uncle. Ricky had been mildly depressed from the deaths of his many loved ones, but had managed to keep himself busy with two jobs and friends. When the accident happened, everything spiraled downwards and Ricky fell back in with the wrong crowd of people.
Ricky and one of his brothers lived together for a while as well, and even though Ricky was the youngest, he was the one responsible for making sure bills were taken care of and was food around. But both brothers suffered from addiction and depression, and money would run out often.

It took a few years to get the right kind of help, but when Ricky saw a doctor about his depression, he was given access to resources and medications that have helped him since. It took Ricky two tries to come clean and recover from depression and addiction, and he said the second time was much harder than the first. But the second time he was not just coming clean for himself, he was also doing it for his brother, who needed help. That was why Ricky went into recovery on June 3rd, his brother’s birthday.

Ricky left New Haven in 2009, because of the violence, the shootings, and the drugs. Ricky has had problems with drugs before, and has liver and kidney damage from previous addictions, and he felt moving away from New Haven was one more step in right direction. He stayed at a few different shelters for a while, first at Rushford, which got him into Meriden, from where he then moved to Middletown.

Ricky soon learned about the soup kitchen, about the community health center, and about where the best AA meetings were held, all from people on the streets; funny enough, Ricky says, learning where the best services are and who the best people to ask for help is just like learning where to get the best drugs. Ricky has visited the soup kitchen several times and made some connections there.

Now, living in Middletown, Connecticut, Ricky talks about his love for music as his favorite escape and his plans to see his favorite vocalist in concert in Waterbury for his birthday. He also spoke of taking a river cruise from Middletown, remembering the river cruises he loved to take all the time when he stayed in New York. He is getting help, going to meetings every single night, and seeing people.

Ricky says he is only just coming into his own, almost a year now in Middletown and a year staying clean, and that if there is anything a person should come away with from his story it is this: “Take advantage of everything you have learned, positive or negative, because all knowledge is wisdom applied, and I wish I had lived by that myself, because I knew better when I went back into drugs.”
“It’s a gathering place where particular people congregate and can be safe.”
– Doug

“I feel like I’m walking into a family diner frequented by the same characters every day, and that they are all distantly related...”

“I’ve been coming here for 35 years. There’s a lot of us that would have never survived without this place. I knew Sister Pat. I served in Vietnam as a Navy SEAL aboard the USS Eisenhower; a lot has changed since those days.”
– Lloyd

“The soup kitchen gives second chances...or more...as many chances as it takes.”
– Fred
A Local Hero
by Emily Ward

On the brief one-and-a-half block walk from the St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen to O’Rourke’s Diner, Earl told the story of almost every building we passed. He described what Main Street looked like 10 years before our walk, how it has changed in the past decade, and how it continues to change with every passing year. He pointed out the mural on Green Street that he helped paint over 15 years ago and told about the great number of people the free clinic has helped over the years. Although Earl was born in Alabama, it’s obvious that he views Middletown as his home.

Upon entering the diner, Earl received smiles from everyone behind the counter. We sat down, and immediately Earl asked the waiter question after question about the coffee. “I don’t want coffee that isn’t as black as I am,” he explained. Once the coffee was deemed acceptable, he began telling his story.

Earl was born in 1949 in a small town in Alabama. He is the second son, with two brothers and two sisters. Almost mechanically, as if he had told this part of his story a hundred times before, he said that his family originally came from the Blackfoot Tribe. He explained that the emblem on his baseball cap came from a reservation in South Carolina.

Earl attended a Lutheran school until eighth grade, at which point he transferred to a public high school. He described his high school as unchallenging compared to the Lutheran school. “When you go to a Lutheran school you learn a lot. You don’t leave there unless you know something,” he explained. He finished high school at the head of his class, graduating in 1967.

Earl worked throughout high school. “If you stayed in school, you got to keep your job,” Earl explained. He worked the graveyard shift, from 12 a.m. to 7 a.m. at the Dan River Mill just East of Thelma, Alabama.

After graduating, Earl was drafted into the army and stationed in Louisiana. Soon after, he was reassigned to several different cities in Germany, including Frankfurt and Manheim, for infantry training with the 11 Bravo.
Earl described Germany as, “... a whole different world. The people over there were good, and the beer was even better.” Upon leaving Germany, Earl and his unit fought in Vietnam for almost 14 months as “ground pounders.”

When Earl came back to the United States, he got a job as a wheeled vehicle mechanic for the Army, a position he liked much better than infantry. He was then stationed at Camp Hartell in Windsor Locks. After six years in Connecticut, he went back to Alabama, this time to Enterprise, his last duty station.

Earl’s father was in the Air Force, so growing up Earl remembered wanting to be a jet pilot. Although he never had a chance to act upon this dream, he did succeed in achieving his second choice in careers. Earl started driving commercial trucks for the military in Dusselheim, Germany and continued this job back in the States for over 20 years.

Unfortunately, Earl’s truck driving career ended when he suffered his third heart attack on the road in 2001. He was going from Sacramento to Portland, Maine, stopping in North Carolina to unload and reload. He ended up collapsing on the George Washington Bridge. He was forced by his doctor to stop working and accept disability benefits. The look in his eyes when talking about his lost career was one of devastation and regret. Earl just wanted to work.

For many in Middletown, Earl’s inability to work was a blessing in disguise. He moved to Middletown after being forced to retire and soon began visiting and volunteering at the St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen. He described the soup kitchen as a safe haven for many residents of Middletown and as a lifesaver for others. His look of devastation was replaced with a glimmer of hope as he described his time at the soup kitchen.

After seeing the horrors of war, the loss of his dream job, and the realization that he was not in fact indestructible, Earl offered a few valuable pieces of advice, which he hopes will strike a chord with the youth of Middletown: don’t do drugs, don’t lie, and don’t steal. “I would also like to see more young people going to church,” he added before we left the diner.

And, as we returned to the soup kitchen, Earl once again recounted the history of each building we passed.
“I’m Certainly Not Where I Should Be, But I’m Getting There”
by Evelyn Benvie

The first time Elsie set foot in the Saint Vincent de Paul soup kitchen, it was not her idea. She had better places to be back then, at age thirteen, better things to be doing with her time, better friends, better trouble. That was right after the soup kitchen opened, thirty years ago and a world away, and it was only because her big brother wanted her to volunteer there that she even bothered to go.

Elsie was born in Kansas to a family with one older brother, but spent most of her youth in Texas, where her mother remarried a man with three children. It was one of her two step-brothers who first introduced Elsie and her brother to drugs – marijuana. Elsie was only ten years old then, but already hooked. Elsie’s mother was a workaholic under a lot of stress, and did not always treat her children well; Elsie’s step-brother was abusive and using drugs and alcohol.

When Elsie was twelve years old, her mother left the South and moved to Middletown, Connecticut. Elsie had a hard time fitting in at first, with her slow Texas drawl, and had to try real hard to “learn to speak like Northerners.” Where they lived was isolated by apartments and condos, and frequented by frequent users, so that was the crowd Elsie fell in with.

At age thirteen Elsie was sent away to a farm in Oklahoma after an incident where a girl was murdered on her thirteenth birthday. Elsie had lied to her mother about sleeping over at a friend’s house, getting another girl to impersonate her friend’s mother over the phone, so that she could go to a keg party. The party was to be at the house of a 21 year old Vietnam vet, John. Elsie ate dinner with her family before going to the ‘sleepover,’ but fell asleep at home and missed the party. The next day she found out her friend had been bullying John, and he had snapped and murdered her.

So she was sent away to Oklahoma for a while. She was sent away again later, to a reform school, but she ran
away from there. Her mother threw her out, and Elsie stayed with her boyfriend. At sixteen she became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, Jamie. Neither she nor her boyfriend were capable of taking care of the child, and her mother had no interest in helping, so Elsie gave her daughter to her boyfriend’s parents.

Elsie returned to Texas, and traveled to California as well, around the age of eighteen. She went back to school and got her GED, then decided to enroll in nursing school. Elsie did not know what she really wanted to do with her life, but being a nurse seemed a good option because, she said, “everybody loved nurses,” and she wanted people to see her as being responsible.

She returned home to Middletown in the mid 1980s. When she tried to visit her own daughter, however, the child’s grandmother threatened to kidnap Jamie if Elsie ever got custody back. Jamie’s grandparents threatened Elsie when she tried to visit, and made it hard for her to see Jamie.

Elsie entered a two year nursing program at Middlesex Community College, and was almost set to graduate when she had to retake a pass/fail IV administering course. Elsie quit the nursing program, realizing she really did not like nursing.

Ultimately, Elsie ended up using again.
Her mother put her through rehab for a month, but one week out and she was back on drugs. Elsie worked as a waitress for the next fifteen years, and attended classes at Middlesex to finish her degree. She still went to school while using, but got her degree in her mid twenties and found work in the offices of ophthalmologists.

Elsie had a couple very bad relationships, the first lasting for about three years until she was thirty. He was handsome, and made good money, but spent it all on hookers, phone sex, and drugs. Elsie was almost ready to go to a shelter for abused women at several points in her life, and the end of their relationship was one of them.

Her next boyfriend took her away from going to a shelter, however, and moved with her to the North End. But he was a paranoid schizophrenic, and would flip-flop for seemingly no reason. In the end he broke up with her because he said she was “too old,” although there was little difference in their age.

After he broke up with her, Elsie sat in her apartment for three days, not eating, not knowing what to do or how to do it. Finally, she found the courage to go to the soup kitchen. It was not easy at first. The people there were not always nice to newcomers, they wanted to test her, they wanted
something from her, they wanted to sell drugs to her; at the start of the month, is when only the people who really need the soup kitchen eat there, Elsie said. The elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill. It is towards the end of the month that the druggies and troublemakers start coming in because their paychecks have run out.

But she worked hard to make connections, and the staff at the soup kitchen worked just as hard to get Elsie to the programs and meetings she needed. The soup kitchen helped Elsie when no one else would, when she had no one else to turn to. She had been homeless in Middletown, but she also said that “if you’re homeless in Middletown, then you’re really just not trying,” because there are so many programs available for those in need, and the soup kitchen will help people find them.

Elsie has even reconnected, slowly, with her daughter. Elsie found Jamie working on Main Street, and began seeing her as often as possible. Jamie no longer speaks to any of her grandparents, but has given both her mother and father a second chance at parenthood.

“I’m certainly not where I should be, but I’m getting there,” Elsie says of her life. She has been clean for three years after being high since age ten, has a new boyfriend who never did drugs, a nice apartment on the North End, and a computer, which she calls a huge step for her. Even the small joys of buying her own clothes and shoes is not lost on her.

The best advice Elsie says she could give is “It is not what happens in life, it is what you do with it. You can choose to rise down to the levels of those around, or you can pick yourself up and learn to love yourself and forgive yourself.”

Now, thirty years later, the soup kitchen is a home, a haven, and a helping hand to Elsie. Even though she does not need the soup kitchen, she still goes there anyway, out of habit, but also out of familiarity.

And she even volunteers there sometimes, just like her brother wanted her to.
“The soup kitchen provides opportunities for everyone, including the chance to develop positive social networks. It’s a very friendly environment.”
– Mike

“I’m glad it’s been open at night...I’d be in a lot of trouble without it....It’s helped me a lot.”
– Alexander

“These days the soup kitchen is about the 3 C’s: chow, chess and charity.”
– Fred

“God has blessed us with it and its staff.”
– Floyd

“...one big happy family”
“...the soup kitchen is the odd combination of a diversity forum and a family diner...the people are the greatest reason to come.”

“I am very grateful for the soup kitchen, that’s why I do volunteer work as often as possible...I don’t believe anything is really for free.”
– Richard

“The soup kitchen is full of people on both sides of the serving counter who know exactly what it is to be hungry and lonely.”
Clyde
by Natalie Marynczak with Brenda Lajara

Clyde Lando is a soft-spoken, middle-aged African American man. When we met he was well groomed, dressed in a button-down plaid shirt with dark trousers and leather shoes. In his gentle voice, with the hint of a hard-to-place accent, he spoke of his upbringing. Clyde was born outside the United States and came to the U.S. at the age of ten. Along with his four brothers and three sisters, he lived in a suburb of Hartford where his mother and step-father did “what they could, like all families do.” He waited patiently for me to finish each of my notes before he resumed speaking. “I still see my mother regularly and help her out by cutting the lawn and stuff like that. She was a good mother to me. She had to work hard with seven children. My step-father and I didn’t really see eye to eye but he didn’t really bother me.” Although it wasn’t easy, Clyde finished high school and held high expectations for his future.

Clyde spoke of early dreams of becoming a police officer. He remembered one particular officer who would visit his school and take the time to talk with him. This left a lasting impression on him. As he continued to share his story, Clyde was always polite but frequently looked away up toward the ceiling or out of the window that overlooks Middletown and the Portland Bridge. Maybe it was the emotions that came with the memories. “Most of the things that officer—I still remember his name—talked about staying away from, were things I did,” he said with a smile and a chuckle, “still, I looked up to him and I took the test to become a police officer, but I failed.” That initial failure was a blow he found difficult to overcome. “I was too embarrassed to try again.”
Clyde had avoided becoming involved with drugs all through high school but developed an addiction during adulthood. While he was able to attend college for a while, he then went through a series of jobs, some more meaningful to him than others. His face lit up and he was particularly animated as he remembered sales related employment that allowed him the opportunity to “go above and beyond to help people find what they needed.” Clyde remembered fondly being able to assist an NBA player find the right size shoes, not an easy task, and being generously rewarded with tickets to a game. It was not about getting something, though; it was helping others that made him feel better.

Presently unemployed and staying in a transitional living program, Clyde is trying to rebuild his life and he sees the program as a stepping stone. He admitted, “My life was unmanageable, even though I tried to do better for myself I still found myself returning to people, places, and things that held me back.” Now, Clyde has a supportive network and even though he “messed up a few times” he picked himself up and kept going. “Now I hang around positive people.” Clyde attends church regularly, as well as AA and NA groups. At the soup kitchen, Clyde has been able to fulfill that need to give back. As he sees it, “A lot of people helped me get to where I am right now.” He gets along well with one of the directors at Rushford and keeps in contact with his brothers. Clyde is not shy to admit that his mother “is the person he talks to the most.”

Clyde has regained a sense of optimism about his future. He is studying at the Lincoln Culinary institute, something that reminds him of the long ago days when he helped prepare food for all his siblings while his mother worked. One day he would like to open his own restaurant but for the moment he is focused on building his strengths, “I’m just doing me right now.”

One commitment Clyde has taken on is to prepare coffee for 50 people at 5 meetings a week at his support groups. A little trick he has for taking the bitterness out of the coffee is adding a pinch of salt. Everybody loves it. It is also a principle he applies to dealing with people who may show bitterness at life, “When people say something rude to me I pause and look at them and say ‘I love you, too.’ Clyde won’t allow his mistakes to hold him back anymore. He recognizes that immaturity caused him to “expect things overnight” and what he really needs to do is just “work at it. Keep doing the right thing, one day at a time.” Based on his own life experience, Clyde’s advice to listeners is “Never give up on yourself.”
Noreen Mouzon always wanted to take care of somebody. With five sisters, one brother, four cousins, her aunt Daisy, and her mother living in her childhood home, she always had that opportunity at hand; however, even with the large amount of people staying at her home, no one took care of her. Her home life was filled with a constant struggle for appreciation between her siblings, verbal and physical abuse from her mother handed solely to her, and a non-stop state of nursing her sick aunt. As a sixth grader in the Woodrow Wilson School, the only thing Noreen craved was a bit of acceptance, something she never felt at home. In search of this, she began skipping school and sneaking into the local high school. She started following the older students and, through drugs and alcohol, began to find a group of people who took her in.

By the age of 16, Noreen became known for “booking it,” or running away, from anything she did not care for. Through this reputation of running from school and home, she obtained the nickname “The Booker.” Experiencing this sense of approval from her peers for the first time, Noreen searched desperately to continue this newfound feeling.

She started joining gangs and increasing her drinking and drug usage, where she acquired more companions who she thought of as friends at the time. Nowadays she has reevaluated them as simply acquaintances. Young and naïve, Noreen was spiraling downward and her home life was only making things worse. Further emphasizing her feelings of inadequacy between her and her siblings, Noreen’s mother, tired of Noreen’s non-stop trouble making and pushed over the edge by Noreen’s fighting with her sister, told her specifically, “I don’t want you anymore.”

Noreen’s mother sent her away to Long Lane School, a juvenile detention center for girls committed by the juvenile courts. Although most people would hate this type of situation, looking back now, Noreen feels those at Long Lane School treated her well, especially compared to her life at home. However, she kept up her reputation as “The Booker” and snuck out often to attend parties and meet up with her friends.
Noreen continued her life of partying and bad behavior at Long Lane until the school simply could not control her anymore. They moved her to Elan School, another facility for troubled youths, in Poland Spring, Maine. Although Elan’s mission statement reads: “Elan’s purpose is not to change an ill-behaved child into a well-behaved child, but rather to return home a responsible young adult,” Noreen described the school rather as a boot camp. Her familiar unhealthy and dangerous lifestyle was quickly stunted due to rash forms of punishment.

According to Noreen, during one method of punishment, the perpetrator was forced into a boxing ring with the toughest student there and left to their mercy. Noreen did acquire a GED from Elan after two long years. Noreen also attempted to stay in touch with her mother who blatantly ignored any correspondence and visited only one time. Her brother, Carl, who stayed in contact, seemed to be the only loving figure in her life.

When released from Elan, Noreen returned to Middletown, Connecticut and, although she obtained a Park and Recreation job working with children as a playground instructor, she quickly fell back into her old habits.
Noreen describes her abuse of drinking and extreme drug use as completely losing herself. At the age of about 18–years–old, Noreen was caught stealing and sent to the York Correctional Institution, the state’s only female prison. By the time she was released, Noreen had no thought of where she was moving in her life. Her constant chase and struggle for acceptance seemed to never come to an end; she had only false hopes of change, which brought her more hardship.

Physically and mentally sick from her addictions, she finally turned to a safe harbor. St. Vincent de Paul Place, the local Middletown soup kitchen, welcomed her with loving arms and opened her eyes to the many resources offered to her. By enrolling her into programs, which offered financial and housing support, the soup kitchen pushed her in the right direction. She immediately grew a sense of independence and individuality as she worked with her case manager, another resource the soup kitchen offers.

For the first time in her life, she was able to live alone and enjoy her privacy. Her lifelong addiction to drugs and alcohol was ended by the sudden loss of a close friend to drugs and her own diagnosis of liver disease. Noreen began to find her footing in the world. However, perhaps one of the most important gifts given to Noreen by the soup kitchen was finally having a sense of family and acceptance. Noreen lovingly notes: “No matter what happens, I always have support from the shelter and soup kitchen.”

No longer referred to as “the booker,” Noreen has been clean for five months and is doing very well. Noreen’s newfound faith keeps her busy every Sunday as she avidly participates in church and “lives for the Lord.” She openly feels that “the struggle will set you free” in life and, even though she went through very difficult times, her efforts and strength to push forward has brought her to where she is now.

When asked what advice she would give to the world after overcoming her own past, Noreen answered with a smile, “If I can do it, you can. If you want it, grab it.” Although her feelings towards her family relationships have not changed, she has found a new family at the soup kitchen. Noreen Mouzon always wanted to take care of somebody; now she is taking care of herself.
Sam’s Story
By Loretta McCluskey

The lean, dark-haired man casually approached our small group seated around a table at the Soup Kitchen and asked if he could share his story. He assured us that he had been through a good deal in life and he wanted to tell us about it. Sam’s lined face had the stamp of time and experience, but what stood out most were his pale blue eyes. They had a gleam to them, hinting at a mischievous nature. As we introduced ourselves and shook hands with Sam, it was impossible not to notice that he was missing a few finger tips on his right hand. We settled in around the table to hear his story. He began by telling us about the lawnmower accident a year ago when he lost the tops of his fingers (“he should have known better”). He left the details to the imagination and we moved on to the story of his life.

Born in the early 1940s, Sam has spent his entire life in Middletown. Raised an only child, he refers to his parents as “wonderful” and he could not have asked for better. His childhood is one filled with fond memories of playing jacks, hopscotch, and jump rope with the girls in the neighborhood. When boys finally moved into the area, Sam and his new friends began camping in the nearby woods and riding dirt bikes. The dirt bikes were what Sam called “cheap entertainment” and they could go many places that others couldn’t on their pedal bikes. They were fortunate that there was a cabin in the area where they would stay and camp. He visited the cabin not too long ago and found only the chimney remains.

Like most young people, Sam had hopes and dreams for his future. He aspired to become a carpenter when he got older, but a tough time in high school led him to quit school at the age of 16. The deciding moment was a seemingly simple disagreement with a gym teacher. In response to the incident, the principal of the school gave Sam two choices: apologize or quit. Feeling he was falsely accused, he took the second option. It was a very difficult time in his life as his mother was ill and required multiple hospitalizations and surgeries. It was during these years that he first experienced, and battled, depression.
Sam has been married twice, the first time when he was 21. He has two daughters from his first marriage (Mollie and Jocelyn) and another daughter (Brittany) from his second marriage. He also has a total of six grandchildren. Sam feels that he is closest to his youngest daughter, Brittany, because he lived with her during the first 14 years of her life. They enjoyed fishing and spending time together while she was young. After he and his second wife divorced, Brittany moved with her mother to Michigan. Brittany calls her father often to check up on him and has tried to talk Sam into moving closer to her, but he is content to stay here for now. Sam and Brittany share a common bond—they both became born–again Christians together. His faith in God has helped him a great deal in life.

Sam spent much of his life doing factory work and, at times, worked two jobs to support his family. For 14 years, he was employed with Lyman Products and worked in the power measure room. For a time, he was put in charge of this area, but he was laid off in 1998 (at the age of 58) when the company was downsizing. Sam was unable to find another job and he wasn’t yet eligible for Social Security. To provide for himself, he traveled up and down the Connecticut River from Middletown to Old Saybrook, collecting cans from marinas along the way. Having a difficult time making ends meet, Sam came to St. Vincent de Paul’s Place and found “food, friendship, and companionship.” He has also found support, and enjoys attending church and sharing brunch on Sundays.

Currently, Sam is living in his childhood home but that will change soon. Unable to pay his back taxes, he recently lost his house and is now looking for a new place to call home. He is fortunate that a neighbor bought his former property, allowing Sam some time to find alternative housing. He admits it is difficult thinking about leaving his home, but he knows he must. Sam is also hoping to find part-time employment to supplement his Social Security. Not afraid of hard work, he has been cutting, bailing, and delivering hay in Durham, but it is not steady work.

From this lifetime of experiences, Sam has wisdom to share with others: “Be a man of your word. Be honest and stay well–groomed. Live for today and learn from mistakes.” And lastly, reflective of his spiritual journey, “Keep your faith in God because he is always there, not like people.” These are his words to live by.
Making a Better Life
By Paul Studdard

It was a humbling day on April 21, 2010, walking into a modest storefront located on Main Street in Middletown, Connecticut, filled with tables and chairs, and converted into a soup kitchen. That soup kitchen goes by the name: The Saint Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen. Maurice D., a soon to be thirty–year old father of four, was one of dozens of people there to get a warm breakfast and see the many friends he has made there over the years while getting a warm meal twice a day. Maurice has not always been a visitor to Saint Vincent de Paul: he was born in New York City and grew up on Madison Avenue attending school at PS 121 in Manhattan. His mother was a pediatrician with a practice in Manhattan. He didn’t know his father, and after his mother died when he was nine, foster homes throughout New York and Connecticut became his new home.

After many years of bouncing around the foster care system, Maurice D. settled in and attended Weaver and Hartford High Schools, graduating in 1998. He moved to Middletown in 1999, where he met his girlfriend, and soon to be mother, of his four children; ages twelve, nine, seven, and six. As in the world today, not all relationships last a lifetime, and
Maurice became depressed and has been homeless for the last four years after his relationship ended. However, he is able to keep a loving relationship with his children, seeing them on weekends and taking them fishing, skating, and to “their favorite” Six Flags Amusement Park. Maurice stresses to his children: “education is first and foremost in order to succeed in life.” He also points out that drinking and drugs are not a way to deal with the hardships life brings on by stating, “Drugs don’t work.” He found this out the hard way. Finding no support system for the homeless, he turned to drinking and drugs to solve his problems and has since found Saint Vincent de Paul.

Maurice calls Saint Vincent de Paul home and credits it as, ‘The Best Soup Kitchen in Connecticut.” While volunteering there for the past year, he is extremely thankful to all the staff. He calls it home but stays with a friend who lets him sleep in his apartment. At times, though, he’s been forced out due to drug use that he no longer condones. He awakens every morning and heads out to Labor Ready at 5:00 am to look for day laborer work. While not every day brings work, he manages to panhandle some change to get him through the day, and when needed, a local reverend will pick him up and let him perform some work around the church. Maurice acknowledges his biggest restriction to finding full-time employment is his lack of transportation. He notes he has had many jobs in the past, giving him an abundance of skills to use, such as masonry, construction, warehousing, and at one time working with a florist. Maurice has recently reconnected with his brother who hopes to be starting up a landscaping business, which will give him more of an opportunity. Landscaping will give him the chance to save some money and return to school.

One year from now, Maurice can envision himself back in school. He says: “there are no age restrictions to go back to school and learn,” and would love to give back to the community by becoming a social worker and helping those as in need as himself. Being very personable and knowledgeable in life’s problems, he states he tries to help those around him who struggle with some of the same problems he had endured. Maurice says, “I’m not interested in making a ton of money; I just want to make a living and be rewarded with helping others.”

Maurice is in the process of trying to get food stamps and health insurance through state agencies, but recently lost his wallet and is trying to prove his identity. Without employment and a means to prove who he is, he is in a tight situation. But Maurice has been in other tight situations. He has the will and determination to win and succeed in building a better life for himself and his children.
“You Relapse in Mind First”

By John Paul Bongiovanni

He walked down Main Street by the Holy Trinity church. He looked for her, Christy Bronson, the woman he had come to interview. After standing for a minute or two in front of the church, he decided to walk around the place, see if maybe the soup kitchen was a part of this church.

In the side alley he saw a woman walking in his direction. Something about her; maybe her eyes, maybe her movements, spoke deeply. There was a story behind those eyes, something sad yet strong. So as he neared her, he called out. “Good afternoon. Are you Christy Bronson?”

She simply answered “Yes.”

Christy Bronson grew up in New York City until the age of fifteen. She moved to Burlington, Connecticut with her parents and six siblings. This was the age she began using drugs. But it wasn’t the move or her family, which had no history of addiction, that made her do drugs. It was the overlooked problem of depression that was ravaging her mind. Back in the 60’s and 70’s people often didn’t get the help they needed, and most of them, like Christy, turned to self-medication.

Christy was able to overcome these youthful problems by the age of 26. She went to recovery meetings and really put an effort towards living a straight life. But the main reason Christy stopped was that she was now a mother. Her maternal instinct wouldn’t let her relieve herself of her duty. During this time she went back to school, earning a Masters Degree in social work from The University of Connecticut.

She enjoyed raising her children, watching her three offspring grow was her life. She watched as her babies turned into children, her children turned into teenagers, and then her teenagers turned into adults. As every parent knows, you have to let your children go then. You have to let them make their own lives. This is when the problem arose again.
Christy still enjoyed working as a case manager for the mentally ill, but with her children grown and moving on, things seemed empty—lonely. The depression began to creep up and rear its ugly head. Then came the wrong crowd—the bad boyfriend, and the slow decline.

“You relapse in mind first,” she explained. Then, at the age of 44 while at a party with her boyfriend, Christy made thought become action. When she was young, it was coke, now it was crack and heroin.

At first she kept up with her job. But as she rode the downward spiral, she began to be given lower jobs and work less frequently. It wasn’t too long before she found herself jobless. It didn’t take long for the bridges she had built with her loved ones to begin burning.

“That’s what hurt the most,” she said when reflecting on the time.

Things only got worse as her boyfriend began to become abusive—verbally and then physically. The addiction got worse, and Christy continued sinking. It became a bad cycle; she used because she was down, she was down because she used. Recalling the situation, Christy said that the addiction let her get abused and made her vulnerable to abusers.
Then, one day, Christy awoke in a dingy hallway on the downside of a binge. She was all alone. “I hit bottom—that was what I needed,” Christy said. “I don’t regret it.”

Christy began to break the habit. It wasn’t easy, especially since she was still with her abusive, drug–using boyfriend. Then, one clean day, he went at Christy again. But this time Christy found something the drugs had stolen from her—courage. She had her boyfriend drive her to the hospital where she got help. Telling them about her boyfriend, they sent policemen to the car. He ran, but later the cops caught up with him and held him for 35 days, just enough time for Christy to get out.

First, Christy lived at a shelter in Waterbury, then she moved to a women’s shelter in Middletown. Finally, she secured an apartment at a state housing complex. Today she goes to AA meetings, NA meetings, and she follows The 12 Step Program. It’s been months since Christy touched a drug and soon it will be a year. She even quit cigarettes a few days before our interview took place. Now she works to rebuild the bridges her addiction burnt, reconnecting with her siblings, children, and parents.

She says that the intuition is still there, that she can tell drug dealers from the normal citizen. She can pick out a drug deal going on, or know when someone nearby is getting high. She still has those addict senses from when she was a user.

“You can never turn it off,” Christy remarked. “I will always have that intuition.”

Yet even with her past being thrown in her face every time drugs come into the situation, Christy pulls through. Recovering from any addiction is hard, but Christy is a harder person. Her reservoirs of strength seem endless, just like her struggles.

When Christy was asked how she deals with her struggle, something so hard it claims many people’s lives every day, she simply responded “24 hours at a time.”
“The tables may hold food, but over them pass stories about love, visions of a world remade, religious prophecies, surprisingly detailed historical accounts, reminiscences about decades past, gossip around the town, and advice about coping with tougher times in life.”

“It makes it possible to survive.”
– Sandy

“People come in and out, no questions asked, anyone gets service, the doors feel permanently open, the personal and volunteer lives of the people at the soup kitchen blend; there is a sense of communal ownership.”
“The soup kitchen helps to relieve loneliness.”
- Sal

“It gave me my self respect back.”
- Larry

“It lifts my spirits when they are very low.”
- Susan

“It is nothing less than the centerpiece of a neighborhood life...”

“It’s awesome, our own little world.”
- Doug
Soup Stories
St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen
Middletown, Connecticut