

Connie and Cinthia's Story

Connie and Cinthia are supportive-housing caseworkers at our new sober-living facility, Providence House. They agreed to answer a couple of questions about the holidays, how their perception of homelessness have changed since working with vulnerable populations, and what home means to them and the clients they work with.

Cinthia's house is bustling with family and friends around the holidays. And good food. "We get together at my house, and usually have traditional Mexican food" says Cinthia "My favourite foods around the holidays are Ensalada de Manzana and Sweet Potato Casserole".

Connie's holiday gathering is much the same. "We usually get together at my brother's house for the holidays. We love decorating the tree and putting up lights." "My favourite foods around the holidays would have to be vegan mashed potatoes, tofurkey (vegan turkey), and carrot coins with brown sugar and cinnamon."

When I ask how their thoughts about homelessness have changed since starting to work at Alpha House, they're thoughtful and introspective for a few moments.

"I realized how complex the system is behind the scenes," Connie offers. — "that it isn't all that easy to get housed, especially when you're struggling with addictions and other mental health issues. There are barriers every step of the way for our folks." Alpha House works directly with individuals experiencing homelessness and struggling with addiction. It's a subset of the population we have a lot of experience with, but it doesn't make witnessing their struggles any easier.

“With addiction you have executive dysfunction, fetal alcohol syndrome, and other mental health illnesses that you have to account for when supporting people. You can read about behavioural challenges in the DSM-5 all you want [referring to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders book], but you really learn what that all means when you work with them first-hand.”

It's a sobering part of social services work; that things are much more real and much more complex than any of us wants them to be. We want clean cut solutions and clear paths towards wellness. We want to hold someone's hand and walk with them to health and stability. But the path is often uncertain and almost always tumultuous.

Cinthia has some thoughts to add after her ponderings. “They [clients] get their stuff stolen all the time— their lives are in their backpack!” She doesn't say it to suggest minimalism in the favourable way but to acknowledge a common challenge for individuals on the street – they often don't have the things they need. Another difficulty that rankles her is the barrier our clients on the street face in obtaining critical documentation, “Even a baby has a birth certificate and all this other government paperwork but, for our clients, it's an incredibly arduous process to get some of this documentation., If they're on the streets, they often lack a usable home address, government ID, birth certificate, etc.”. “You also see a lot of prejudices that your family and friends have around these issues and that can be hard sometimes.”

Where is a safe place to vent about a frustrating or upsetting day when your supposed shoulder to lean on tells you you're wasting your time. "But you have to do your best to educate them," She says matter-of-factly.

What about the clients they work with, I ask. What's it like for them during the holiday season. Connie and Cinthia share a sad look, "There's lots of depression around the holidays; many people pass away around this time or shortly afterwards. They hold out until the holidays to see their loved ones one last time. They also tend to isolate due to those feelings around family and the holiday season."

At Alpha House, we recognize that these difficult emotions don't just disappear because they have housing now. It's one of the reasons we're grateful for any opportunity to create and build community in the building, to decorate, host communal meals, and engage clients in conversation. Sometimes it's about acknowledging the pain of the past but learning to build new memories.

Can they share a memory of a recently impactful client, I ask. This time they don't have to think long. Connie beats Cinthia to it. "One client, Daniele, had a big impact on me because I was able to personally help her. When she was struggling, I was the one who got her to the psych ward where she got into treatment and she's been mostly sober to this day. She isn't here at Providence House anymore. She chose to move in to another one of Alpha House's buildings to get a fresh start. I'm really proud of how far she's come."

“Nicole probably had the most impact on me.” Cinthia jumps in, speaking of one of Alpha House’s high needs clients. , “She was always high-intox, was on the most medication, and required a lot, if not the most, supports in the building at the time. She absolutely refused to go to detox, and her health was deteriorating Then suddenly, we find out that she checked herself into our detox program. After completing the detox program, she wanted to go back to managing her substance use instead of sobriety. but staff encouraged her to try sobriety for a bit— in large part so she could have the chance to see her children again.”

Nicole, throughout this time, was working with caseworkers to try and get visitation rights to see her kids. A big factor that influences this decision is sobriety.

“She was finally able to see her kids again a couple of months ago,” Cinthia says with a glowing smile,— “after years of working on improving her situation and providing updates to caseworkers. Seeing how strong she is, and the effort she now puts into staying sober for herself and her kids is so heartwarming. It’s encouraging to see people change. It acts as a reminder that you are helping, even if sometimes it doesn’t feel like you are.”

Cinthia concludes, with perhaps the best summary of Alpha House’s approach to homelessness and addiction: “Some people need more time and support than others.”