THE HAVEN, STEVENAGE

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HOMELESS PEOPLE DIE UNNOTICED, LIKE LEAVES FALLING FROM TREES IN AUTUMN … With this in mind, the visibly moved Policy Director of 'Crisis', interviewed on Channel 4 News a little while ago, concluded: 'We need to treat people as human beings'. He described the continuing rise in numbers of homeless people dying on the street so far since last winter (133 - 35% of them related to drugs and addiction, with an average age of 47) as both 'beyond appalling' and 'a national disgrace'.

With another winter approaching, The Haven will be providing extra beds for rough sleepers when the temperature drops to below freezing for three nights on the run, just as it always does. It's a sensitive time of the year, coming up to Christmas. Not only because it's getting colder: we need to bear in mind that vulnerable people aren't immune to the expectations of the season. One of our most consistent supporters is onto this already (see Access Self-Storage, Stevenage's early plans for residents at The Haven, below). See also another trip up a mountain, our final story – an illustration that facing a mammoth challenge can turn out to be longer lasting than the trappings of Christmas.

This newsletter features a profile of one of this year's 'movers-on' from The Haven. Jenny describes the rather unusual circumstances which led her to take shelter there, and how her sojourn has helped her to begin again, after confronting her own challenges with much courage.

The people of Stevenage are never slow to support our homeless people with ingenious methods of fundraising, as we celebrate in this newsletter once again, and we may be cautiously optimistic that in Hertfordshire, at least, one of the main obstacles to tackling homelessness in the community – the business of relevant support agencies providing joined-up care so vulnerable people don't slip through the net - is already evidenced by The Haven's long-standing working ties with bodies representing aspects of the law and health. Homeless Link, the national campaigning group, reminds us that hospitals, jobcentres and prisons now have a *duty* to notify local authorities when they think someone may be homeless or at risk of homelessness. So it's not necessarily that people who are in a position to provide support are ignorant of the rise in homelessness. On a positive note, Homeless Link lets us know that some councils already have measures in place, such as improving discharge procedures in hospitals and offering ongoing medical care for homeless people.

For St Mungo's in London, preventing rough sleepers from returning to the street is every bit as hard as getting them off it. This is where the continuing support received by people like Jenny most crucially comes into play, as you will see.

GOOD TURNS THAT MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

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RESTAURANTS OF STEVENAGE, YOU ARE AMAZING. Can anyone be quicker to respond to an urgent call for help than you? The gas oven at The Haven was on the blink for some days – not good news for 41 residents who needed to be fed. Quick off the mark was Papa Johns Pizza in the Old Town. Next to step up was Nandos at the Leisure Park, when Manager Paul kindly donated dinner for the night. Heroes!

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A BATTLE OF THE TITANS

It might have been sweltering (remember those days?) but a Quiz Night fundraiser held at Springfield House, Stevenage, during the summer, raised nearly £200 in support of The Haven. Eleven teams took part, including 'BBC 6' (seen below holding small cups) and 'Diamond Geezers' (with their medals). They were all diamond geezers, particularly Quizmaster Jeff, Asda, Stevenage, for donating refreshments, Barnaby's the Florist, The Cromwell Hotel, Aston Bakery, and Springfield House for the venue, and Trustee Rosa Manning. The sheer imagination of the organisers, plus the huge effort behind the scenes to get this show on the road were spectacular. Thank you!

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YES, CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS ARE ALREADY UNDERWAY AT ACCESS SELF STORAGE. For the seventh year running, staff have nominated The Haven to be the beneficiary of their annual Christmas Appeal in the community. Since the campaign began seven years ago more than 4,500 donations have been collected. As we go to press, a 50-square-foot room at Access Self Storage, Stevenage is gradually filling up with this year's donations (the cut-off date is December 14). Local residents and businesses are invited to drop off chocolates, biscuits and toiletry gift packs there for men and women being helped by The Haven.

This was last Christmas's effort, when 200 toiletries were collected. L-R: Vicky Ward, (housing support worker at Stevenage Haven), Ian Girvan (Store Manager) and Frankie Packard (Project Manager, The Haven)

Barbara Howard, Director of The Haven, says: 'We are so thrilled that Access Self Storage, Stevenage, has chosen us for another year. These gifts donated by our local community really do help to put a smile on people's faces over the Christmas period. It's a tough time for many, not least the homeless, and community support such as this is a powerful message that their community is thinking of them.'

Access Self Storage Manager Ian Girvan agrees. 'Working annually with Stevenage Haven we have become close to the charity and the tireless work they do. We are really looking forward to working with the community to make this our best year yet. It is so heart-warming to know that people are going out of their way to think about others they don't even know, especially at such a busy time of the year.'

THEY PICKED A FINE DAY FOR IT, a group of generous and energetic young people who took to the streets to raise money for The Haven. A BIG CLAP for the local National Citizens Service team which raised £236.50. Rhian Turk's willing young people did a town collection with 'Borough Bear' in August, followed by a pay-and-play basketball and football event at Bardwell Upper School. 'As part of our third week [of community service] we are giving back to the local community. We feel strongly about the local issues you deal with regarding the homeless.' Well, The Haven says thank you so much, all who gave up their time to take part to raise such an astounding sum.

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SUMMER NIGHTS: REMEMBER THEM?

Who could resist? The dining room at The Haven was packed for one of its most popular lunch times, with residents, including some who had moved on and were returning for the treat of a Caribbean meal. Haven staff and volunteers also enjoyed the delicious food served up by members of Elim Church each month and always a very special treat.

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THE HAVEN's STALL AT HITCHIN COMMUNITY DAY

A Peter Rabbit coin which could turn out to be quite valuable was discovered in the donations bucket of The Haven's stall at Hitchin Community Day. Could that be what put the smile on Rosa Manning's face? Anyway, Trustee Rosa, her sister Erin and The Haven Administrator Wendy Guinan managed to net £30 on the day – and we await

news of this particular rabbit drawn out of the hat which may – who knows? - in time significantly boost the total.

WELL, DOESN'T THIS LOOK INTERESTING?

Charles Gidigbi, Floating Support Worker at The Haven, was on hand to explain the work of The Haven to students at North Herts College, Stevenage during a recent Social Care Careers and Volunteering event there. The organiser reported: 'The students have fed back that they found the experience very beneficial and asked for their thanks to be passed on to all who were involved. The level 3 students in particular found the event useful in supporting their current unit 'Working in Health and Social Care' and found the range of volunteering opportunities in the sector eye-opening.'

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JENNY. SHE CAME, STAYED A WHILE, THEN MOVED ON

Until recently, Jenny was one of the residents at The Haven. She's an intelligent, well-presented person, choosing her words with care – and a good sense of timing. There's a certain feisty independence of mind in evidence in Jenny, as you might expect from a well-qualified professional, combined with the sense of a glass-half-full attitude to life and willingness to look at herself squarely, despite the trauma that eventually led her to The Haven. In many ways, you could say she is untypical of the stereotype of a homeless person. But people like Jenny exist, and they are not immune to vulnerability.

Jenny grew up as an only child in a stable family in Ireland, then came to England to do a degree in nursing at the University of Hertfordshire. Soon enough, she was living in a five-bedroom house in Letchworth, married, and the mother of three 'very grounded' children. She had a secure job at The Lister Hospital, where she was moving up the career ladder. She had a nice car of her own parked outside, too.

What could possibly be wrong with any of that? Well, this is Jenny's story.

'Then, he made a fatal mistake'

All this time, it seems, the worm of destruction was busy tunnelling away invisibly beneath the surface of her life. It had several aspects. First, there was a controlling husband. Next, a domineering mother-in-law who lived very close by. Jenny began to experience extreme panic attacks, some of which put her into that most terrifying state of flight mode, hyper-anxious to get away (somewhere, anywhere). 'I would not feel myself,' she explained. 'Then it would escalate and I wouldn't know what to do.' She tended to calm herself with binge drinking. 'I certainly didn't make it easy for myself,' she added.

The anxiety attacks began after what she describes as an ill-fated house move, after the family had lived in the same marital home for twelve years. She discovered she was instinctively against the move, which involved taking over a house that belonged to her husband's aunt, also a near neighbour. She felt something was wrong about that. It wasn't until moving day that her intuition proved to be right. She discovered that her name was not on the deeds of their new house – only her husband's. There was a massive row at a Christmas party when she had too much to drink and was later caught drink-driving. As a result, she was put on probation and her driving license was revoked.

Things started slipping badly after that.

Her husband took to locking her out of the house and she began sleeping in the garden, or the shed, in the knowledge that her children were safe in the house.

She spent three years in this state, during which time she stopped working: 'I just wasn't coping. I was falling apart'.

Then – 'he made a fatal mistake. He got violent and head-butted me. When the police arrived I was in the shed with a massive bump on the head and it was snowing.' Jenny might have been entitled to alternative accommodation as a result of this, but she made a decision to stay put for the sake of the children.

'My resounding relief was that I was going to prison'

She continued to experience being forcibly locked out of the house and her car would become her refuge in the months that followed when this happened. She began sleeping in it. 'I would move the car to various places so I wouldn't be spotted by people who knew me. Everyone thought I had got rid of it.'

It was only a matter of time before she was caught. 'When I noticed the police were on my tail as I drove towards a place to sleep I knew that was it. My car was marked. It was going to ping up on any system.' She quickly (and soberly) weighed the situation up: 'I could do fast and furious and just speed off, but the best thing, I knew, was to submit and get out of the car. So I got out of the car and put my hand up.'

The incident led to a prison sentence of 20 weeks – not, she is keen to stress, on another drink-driving charge, but for driving in an unlicensed vehicle. 'My resounding relief,' said Jenny, 'was that I was going to prison this time – but I was going to have a roof over my head and someone to feed me. I felt hugely better, and massively relieved.' It sounds as though Jenny, a fundamentally self-contained and resourceful person at heart, made the most of her time there (she served half her sentence in the end). Her pride forbade her to accept being released with a tag after only four weeks and throughout she

'Knowing someone was there, 24/7, at The Haven and all I had to do was pick up the phone'

found prison staff willing to help – though none of it came to fruition because she wasn't in for long enough for the support mechanisms to grind into place.

She left prison one Friday with nothing but the statutory £38.50 she was given: 'enough for one night of hotel accommodation.' Fortunately, within days a place was found for her at The Haven. She tried to negotiate with her husband - her priority being to hold onto the threads of the relationship with her children, until – 'resoundingly, one Saturday in August, I went into town, sat in a Costa and thought: you know what? He has no

interest into doing anything for me at all. I am a resilient person,' considers Jenny. 'I had clarity. All I wanted was to rebuild the relationship with the kids.' Through sheer perseverance, a characteristic of hers, she has gradually managed to do this, despite acknowledging that they are young adults now, with lives of their own.

While she was one of the residents at The Haven she volunteered at the PDSA and started counselling. And two important things happened: her stress order anxiety condition was correctly diagnosed for the very first time, enabling her to obtain the correct medication, and she agreed to a divorce. She ended up with nothing material from her marriage - but with her integrity intact. Material stuff is worth nothing in comparison to this: it is something she is very sure about.

It was during her period of peaceful respite at The Haven that she began to rebuild her strength, and her life. 'Knowing there was always someone there, 24/7, and all I had to do was pick up the phone …' This was so important to her: 'To have that support – that someone will come and ask if there's anything I need, the reassurance that someone is there.'

Jenny toyed with returning to Ireland, but 'everyone can have those moments.' The fact is that her children are here, and she is working hard to cement the bond with them.

For the last few months she has been living in a home of her own, a rented bedsit with bare walls comprising a tiny fraction of a small house (one room, basic kitchen facilities, toilet and shower attached).

This is her new ground zero.

No matter. She says: 'I have anonymity here, and that's fine.' She is currently doing merchandising work for Next, while her nursing uniform remains packed away. 'I don't know if I'm ready to go back to nursing. I have such emotion about my nursing uniform.'

A bed was in situ when she moved in, but she decided to get rid of it and acquire a sofa bed so she could maintain some semblance of a normal living space. The fact is that there simply isn't enough housing available for people like Jenny: single people seeking a home of their own.

'I am a resilient person'

Jenny's counselling at The Haven continues, and she takes her washing there once a week (otherwise it would cost, she reckons, around £20 to get herself to a laundrette and use it). Here, Jenny is determined to rebuild, almost from scratch. 'I've had a couple of dates, but … we'll see,' she says with a wry smile. 'I take each day at a time.'

Hats off to you, Jenny, and all the luck in the world.

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‘WE DID NOT THINK IT WAS POSSIBLE’ – SNOWDON: THE SECOND TRIP

Just In case anyone reading this thinks climbing Snowdon might be some kind of walk in the park (sorry), this report will demonstrate that climbing the highest mountain in Wales can be the sort of life-changer which takes guts as it challenges any lingering self-doubt from the outset. It might even prove to be a turning point in someone’s rehabilitation.

Richard Astill, Support Worker at The Haven, was in no doubt about this as he led a group of residents towards North Wales this summer. So we end this newsletter on a heart-warming story which should give great hope to anyone who is dubious about their inner resources.

Over to Richard (who has either melted into the rocks in this snapshot, grabbed a lift in a helicopter back down, or took it himself):

'When we passed through Betws y Coed, we were soon at our destination. It was getting real. Soon we arrived at the youth hostel we were staying at – Snowdon Ranger. It's named that after a Victorian guide who took people up the mountain by using this route.'

From the foot of the mountain it became apparent that they must first negotiate a steep climb, taking them along a zig-zagging upward route. 'Some of us were thinking: "Is this what it's going to be like all the way up? Can I make it?" But soon the path levelled out and we were able to look back and get a glorious view of the lake. By then the hostel was a small dot. As we climbed, we spread out, as the more sure-footed were able to scramble up whilst the more reserved took it more sedately.'

After spotting the route taken by the Snowdon Mountain Railway they began to enter the clouds - 'and the surroundings took on a more other-worldly feel. It was very difficult to see too far in front of you, but walking together all of us were able to encourage one another.

'It was possibly a mistake, but as we went along we asked people heading downhill: "How far is it to the top?" "About 40 minutes" came the reply. That's great, but you start to lose hope when you get that same reply every 20 minutes. Would we make it?

'As we plodded on we came across a young man sitting by himself saying he could not go on, and that his friends were coming back for him. We told him he could not stay there on his own as he would freeze, and we got him to accompany us as we headed up.

'Buoyed up that, we had nearly reached the summit. We gave it one last push and it wasn't long before we made it. The young man now walking with us was reunited with his friends - who had been waiting at the top for him all the time.

'There was an immense feeling of satisfaction that we had achieved something amazing, and the whole team had a great sense of pride.

'If we can do this, what else can we achieve?'

They reached the hostel just before nightfall in time for a warm-up dinner of chicken tikka and Mediterranean chicken which had been prepared in advance by Frankie Packard, Manager of The Haven.

It was the following day when they embarked upon the long journey back to Stevenage – 'tired, happy, and many of us satisfied that we had done something we did not think was possible'.

But it was, and you did it.

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