

The Commons



WINDHAM COUNTY'S AWARD-WINNING, INDEPENDENT SOURCE FOR NEWS AND VIEWS

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HOME ALONE

The story of a high-school senior who narrowly escaped homelessness, and the social service agency that is giving him a helping hand

Editor's note: Because of the sensitivity of his situation, the subject of this story agreed to talk to The Commons on the condition that his name be withheld.

By Sara Lepkoff
The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—By most definitions, “Brad” is a typical high school student, one loves to play football and create art.

“I wake up, go to school, go to work, then hang out with my friends and do my homework,” the Brattleboro Union High School senior says.

He also lives alone — one step away from homelessness.

Brad is one of an estimated 55 young adults in Windham County at any given

■ SEE BRAD, PAGE 5

DAVID SHAW/THE COMMONS

Stopping the stink

Putney residents want paper mill to address odor

By Olga Peters
The Commons

PUTNEY—A state environmental official has encouraged residents, frustrated with odors and air quality from the Putney Paper Co.’s mill, to keep records of when the offensive odors linger over the town center.

Many of the more than 20 people who attended an April 21 meeting with Philip Etter, environmental analyst with the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation live within miles of the Putney Paper Co. Inc.’s mill on Route 5.

They complained to Etter of noxious odors from the plant, which they say sends “little bits of paper like confetti” into the air that settle along Main Street and residences south of the mill.

“This is more than an aesthetic issue for some,” said resident Anne Fines, who said she does not live in her home at Putney Commons, a co-housing community south of the mill. The air quality aggravates her allergies and creates respiratory issues.

The big question posed to Etter: what information did the state need to spur action?

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Underfoot artwork under way

Brattleboro arts committee anticipates first in series of sidewalk art

By Allison Teague
The Commons

BATTLEBORO—The idea is simple: replace blocks of the sidewalk with art that can do double duty.

Kate Anderson and Hugh Keelan of the town arts committee (TAC), along with artist and musician Garry Jones, sought and received approval for a sidewalk public art project.

Now, as a result of an idea that Jones brought before the TAC, the Selectboard has approved the Horizontal Art Project, and Director of Public Works Steve Barrett said there could be a completed slab of sidewalk as early as May.

“It takes a day to replace it and we’d give it a day or two to cure,” Barrett said. “We’ve all ready gotten proposals for a project. We can do it whenever the Arts Committee gets it to us.”

Natalie Blake, ceramics, and Randy Solin, glassblower, of Fulcrum

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A week in the life of Superior Court

Two civil cases offer a window on the judicial process

By Thelma O'Brien
The Commons

NEWFANE—What goes on behind the doors of Windham County Superior Court, the imposing 1825 Greek Revival structure on the Newfane green?

The Vermont judiciary website describes the state’s Superior Courts as “trial courts where civil matters such as breach of contract, eviction, foreclosure, personal injury, land disputes, medical malpractice and wrongful death cases are heard.” Appeals from the Probate Court are also heard in Superior Court.

During two cases observed over five days of observation in April,

juries heard charges of medical malpractice in the last three days of the first trial and accusations of construction fraud in the start of the next.

If it can be said that any trial is straightforward, the malpractice case against Roger Dietrich, M.D., a surgeon once affiliated with Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, had a mainly orderly trajectory, though complex in parts and about matters that took place in 2004.

The suit against Dietrich was brought by a former patient, Timothy Holt.

In contrast, the \$1.3 million fraud alleged in the construction case by a condominium association, Vantage

Point, a 30-year-old, 60-unit, three-building complex, against Stratton Association Management, is anything but simple.

That action against the condominium management, which not only involved the change from one management company to another but also the facility’s owner in the same action, brought charges against a now-defunct third-party contracting firm, RAB, which had hired people to restucco the buildings.

According to Rich Carroll, clerk of the court, two jury trials in two weeks is far from typical. The jurisdiction might not see two jury trials in a year.

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DAVID SHAW/THE COMMONS

“Brad,” a Brattleboro Union High School senior, lives on his own with the help of Youth Services.

Brad

FROM PAGE 1

month at risk for not having a place to live. That number that is likely higher because it's difficult to track the problem, “especially in rural communities,” says Danielle Southwell of Youth Services, Brad's caseworker, who describes her client as “an amazing kid.”

Now, with a rent stipend from Youth Services, Brad lives on his own in a Windham Housing Trust apartment building. The single-resident-occupancy building provides separate rooms, complete with bathroom, closet, and open living space. The rent

is \$317, with electricity, phone, and heat included.

Both Southwell and Brad say that he was lucky in finding this unit. “Finding housing that is affordable is so hard,” she says.

Things are not easy for the teen. “A lot of my friends think I'm lucky with no parents around, but I have to do everything on my own,” Brad says.

“There's always chores to do,” he adds. “Clean the house, keep food in the fridge, laundry, take out the trash.”

And pay the rent. Brad works a 20-hour week as a supervisor in an area youth program. “I get out of work at six, so the remainder of the day is devoted to homework.”

BRAD HAS LIVED on his own since last fall, when he moved from what he describes as “not a suitable situation.”

At that time, his mother lived in a 30-foot camper in Marlboro along with two cats, a dog, and her boyfriend.

“I slept on a camper couch that was too small for me and slept less than 3 feet away from my mom and her boyfriend,” Brad says.

There was no bathroom, or running water. There was no source of heat until a woodstove was put in.

“At the end of the summer I knew I was going to be homeless,” he said.

That wasn't always the case. For 15 years, Brad, who was born in Greenfield, Mass., lived with

his mother at Westgate Housing Authority, a housing complex in Brattleboro.

Then his mother's boyfriend moved out, and she couldn't pay the rent.

After Brad and his mother were evicted, he stayed at a relative's house for two weeks and on his own at a hotel until he moved back in with his mother in the summer of last year.

Brad was still living in Marlboro when he met Southwell that summer at a junction meeting, where youth between the ages of 13-21 can come to Youth Services to enjoy free food and an activity.

“At first he was unsure about the program, hoping things would work out with his mom,” Southwell says.

Southwell makes it clear that it was Brad's decision to move out. Once it was clear he didn't want to stay in the situation, “we talked about options with him,” she says.

YOUTH SERVICES works with those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, Southwell says. In its definition of homeless, the agency considers people who are unstably housed, those who could lose a place to stay at a moment's notice.

Southwell says Youth Service clients struggle with “extremely unhealthy environments.”

The young people she works with are escaping generational poverty, physical and verbal abuse from partners or families, mental health issues, or drug and alcohol problems at home.

Many run away, but they don't have a place to run to, Southwell says.

They might stay with friends where there is a lot of drug use or fighting, or they might end up in other similarly unstable environments. Some end up staying at hotels or motels, as Brad did briefly (at \$262 per week). Some end up in homeless shelters.

“In those circumstances there is a much higher risk for substance abuse or not going to school, difficulties with employment,” Southwell says. “They can't think about higher functions.”

“The whole goal of Youth Services,” says Southwell, “is to empower people to make healthy decisions, not to mandate or force.”

Brad is still in contact with his mother. “I still talk with her. The last time I saw her was a month ago.”

She still lives in the camper, but supports his decision. “She didn't like the circumstances either, but she didn't have anywhere to go.”

Together, the two “assessed what his needs were and thought a little about what to look for in an apartment,” Southwell says.

BRAD DESCRIBES his living

situation as similar to living with one's parents, “but it's a little awkward.” Brad explains that most of his neighbors are friendly, but all are at least twice his age.

Besides household chores, there are many more concerns that Brad has to be aware of.

“To do something that costs money, I have to do it myself. It makes me realize how much kids take money for granted when their parents pay for it,” he says.

Southwell has provided support with budgeting, how to get and keep a job, and other life skills, including finding a place to live.

Having a job has also meant other compromises.

Last year, Brad loved playing football. This year, he had to quit the team. “I was thrown into this circumstance,” Brad says. “I had no choice.”

Though Brad is open to talking about his situation with friends, people often question why he isn't more involved in after-school or sports activities.

“My friends don't completely understand, but they support me,” Brad says.

When things get overwhelming, Brad often goes to friends or teachers for support.

Brad admits that living on his own can be stressful. “I have to do things to get my mind off of it, like hanging out with friends or going outside,” he says. “Other than that, it's okay.”

“Being in the camper was a lot more stressful,” he says. “I'm lucky to be downtown where things are going on. If I was at the camper, it would be a lot harder and more boring.”

BRAD IS UP FRONT about the challenges for him and any young person living in Brattleboro area.

“There should be more jobs for young kids,” he says. “It gets them out on their own and they can learn the definition of working,” Brad acknowledges that it is very hard to get a job in this economy.

Brad sees the housing issue as a larger problem.

He envisions living in a house with people he can relate to, people his own age.

In addition to school and work, Brad has kept up with bills, filed his taxes, and applied for college and financial aid.

“I just got accepted into Greenfield Community College,” Brad says. After a year at Greenfield, he plans to apply Castleton State College in Castleton, where he hopes to study studio art and play football.

“I want to draw, play football, and enjoy the good life,” he says.

‘Someone consistent to help them stay on track’

Agency gives a hand to homeless and at-risk youth

BRATTLEBORO—According to Youth Services' website, “The agency's mission is to provide programs and services that promote the healthy development of local youth and families and help them gain the skills necessary to lead constructive lives within the community.”

Danielle Southwell, case worker for the agency's youth development/family emergency response program, says Youth Services worked with 1,628 youth across ten programs during its last fiscal year.

Southwell says because many at-risk teens have very few support systems, “It makes a huge difference to have someone consistent to help them stay on track.”

“They want to make progress,” she says. “They need someone to present options to them and help them.”

Some at-risk youth are referred by area high schools. Others come via the state's vocational rehabilitation program or from Health Care and Rehabilitation Services' JOBS (Jump On Board for Success) program, which helps youth with mental health problems develop skills necessary for securing employment.

And others come by word of mouth, or from the weekly Thursday night outreach that Youth Services calls “The Junction.”

Every Thursday, approximately 45 young people visit “The Junction,” a collaboration of the Boy's and Girl's Club and Youth Services, provides teens with a place to enjoy free dinner and an activity.

“The activities vary from education about sex health, how to rent an apartment, or how to apply for a job, to fun stuff like pool tournaments and movies,” Southwell says.

Southwell believes the event is effective in reaching kids who could benefit from their services.

Youth Services' street outreach program has also been important in reaching youth as well, she says.

The peer outreach workers, who are teens themselves, offer resources like food, information about services, and contraceptives to teens in several Windham County communities. Workers distributed 2,885 resource guides to area youth, resulting in 426 referrals to other area organizations in a year's time.

In the agency's last fiscal year, its transitional living program served 72 area youth in need of a home. The program provides teens with financial support and counseling on life skills related to independent living. To receive benefits, youth need be engaged in 20 to 30 hours of productive work — either school, work, or other activities deemed healthy.

The Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act provides some of the funding for the transitional living and street outreach programs.

Southwell meets weekly with each youth involved in a Youth Services program to assess her client's needs and identify his or her own strengths and skills.

“We try to arrange it so that everyone has somewhere to lay their head,” Southwell says. If necessary, temporary emergency housing is available to youth for up to two weeks. In its last fiscal year, Youth Services provided youth with 11 nights of safe housing.

This year, Youth Services has launched the Youth In Transition housing initiative with support from a federal grant from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Youth Services has identified the need for expanded housing options for youth in these programs.

Southwell says the agency hopes to raise funds locally to create subsidized housing serving those ages 16-21 who can benefit from the security of a home while they work to achieve personal goals and learn skills to achieve independence.

For more information about Youth Services, visit www.youthservicesinc.org.



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