



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

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Area Funders Provide Support For First Step

Finances more often than not seem to be a chronic issue for regional small and medium size nonprofit organizations in the best of times.

The year 2020 will go down in history as challenging and creative for organizations that were able to sustain. “It has been interesting times,” says Keith Giles, the executive director of First Step Recovery Homes, Inc. Operating for 29 years he says, “We have experienced rough funding situations before, but COVID has created a different set of issues.”

Recognizing the critical needs in the Black community resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the POISE Foundation created The Critical Community Needs Fund designated to provide support to small and mid-sized Black Led Organizations serving the most vulnerable members of the Black community in the Pittsburgh region. First Step received \$20,000 from the Fund.

Mark S. Lewis, President and CEO of the POISE Foundation commented, “As we have seen across the nation, the Coronavirus has had a devastating impact on communities of color, and in particular the Black community. We have also seen

that many of our small to mid-sized Black led organizations and businesses have been left out or left behind from accessing many of the government relief programs. These are often the very organizations that are nimble, cost effective and have deep and intimate relationships with the people they serve. It is our hope that this fund will assist many of these organizations to continue their care for our community.” The CCNF grant has raised over \$1.1 Million so far and pushed out \$982,000 in grants to 94 local Black Led Organizations, according to POISE officials.



With the purpose to improve the quality of life in the Pittsburgh region by evaluating and addressing community issues, promoting responsible philanthropy and connecting donors to the critical needs of the community, The Pittsburgh Foundation continues to understand the value of work conducted by First Step Recovery Homes. Sharing values and committed to providing housing and support services for persons who are recovering from the disease of addiction.

In 2020 The Pittsburgh Foundation in a double portion has provided their support to First Step by way of granting \$15,000 towards the Family Reunification Program and funding has been provided by the Arthur and Janet Innamorato Fund.

With the motto, “Taking the first step towards a brighter future” the Family Reunification Program is designed to bring stability to family units through assisting with healthy family interaction, education and to provide the identification, prevention/intervention for children and youth utilizing a family assessment tool.

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First Step Residents Make Strides

Mention the organization First Step Recovery Homes, Inc. to people throughout Allegheny County and the reaction falls in positive favor. Reactions include politicians, funders, other organization leaders and the general public. But to the 700 or more former residents First Step is a life saver. Donald Rindfuss, Richard Vanholt, Nathaniel Watson and Anthony Williams attest to the life saving work of the organization.

“First Step really changed my life enabling me to accomplish some of my life goals,” says **Donald Rindfuss**. Sixteen years after entering his fourth rehab facility he has obtained a drivers license, attended the Community College of Allegheny County and graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a Masters Degree in Social Work. He is also a licensed clinical social worker and certified advanced alcohol and drug counselor. Now retired, he reaches back and helps others going through the addiction struggle by facilitating groups and case manages on a parttime bases at First Step.

A ninth grade dropout residing in South Florida Rindfuss remembers his first drug of choice as being alcohol later advancing to marijuana. “I grew up in the 70’s when smoking pot and drinking was the cool thing to do.” He was introduced to the lifestyle by his father who drank a lot. “As a kid I use to steal his booze and go to a friend’s house to drink.” Hanging out in area parks he recalls his friends giving him marijuana where he says he evolved into a “long haired hippie.” In the mid-seventies in an attempt to turn his life around he spent two years in the United States Airforce but realized it was not for him and returned to Florida and began doing construction and electrical work which provided him the opportunity to travel. His continuous

drinking and drug abuse caused him his marriage, three failed rehabilitation attempts and jail time. In 2001 he relocated to Pittsburgh at a time he labels as “the lowest and worst time of his life.” The Pyramid Rehabilitation Center and later First Step at the age of 47 initiated a life change. It is the last rehabilitation center he has needed. His First Step journey has included him becoming house manager which provided the opportunity to bond with the residents and realize his calling. Today he has met his goals and maintains his first sober relationship, a marriage of over ten years. His advice to anyone thinking about experimenting or struggling with drugs or alcohol is to seek help. “There are many people and organizations out there providing help. Even people in recovery contemplating using again he says needs to reach out.”



In agreeance with Rindfus, **Richard Van Holt** encourages those that are serious about their recovery to utilize support services, to continue their treatment plans and to reach out when needed.

A Homewood native, at the innocent age of 11 he recalls assisting his parents in cleaning up left-over alcoholic beverages after socials and parties they often held. He also mentioned a strong love for his uncle who was a heroin addict. He began sipping alcohol as a kid and by middle

school he advanced to marijuana and as a young adult was experimenting with heroin and other drugs. “I have shot drugs from my late 20’s which adds up to most of my problems,” he assesses.

Clean since 2016 and now age 53, Van Holt’s life experiences have been eventful. He experienced the killing of his stepfather at the hands of his father, spent 13 years in the penal system and along with his drug addiction suffered with a level of depression. A graduate of Connley Trade School he confesses that he has had “numerous opportunities and good jobs,” but drugs and the carnage of his past always interfered with his success. A participant of the County Mental Health Court system and with 18 months clean he entered First Step and even then, had to undergo attitude and behavior adjustments.

Fast forwarding to current times, Van Holt says, “I’m loving me.” Grateful to First Step for assisting in changing his life he is working toward gaining employment in the recovery field which he is excited about. Grateful to CORE, ACTA, First Step and the recovery community Van Holt says his five years of being clean is a new way of living; “And I’m thankful for it. Really, I value my clean date more so than my birthday because February 6, 2016 is really my birthday. Just waking up and not being committed to using is a good day and I thank God for that.”

The best way to not get hooked or addicted to drugs and or alcohol or to begin reusing is not to pick up the first drink or take the first hit, is the advice of **Nathaniel Watson**. “It’s the first one of anything that gets you. The first hit, the first drink. All those years I spent thinking that it was the in between one or the last one. I spent all those years out in the streets trying to get that first hit.”

A Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania native, Watson’s acquaintance to drugs began as a teenager while hanging out with the fellas. **(Continued on page 4)**

Inside First Step

Years of dedication and sacrifices has brought Keenon Mikell’s long time dream to fruition. Smiling broadly, he announced that it is done. In December of 2020 he received his Bachelor’s Degree in Social Work from California University of Pennsylvania. With a 3.997 grade point average he proudly recognizes that he graduated in the top one percent of his class. Previously he received his Associates Degree from Community College of Allegheny County as well as certifications in the field of Drugs and Alcohol. His goal is to acquire his Master’s Degree in 2021.



A case manager and life coach at First Step Recovery Homes, Mikell not only serves as a role model to the residents he is a father of five and involved in the community.

Imagine a group of burly guys sitting around making candles. Projected by the spring of 2021, many First Step residents might be working with Sheree Kegley the owner of Bleu Pretty Candles. A participant in the entrepreneurial program of the Mon Valley Launchbox, an initiative between Penn State Greater Allegheny, Invent Penn State and the city specializes in custom



of McKeesport, Kegley’s business candles and wax melts.

“I am excited about the Pretty,” says AzikiWe component.”

opportunity to work with Bleu Abdul Alghafur. “I like the spiritual

Starting her homebased outstanding quality candles now finds her workload Starting her homebased outstanding quality candles now finds her workload Starting she will be able to not only provide employment, but also provide them with life skills to carry along their journey.

business with the intent to provide candles at reasonable prices, Kegley overwhelming. Working with First

Fresh Steps

Even though 2020 was a challenging year, Keith Giles, executive director of First Step Recovery Homes, Inc. and Rabbi Moishe Mayir Vogel, executive director of the Aleph Institute N.E. Region remain committed to their desire of establishing a Delancey Street style project in the Pittsburgh region. Using the name Project FRESH (Family-Recovery-Education & Employment-Sustainability-Housing,) the two organizations are striving to create alternative sentencing opportunities for those committing crimes instead of serving jail time. “We can’t let the coronavirus deter us,” they say even though possible funding sources have been at a standstill. The virus has also put a hold on their monthly meetings with the steering committee.



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First Step Supports Mom’s Group

In December of 2018 Jyjuan A. Brock an inmate housed in the Indiana County Jail penned a letter to Carmen Anderson, the Heinz Endowments’ director of equity and social justice. He was responding to comments made in a newspaper article concerning criminal justice reform and their three-year commitment of \$10 million toward possible programs to be utilized to reduce the number of Pittsburgh-based African Americans in the criminal justice system and reducing the “school-to-prison” pipeline.

As a result of his efforts, his mother Angela Brock has picked up the mantle and with the assistance of other mothers of incarcerated sons have been working with Anderson to spear head efforts to address a few issues contributing to the disproportionate number of African American youth ending up in the criminal justice system. Their focus is to advocate and support loved ones that are or have been incarcerated. Since the initial meeting of Mothers On the Move, First Step has been at the table with Brock and the mothers working with Anderson on The Restoration Project-A Justice System Reform Strategy. “Initiatives like this fit our vision to provide preventive measures to addiction and to assist men in transition from incarceration. One of our main goals is to prepare and work with our residents and men to assist them in staying drug and alcohol free,” explained Keith Giles, First Step’s founder and executive director.

The three-point mission of MOMs is to act as a voice for the voiceless; to serve as a negotiator between the system, the inmate, and their family by providing information, needed resources and by providing referrals that meet the family’s needs inside or out of the criminal justice system and to provide the family and inmate hope.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the monthly meetings hosted by the Heinz Endowments have been on hiatus, but according to Brock during the first quarter of 2021 the plan is for meetings to resume by way of video conferencing meetings.

First Step Residents

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"I took that first drink and first hit of weed and said ohhh I like this, and it went from there," he recalls. He became a resident of First Step in 2006, after completing a program at White Deer Run in Allentown. Kicked out of the nest after 17 months, laughing he says, "My time was up, but I didn't want to leave." Since leaving he has been married nearly six years, has graduated from the Bidwell Training Center, and has an associate degree in communications from the University of Phoenix. He has worked several jobs with the last at PPG Arena.

Realizing that everyone is different he says for some aiming to break their habit the best way for them to maintain their sobriety is to attend meetings or share with others, but for him knowing his self is best. At 62 he says, "I know I have an addictive personality. So, the best thing for me is to stay away from it. I don't let the disease lie to me anymore." His advice to those trying to get out of the life is to make sure they are ready to stop. "You can't do it for anyone else. You must be sure. You have to be sick of being sick 'n' tired.

Staying clean did not start out as an easy task for **Anthony "Tony" Williams**. But he is now working on his 16th year of being drug free. As a sophomore at Westinghouse High School, he started smoking weed and drinking. Thinking back remembering seeing his mother and stepfather getting high he says, "I couldn't wait to start getting high because I wanted to have fun like they were having." He noted that back then they did not suffer the consequences as he did; like losing everything like their house or getting a divorce.

Upon graduating in 1978 he attended Florida A&M University with the hopes to stop drinking and getting high, but that did not happen. Not realizing he had a disease, he got progressively worse. Five years later he returned to Homewood and continued the lifestyle graduating to crack cocaine which he says was the beginning of his end. His first treatment started with the cycle continuing for over two decades. In 2004 he entered First Step where he says the staff poured into him, he stayed clean nine months. Things happened and he spent 10 days in jail which gave him clarity about his life and he requested to return to First Step. When he returned, he said they loved on him from the inside and he cleaned his self-up and returned to his job at the Penny Saver for the third time. He worked there from 2005-2016. But initially started in 2001.

Grateful for his life experiences, Williams feels he is fortunate to be alive to share his story. In 2008 he suffered a massive heart attack. "I died behind the wheel," he explained. But because I was clean, I was able to survive." Four years later he suffered a stroke in his sleep and in June of 2016 he had a second massive heart attack and received a triple bypass. "My life is nothing, but an extension of God's grace and mercy and it all started with First Step."

As his way of giving back to First Step he has served on their board of directors and one year during the D&A Convention held at Seven Springs Resort he rented a house enabling the residents to attend the convention. "For some of the guys it was their first convention and first time leaving Pittsburgh." He continues organizing the local and several regional NA Conventions as his way of thanking the NA community in helping him save his life. Admitting that it was a struggle he says it took him 20 years. Now 60 years old and 16 years after residing at First Step, Williams remains grateful for their services. "I can never repay them for giving me the life I have today."

Fresh Steps

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Like First Step, the Aleph Institute North East Region addresses the needs of people incarcerated except their focus is the Jewish community. Located in Squirrel Hill, throughout the years Rabbi Vogel has built strong relationships between Rabbis, inmates, chaplains, and state officials resulting in the capabilities to provide essential programs for incarcerated individuals and their families assisting the national organization to evolve into one of the nation's most effective advocacy groups for Jews.

With the work First Step and the Aleph Institute have been conducting throughout the region for the past several decades, the goal is for FRESH to form a facility utilizing the Delancey Street model, based in San Francisco, California. Strengthening their work with men and women recovering from the disease of addiction and that have been incarcerated, the goal is to provide safe, long-term housing combined with wrap-around services, education and employment, and the reunification with families.

Have a safe and Prosperous

2021

First Step Host State and County Officials

Politics over the last four years locally and nationally has been an interesting and educational process for individuals, entrepreneurs and non-profit directors the like. One of the few African American owned and operated organizations located and operating in McKeesport, a Mon Valley community 16 miles from the city of Pittsburgh, the board and staff of First Step Recovery Homes view it necessary for elected officials to be aware of the people, businesses and organizations living and operating in the once thriving steel mill community.

McKeesport native State Representative Austin Davis and Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald visited First Step, a 29-year-old organization providing needed services to a population of homeless men recovering from chemical dependency. Residents and staff provided a tour of their facilities and had the opportunity to discuss issues and share ideas with the aspirations to bring an awareness of neglect in the community and national pandemic of drugs.

Non Profit Groups

(Continued from page 1)

“With the type of year, we had in 2020, it is essential that we begin reestablishing healthy relationships and reuniting families. It is our belief that if our participants take part in community programs to develop their interpersonal skills that it is more likely that they remain in permanent housing and become a positive role model for their children and within the community,” says Keith Giles.



The Blessing Board

A non profit organization, The Blessing Board provides donated household furnishings to those in need at no cost in response to what God has done for them. Serving approximately 1,300 families yearly their main facility is located in Oakmont and they operate at the First Step warehouse at 820 Market Street. To donate or for assistance call 412-828-1023 www.blessingboard.org



Climbing The Stairs To Recovery...

Director's Message



“ This has been a year like no other at First Step Recovery Homes, actually unusual would be an understatement. Because of the coronavirus that has ravished our community and nation, it is no longer business as usual. An old African Prover states (THE ONE WHO INHERITS A HILL, MUST CLIMB IT .) Our intake and assessment procedure has changed. We have to scrutinize all new perspective residents in order to assure our exiting residents are protected.

Safety has become paramount at First Step because of COVID-19 putting our staff and residents at risk. This year our budget calls for additional line items being put in place to assure safety to the public, residents and staff.

We pride ourselves in providing wrap-around services consisting of; Personal growth and development, Establishing permanent housing, Directing residents towards employment, education and independent living, Budgeting, Proper dieting, House keeping, Personal Hygiene and basic life skills. We also encourage resume writing and interviewing techniques to increase marketable skills to raise their self-esteem.

Families are one of the most important commodities in our community, and we understand that father's are truly an integral part of the family. Today's alarming statistics reveal that only 20 percent of African American households are headed by men. Most of the deterioration in the role of back father's is socioeconomics in origin, with drugs/alcohol playing a major role. One of the greatest influences in a young mans life, is the relationship he has with his father. He not only has to be there physically, but also psychologically to help create a well rounded individual.

The criminal justice system and incarcerated father's becomes a major facture, challenging our expertise in Mental, emotional, health/wellness and spiritual growth of our consumers. It is absolutely necessary that each consumer be in touch with these attributes before leaving our facility.

Please be aware that one out of every three families in Pennsylvania experience some form of addiction. We are committed to empowering families to navigate the complex dynamics of addiction and recovery. We must continue to focus on the family as the fundamental element in the community for healing.

(The greatest good we can do for one another, is not just to share our riches, but to reveal them to their own.)

The Recovery Report

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Board & Staff Box

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- Diane I. Daniels Annette Tyler
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First Step Recovery Homes Inc. provides supervised, temporary, safe drug and alcohol free structured housing for persons recovering from the disease of addiction and trying to stay out of the criminal justice system.