



Northern Santa Barbara County

LIVE UNITED

By **Lena White**

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“Even if you find out that I relapse tomorrow, I want you to know that you are helping me. Because these 20 minutes that I’ve spent eating lunch with you are 20 full minutes that I haven’t been thinking about drugs or getting high. And that’s a victory.”

Assisting people who are experiencing homelessness as an AmeriCorps member this past year has made me reexamine my definition of success. Serving with the Santa Barbara Public Defender’s Office, I wanted to permanently house clients who were chronically homeless, connect clients who had co-occurring mental health disorders with effective treatment programs, and break the seemingly endless cycle of incarceration, all while ensuring my clients had access to basic necessities like food, soap, and clean socks. I was quickly met with a harsh reality. “You are not an apartment building,” my supervisor informed me on day one. I could not make housing opportunities appear out of thin air.

As for effective treatment programs, residential options for mental health treatment in Santa Barbara County are scarce and if my client had co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (as most did), they were completely out of luck. My dreams of being a hero in the courtroom also fell flat. While I could try to get bench warrants pushed back, if I could not locate a client in time, jail was often inevitable. So I was often limited to providing basic necessities, but those too, eventually ran out.

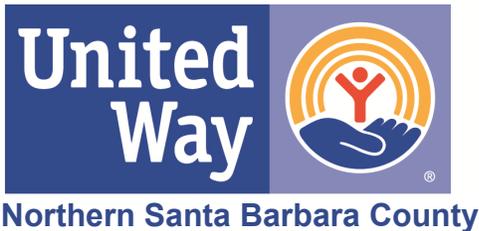
“There’s nothing else that you could have done,” my supervisor tried to console me. “It was the system that failed him.”

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I remember when I lost a client for the first time. He spent the last months of his life going in and out of the emergency room. The first (and last) time I saw him, I found him lying on the ground calling out for help. The EMTs knew exactly where I was, they knew my client by name, and, by the way they interacted with him, it was evident that calls like mine had become part of their daily routine. The law enforcement officer at the scene relayed that this was at least their fifth call concerning this man in three days. He explained that they wanted to help him, but it was bordering on abuse of emergency services. They had already gone as far as removing the pay phone across the street, because my client reportedly used it to call 9-1-1 too frequently. The officer told me that different community agencies had been trying to help my client for years, but that “he always refuses to go anywhere.”

This man was a Vietnam veteran in his seventies who had such inadequate access to support services that he spent the day lying in the dirt in a park, swaddled in hospital blankets and self-medicating with bottles of alcohol, because he had been banned from every local shelter and treatment facility for an inability to properly care for his colostomy bag. I have never seen a man who has needed help so much, nor anyone else who wanted help badly enough to call emergency services five times in three days. Now that he was desperate for someone to hear his cries, it felt like they were falling on deaf ears.

The EMTs disclosed that upon arrival to the emergency room, they would get him cleaned and sobered up, and then release him right back to the streets hours later, “because there’s never actually anything wrong with him.” His body was found in a park near the hospital on a Saturday morning. I was told he had been discharged the previous night.

“The saddest part? Oftentimes, we’re all they have,” the Public Defender of Santa Barbara told me. She recounted a time that she received a phone call informing her of the passing of a client she had worked with years prior. He had listed her as his next of kin, because she was the only person he could think of. “Sometimes we don’t know the full impact we have on clients just by being there for them.”

Throughout my time as an AmeriCorps member, I was often confronted by a sense of futility. I felt as if I had been tasked with plugging holes in a very leaky bucket and all I had been provided with were cheap Band-Aids. Some days I would manage to stick Band-Aids over a hole or two, but they would soon come off of those holes as well. Most, if not all, of the people I worked with had histories of significant trauma, the effects of which gradually took over their lives. Sudden deaths of loved ones, childhood prostitution, abusive parents, sexual assault, police brutality. I could not erase the

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effects of generations of institutional racism with my measly Band-Aids. But, sometimes, Band-Aids can facilitate the healing process even if they do not mend the wounds entirely.

“You make an old Black man’s heart smile.”

My clients taught me a key lesson that I always reminded myself of when I felt that I was not accomplishing enough: a victory is a victory, no matter how small. Taking a client out to lunch and distracting them from their addiction for twenty minutes is a victory. Bringing a client a pair of reading glasses from a dollar store because they could not afford them is a victory. Sharing a laugh is a victory. Getting a warrant pushed out a week is a victory. Obtaining a few days of motel vouchers is a victory. Taking a client to a medical appointment is a victory. Making someone feel heard and seen is a victory. Arranging transportation back to the shelter is a victory. Helping a mother acquire a copy of her son’s birth certificate is a victory. A trip to the emergency room can even be a victory. Sometimes bandaids *are* victories, because a victory is a victory, no matter how small.

“How do you make change? You’re already doing it! It’s all about spreading the love. That’s all it is.”

While all of my clients have struggled significantly, they have also demonstrated tremendous resilience. They encountered barrier after barrier after barrier and still kept on fighting. Sometimes they needed some extra advocacy, but I only encountered a few people who had truly given up. Seeing my clients continue to push through a system that seems determined to drag them right back down has shown me the importance of finding resilience in the face of adversity and making every victory count. I may not ever be able to solve all of my client’s problems like I initially set out to do, but we can all continue to fight for them. All it takes is a little love.

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