



“Every long or short journey begins with the First Step”

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First Step Thirty Years and Counting

Over three decades ago, Keith Giles had a dream and a repository of people that believed in his vision and abilities. Thirty three years later the dream flourishes as First Step Recovery Homes, Inc. continues its mission to provide supervised, temporary safe drug and alcohol free structured housing and recovery support services for persons recovering from the disease of addiction and trying to stay out of the criminal justice system in efforts to create sustainable recovery communities. The organization has assisted over 1,300 men address and overcome their struggles with addiction. More than 50 staff, consultants, clinicians and other professional have been employed to assist in fostering the dream throughout the years.



Jerry Stradford is one of many that has worked with Keith and has been part of First Step for over 20 years. He started as a case manager over seeing three programs and soon was promoted to supervisor handling a case load of 25 to 30 men living in three First Step houses. Stradford’s purpose of working at First Step and in the recovery field has remained solid throughout his career, “I am invested in helping people in recovery.”

Throughout his tenure Stradford says he has experienced and survived quite a bit. Budget cuts, low staff, no staff, no heat, the Corona virus Pandemic and a difference in the cliental. “In the beginning the men were all African Americans, but now we’re servicing at least 70 percent Caucasians. The men's backgrounds and religious affiliations vary. We have housed men from the criminal justice system, referrals from Megan's Law, former dealers and a variety of professions. But we’ve been able to be flexible and modify our services.

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Support of Life Saving Work

Since the first grant issued in 1998, The Pittsburgh Foundation has consistently supported First Step Recovery Homes in its structured housing and recovery programs for clients dealing with alcohol and drug addiction.

“The organization has an impressive mission to provide a recovery community that welcomes every person who wants to be part of it,” says Traci Johnson, the foundation’s director of grantmaking. “That aligns with our mission of evaluating community issues and addressing them with support where it is most needed.”



has received multiple grants Small and Mighty Program, to provide operating support to small, community-based organizations that historically have been overlooked in grantmaking. “First Step has been an effective contributor to the program’s goal of addressing poverty and inequity by providing essential human services,” says Johnson, and we congratulate the staff, board and supporters on 30 years of life-saving work.”

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First Step Residents Make Strides

In 1988 this section of the Recovery Report was titled “Former Residents Climb Ladder.” Twenty five years later this section can still be referred to its original title. As First Step embarks upon its 33 year, ladders are still being climbed as strides are being made. Branden Douglass, 36 and Richard Joint, 38 are perfect examples.

Grateful for the opportunity to work as a behavioral health technician at Pyramid Healthcare, **Branden Douglass** believes he was placed in the position to serve as an example. To utilize his life experiences to help others to break the strong hold of addiction. “It’s my life experiences and First Step that prepared me for this job.” Enthusiastically he explained that his duties include conducting one-on-one counseling, performing daily therapeutic group sessions, providing resources and acts as a unit monitor because he spends the majority of his time on the floor with the guys.

Several years ago Branden was in the same situation as the current Pyramid patients. From there he went to First Step Recovery Homes, a decision he qualifies as one of the best he ever made.

A long time East Pittsburgh resident, Branden recalls drinking and smoking weed as a teenager because his friends were doing it. They introduced him to various drugs which he says he enjoyed everyone of them. Reflecting on the

path of his life he identifies his environment as a root cause of his addiction. “My parents sold drugs, it was a life style”

Health issues, the death of his brother and not having anyone initiated the beginning of his sobriety. “I didn’t have any meaningful relationships. I was alone with no one that cared about me. I was trying to die, I just had no will to live anymore.”

In addition to his job, Branden says that for the first time in 20 years he

After spending six months in jail, and 20 plus years addicted to heroin and other drugs, the Erie native wanted something different for his life. Not needing to return to his hometown to live the same type of life, after Pyramid he enrolled in First Step. That was the first time he stayed in a structured atmosphere like a recovery, halfway house type situation. “It was the greatest decision I’ve made. Keenon, Jerry and Missy changed my life. They introduced me to the Community Kitchen program.”

Similar to First Step the Community Kitchen’s philosophy is that everyone is inherently worthy and has the potential to reach and exceed their goals, regardless of their past or present.

Their training program propelled Richard to a permanent position with the organization and as the saying goes, he has never looked back. He now resides in Hazelwood and has full custody of his two daughters. He also has plans to attend Community College of Allegheny County to receive his degree in culinary arts.

“A lot has happened in my life in the last couple years. I have went from my lowest point in life to now working a job that I enjoy, being a good example and better father and a supportive friend.”

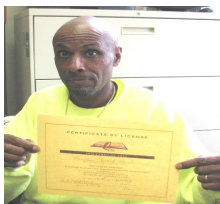
To those struggling to get or stay clean, Richard says it’s a mindset. “You have to make the decision, then take the first step and stick with it.”



has his own place, he recently purchased a car and is communicating with his family again. “I owe all this to First Step. Jerry was the first person I ever completely trusted. First Step was one of the first experiences I’ve had where people cared about me, wanted to help me and only wanted to see me succeed. They changed my life.”

Like Branden, **Richard Joint’s** path to recovery began at a Pyramid Healthcare facility.

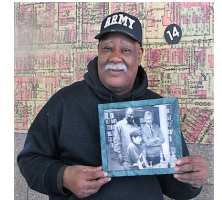
Former Makes Stride Residents



Rev. Ed Houston (L)
Charles White (R)



Patrick Murphy (L)
Donald Boyd (R)



Inside First Step

Those operating non profit organizations in any field can attest to the need of partnerships and groups working together to accomplish a unified end goal. Staff at First Step Recovery Homes have partnered with many organizations over the years relishing the relationships, and continue to grow their network. Action Housing, Inc. is one such partner.

“ I have known Keith Giles for more than 30 years and deeply respect the work that he and his organization does, says Larry Swanson, Executive Director of Action Housing, confirming why they are involved with the First Step 330 Penny Street restoration project. In building which housed seven men, amount of damage.

Labeled as Pittsburgh’s largest improve their lives by offering quality, Step in their rehabilitation process.

Swanson says ACTION Housing the 800,000 dollar financing needed to initial project design. The design firm with has been hired to complete the project working with McKeesport-based Coker Construction Companies owned by Edward A. Coker.



non-profit developer, which exists to help people affordable housing has committed to assisting First

will work with First Step to secure the balance of redevelop the site as well as provide help with the of Tink and Design, an architect firm they work

Delighted to be a part of the team, LeTaj Tinker owner of the firm says the project will occur in phases with the first consisting of designing the layout of the work and obtaining permits, documents and drawings. He anticipates that the ground breaking for construction can take place in July 2024. “This is a great project and we are glade to be a part of this partnership with First Step Recovery Homes, Action Housing and Coker Construction Companies. “

Thirty Years and Counting

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Reasons why Stradford believes First Step has been around for 30 years and why people respect Keith’s dream is because most of the direct staff that works with the men understand their plight. “We have been through what they are experiencing and no one judges.”

Arrested 12 times and until he reached what he considers the bottom of his life in all areas due to his addiction is why he can relate to the residents. “My story is not that much different.” He says he casually started smoking weed and drinking in the tenth grade to be grown. While attending the University of Detroit, pledging a Greek Fraternity and becoming a top dog on campus by his sophomore year he was addicted to heroin and using PCP regularly. After returning to Pittsburgh he got involved in the IBEW apprentice program and worked around the area for about 10 years while his addiction progressed until 1986. The last 36 years he has been working in the field. “I understand addiction in all ways which gives me a unique way to relate to the guys. They trust me and that’s important.”

Stradford estimates that there is always going to be a need for a First Step and similar organizations. Recently becoming a State of Pennsylvania Drug and Alcohol Licensed facility he says helps them to continue to be the model recovery house. “We bring consistency as we strive to receive county, state, and federal dollars. Our vision for First Step is to continue creating a recovering community and establish more housing opportunities as we work to save lives and reunite men with their families.

Board & Staff Box

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- Richard Giles
- Yvette Giles
- George Jones
- Gretchen Lowery
- Dennis Robinson
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- Nichelle Rose Jerry Stradford
- Samantha Van Zandt

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- Diane I. Daniels Annette Tyler
- Delbert Tyler Marilyn Williams
- Robin Horston Spencer

Climbing The Stairs To Recovery...

Director's Message



This has been a trying year for First Step, but also a blessed year. A devastating fire destroyed one of our properties in March, the blessing is that the four residents that were in the property were not injured. It just so happened that four vacant beds were available in one of our existing facilities. Now the journey begins to rebuild with the goal to house 14 homeless men.

First Step Recovery Homes will be celebrating their 33rd Anniversary on August 26th at Renziehausen Park in McKeesport. Our mission continues to be serving homeless men suffering from the disease of addiction and those being released from the criminal justice system without permanent housing.

As we prepare for the celebration, we would like to take this opportunity to thank those that have assisted us on our journey.

Without agencies such as UPMC (John Lovelace), four different mayors of McKeesport, (John Bindel), (James Brewster), (Wayne Kusick), & (Mike Cherepko) we would not be able to fulfill our mission. Also, the foundations that so graciously provided grants to help fill gaps in our budget; The Pittsburgh Foundation, PNC Charitable Trust, Staunton Farms Foundation, Scaife Family Foundation, Poise Foundation, Arthur & Janet Innamorato Family Fund, Forbes Fund, Hillman Foundation, McKeesport Hospital Foundation, Jefferson Regional Foundation, and a very special thanks to the Primary Care Health Center, my mentor the late Mr. Wilford Payne, Dr. Jerome Gloster and the staff.

Finally, we sincerely appreciate the homage shown by means of the proclamations from United States Senator Robert Casey, Jr., State Representative Matthew Gergely & State Senator Jim Brewster recognizing First Step through adherence to the highest standard of service, and to the principles of fairness, reliability, and integrity. "They have become leaders in the community and a model that is worthy of emulation."

I am truly humbled and know that we must all find our true purpose in life. "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or as Beethoven composed music, or as Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."

The Recovery Report

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