



**Celebrating our  
2017 Graduates:**

Linda  
Carolyn  
Debra  
Xiamyra  
Michelle



**This Issue**

2017 Graduates	p.1
New at RCB	p.1
A Mentor Reflects	p.2
A Participant's Journey	p.2
Coordinator Reflects	p.3
In Gratitude	p.3
Women & Re-entry	p.4
Accomplishments	p.4
Words of Thanks	p.4

# 2017 COMING HOME

Heeding God's call to social justice, healing, and restoration, the Reformed Church of Bronxville (RCB) launched the Coming Home Program in partnership with Hudson Link and the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness & Housing in the fall of 2009, thus beginning our transformational journey. Our program was the first to adapt Catholic Charities original model to include formerly incarcerated individuals with a focus on building supportive community. Spring 2017 marked the completion of our 8th Coming Home program cycle, with 64 men and women having graduated since program inception. This year's Coming Home Program will host 7 men.

Our Coming Home program at RCB assists individuals in the process of recovery from the trauma associated with a period of incarceration. The program includes goal setting workshops with mentoring, life skills sessions, advocacy, and story sharing in a supportive environment.

Moreover, RCB's Coming Home program has served as a model for the development of Coming Home programs at various other churches. In 2011 a collaborative journey with Fordham University's Beck Institute on Religion and Poverty began in an effort to document, research, evaluate and promote Coming Home as a replicable, evidence-informed program model.

Everyone who has contributed to the success of Coming Home, we applaud you! The generous contributions from volunteers, mentors, presenters, staff, and participants have resulted in an exceptional community experience of resilience and transformation.

**New at RCB This Year...**

This year's Coming Home program put more emphasis on acknowledging the traumatic role loss and grief play in our lives, and exploring skills to cope with these complex emotions. Participants were encouraged to develop personal rituals and processes that recognize the pain of their losses, while integrating the grief they feel in a more meaningful way in their lives. Participants also learned about the healing and transformative power of forgiveness, using Desmond Tutu's *Fourfold Path to Forgiveness*. Tutu, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, believes that each of us needs to forgive and be forgiven, and that there are four important steps in this healing process: admitting the wrong and acknowledging the harm; telling one's story and witnessing the anguish; asking for or granting forgiveness; and renewing or releasing the relationship. Forgiveness is hard work but ultimately, it is the only means we have to heal ourselves and the world around us.

Thank you to John Ducksworth and Eric Waters for facilitating the first restorative circle training for the RCB congregation.

"Life is good, very good," those are words Linda Davis uses as she talks about the difference in her life since graduating earlier this year from the Coming Home Program at The Reformed Church of Bronxville. It has not been an easy road for Linda but she is a living witness to the hard work it takes to get to a place where she can say with confidence that life is better today than it was in the past. For Linda, life today includes surviving cancer, reconnecting with her family, having a job, and being completely drug free.

She attributes the Coming Home Program for helping her get her life back on track. After 20 years of heroin and cocaine abuse, Linda was in a no win situation. She had been arrested and was facing charges for drug possession as a result of what she describes as a really bad relationship that had her caught in a downward spiral. "I couldn't think," Linda says, "my mind was always in a fog and I was caught up with this guy and he was controlling me." Describing her life as "crazy", Linda needed to make different decisions. When time came for her to stand before a judge on the drug possession charges, instead of prison time Linda was sent to a diversion program to help her get clean. Seeing this as a lifeline, Linda made the decision to move out of her apartment and give up her Section 8 housing voucher so that she could move in to the YWCA and enter their Awakenings Program for drug addiction. While living at the YWCA, a fellow resident told Linda about a program that she had just completed called Coming Home. Linda recalls "she told me about this program that helps people and so I wanted to give it a try." With the determination to turn her life around, Linda began the Coming Home Program while also attending the Awakenings program at the YWCA and the diversion program. "During the day I had the diversion and Awakenings, and one night a week I went to the [Coming Home]

program," says Linda. When Linda entered Coming Home, she wasn't used to what she saw and experienced. "Someone was always hugging me," Linda says, "it scared me and I kept wondering 'what do they want from me'." Despite Linda's fears, something about Coming Home kept drawing her back. She was determined to not go back to her old life and she knew she needed and wanted help. By staying with the Coming Home Program, Linda says she found her voice. "I sort of came out of my shell," Linda says, "before, I didn't talk much, I held it all in but going made me realize that I had to let go, to open up and talk about it." Together with her mentor Sally, Linda began to work on finding her own apartment and enrolling in school. "They really helped me, I wasn't used to people being nice to me," Linda says. The program also helped Linda set goals for what she wanted and supported her in achieving her goals. Linda was able to reconcile with her daughter who she says was not speaking to her. "My daughter was really angry with me because of the life I had been living but now we are back together again," says Linda.

Today, Linda has been clean for two years. She spends much more of her time with her siblings and with her daughter. She continues to meet with her mentor for coffee once a week and her mentor has been a valuable support as she applies to go back to school to become a peer specialist. Linda reflects on her experience in the Coming Home Program and says "nobody can do this on their own, you need somebody. Give it a chance, you have to want it and be willing to work for it but when you do the right thing, the right thing comes to you."

***In sadness we celebrate Linda's time with us. Recently she shared that she has never been happier. Linda passed away suddenly on 11/3/17. Her spirit will live on in her daughter, family and the Coming Home community.***

## AMY: A MENTOR REFLECTS



Imagine having the time—no—*making* the time to get together with a room full of good friends every week to share an amazing meal. Imagine feeling safe enough with these friends to be able to talk about anything—I mean *anything*. Now, imagine trained therapists and counselors joining you to assure you that your feelings count. That was the backbone of my experience with the Coming Home Program at the Reformed Church of Bronxville (RCB).

Coming Home is designed for men and women who are returning from a period of incarceration. Upon reentry, they often feel unsupported and frustrated by the unnecessarily complicated societal systems they encounter. For example, one woman in our group could not get her old high school to give her the diploma she'd earned. The school gave her the runaround every time she asked for it because the paperwork was never quite right. Most of the women in our group struggled to get work because they had to disclose to potential employers their criminal justice histories. Is it any wonder that people in desperate situations like these sometimes make choices that put them at risk to recidivate?

For six months, my job was to journey and learn from my mentee. As a mentor, I offered love, support and a listening ear to one participant, a mother of three, desperate to get back to her babies. Every Tuesday, we met with the other mentors, participants and RCB volunteers to share a hot meal and stories of survival, of faith, of triumphs. We received lessons in how to set goals, how to meditate, how to interview for a job. This was meant for the participants but I too learned so much. It was "warrior training" and we were all in it together. (continued on page 3)

In April, the five participants in the program graduated. One by one, they stood before a packed house in the Edwards Room and spoke about how the program changed their lives. They all said something similar: that the meals, the lessons, the flowers and leftovers they were able to take home each week, the community support and unconditional love gave them new hope for their futures. They are approaching life in fresh, new, and confident ways. They might not have said it, but it was clear they had become warriors, and so had I.

Mentors and participants share a bond like no other. Mentors celebrate meals with participants and walk with them throughout their program journey. Empathy, authenticity, respect and acceptance are the hallmarks of a healthy mentor-participant relationship. Thank you to our 2016-2017 mentors:

- |                 |                 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Sally Baker     | Lisa Connors    |
| Maureen French  | Lisa Kunstadter |
| Cynthia Shively | Amy Westerby    |

**JUSTICE IS WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE IN PUBLIC ... COMING HOME**

*By Janet Donat*

For the past three years, RCB's Coming Home program was fortunate to partner with Janet Donat of Family Services of Westchester (FSW). Janet served as Program Coordinator for RCB Coming Home.



each session. In addition to the fellowship shared over delicious homemade meals generously provided by members of this congregation as well as members of the Bronxville community, we have had the opportunity to learn and grow, thanks to others who share their knowledge and expertise through workshops focusing on personal finance, setting goals, succeeding in the world of work, meditation and mindfulness, self image and values, and healing from trauma.

grip of despair and isolation.

As the Coming Home program moves through the darkness of winter to the miracle of light and new life that spring inevitably brings, we witness a parallel miracle unfolding within all of us who have participated in this program. Slowly over the 24 weeks, hearts open, friendships develop, old wounds begin to heal and the catalyst for this miracle is relationship. We find unity in our diversity, and truth in Cornell West's words, "Justice is what love looks like in public." The lines that seem to divide and define us when we first come together each fall blur by the end of the program cycle. We become a community of friends who have connected on this journey we call life. Justice IS what love looks like in the Coming Home program at the Reformed Church of Bronxville.

"Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public." This, of course, is a famous quote from Cornell West, but he could have been speaking of the Coming Home program at the Reformed Church of Bronxville. Our program takes place on Wednesday nights each fall. A group of strangers gather together to begin a journey of growth, self discovery and healing. We share a meal, check in with each other and offer our reflections on an inspirational reading at the beginning of

As the fall progresses and leaves begin to change color, our own colors emerge as we allow for new insights and self discoveries to transform us. As the days get shorter and the nights longer, our participants delve deeply and fearlessly into the stories of their own lives. With great courage they give voice to their own truth...letting go of the darkness of shame, humiliation and fear that can so easily keep us all in the frozen

WESTCHESTER COMMUNITY FOUNDATION's mission is to connect generous people to the causes they care about and invest in transformative ideas and organizations to improve lives and strengthen our community. WCF is a division of The New York Community Trust, one of the largest community foundations in the country, with assets of approximately \$2.6 billion.

Sherrie Sorenson and Betty Hewitt

We would like to recognize the **Westchester Community Foundation** for their generous funding of Janet Donat's coordination work with the Coming Home program.



**In Gratitude**

Meals are one of the cornerstones of the Coming Home Program. Each evening begins with a meal, usually prepared and served by RCB congregants, who share fellowship and a time of reflection before groups for learning and healing begin. The tremendous endeavor of coordinating the meals week after week was lovingly orchestrated by Sherrie Sorenson, with help from Casamira Stricker, Jane Ircha and the late Betty Hewitt. Betty was a faithful member of RCB and active contributor to the Coming Home Program for many years, and while we mourn her loss, her generous and kind spirit most certainly lives on.



There is now a substantial body of research on how women's experiences within and outside of the criminal justice system are different from their male counterparts and as a result, how women's needs are quite different than those of men<sup>1</sup>. Through an understanding of these critical differences, RCB's Coming Home program has spent the last three years adopting gender informed strategies shown by research to meet the unique needs of women reentering the community.

According to a 2015 report by The Sentencing Project, women are a fast-growing criminal justice population<sup>2</sup>. Since 1980 the number of women in U.S. prisons has increased by more than 700%; and between 2000 and 2013, the number of women in local jails has increased 44%<sup>3</sup>. The increase of the female population in criminal justice can be traced to changes in

state and national drug policies that mandated prison terms for even relatively low-level drug offenses, and to post-conviction barriers to reentry that uniquely affect women<sup>4</sup>.

Focusing on reentry is critically important for women, as the majority will return home after their sentence. One-quarter of women released from prison have an arrest for a new crime within six months, one-third return to prison within a year of release, and two-thirds within five years of release<sup>5</sup>.

RCB's Coming Home program leadership has learned in the past three years the importance of focusing on women's strengths to maximize their success post-incarceration. A woman's strengths, as well as certain aspects of her social environment, act as protective factors that help her resist pressure to return to

maladaptive behaviors. RCB's Coming Home staff has found that a key to successful reentry is for women to be engaged in the reentry process by playing a role in setting their own goals and defining their motivation to meet those goals. When women establish their own priorities, they are working toward goals that have meaning for them, and therefore are more motivated to pursue them. We have found that genuine support from one person, like a mentor, can be a motivating factor in women's recovery and restoration.

<sup>1</sup> Covington, S. S., & Bloom, B. E. (2003). Gendered justice: Women in the criminal justice system. *Carolina Academic Press*, 1–20

<sup>2</sup> The Sentencing Project (2015). *Incarcerated Women and Girls*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Mauer, M. (2013). *The Changing Racial Dynamics of Women's Incarceration*. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>5</sup> Snyder, H.N., Durso, M.R., Cooper, A. & Mulako-Wangota, J. (2016) Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Recidivism Rates of Prisoners with Selected Characteristics Released from Prisons – Female and Male*. Generated using the Prisoner Recidivism Analysis Tool - 2005 (PRAT-2005)

### Program Accomplishments

The past year's graduates have made significant progress with their personal goals, possible because of their mentors, program staff and the RCB caring community. As one participant reflected at graduation: "Hard to believe how people are in this program, hugging, smiling, being kind – and helping me develop compassion for myself and others. I have found my voice. I did not think I could get my life back, but little by little, I am." Five women discovered who they were, what was possible, and that support was something you could count on. Another graduate added: "I've never talked about my life. The women helped so much. We spoke of things you take to the grave."

For these women, graduation was a wonderful event, celebrating real second chances as they left their incarceration behind them. Empowered to move forward, they experienced increased social support that made new beginnings possible. Many experienced reduction in trauma symptoms that made it possible to return to school, find success in employment and volunteer. So much changed for them, because a mentor's perspective made a difference, poignantly captured in another graduation reflection: "My mentor instilled in me that I am a good woman. I have learned so much...I never knew kindness. My world was dark and cruel. That has changed."

An independent evaluation completed by the Beck Institute found that very significant strides were made in all areas reviewed. Program satisfaction was unanimous, and the majority of women wanted to stay connected to the program. A graduate summed up the experience: "I used to say I did not have friends – Now I have family – God gave me my mentor – I have learned I can persevere. God will guide you."

### Words of Thanks

**GLAM4GOOD**  
Thanks to Tennille Lambert, Coming Home was introduced to GLAM4GOOD, an organization that harnesses the healing power of fashion and beauty to promote well-being and to empower self-esteem for everyday heroes and people in need. GLAM4GOOD provided makeovers, clothing and jewelry giveaways to our participants during Boutique Night, making what has always been a memorable evening that much more impactful and meaningful.

**Many thanks to the presenters and speakers who shared their skills and talents with us this year!**  
Eric Waters, Liz Gannon Graydon, Norma Loeb, Elizabeth Campbell, Tom Rodman, Jennifer Purdon, Elena Falcone, Belle Hann, Sloan Wainwright, Amy Soucy, Glen Roethel, Pat Drew, Lisa Connors, Dennis Hanratty and Mt. Vernon United Tenants Association, and Linda Ryan.

Thanks to the Mission Council and the Coming Home Leadership Team: Theresa Colyar, Janet Donat, Suzanne Katz, Alexandra Pierre, Dawn Ravella and Sherrie Sorenson.

**The Beck Institute on Religion and Poverty**  
Fordham University  
Graduate School of Social Service  
400 Westchester Avenue  
West Harrison, NY 10604  
Phone: 914.367.3436  
lightburn@fordham.edu  
www.fordham.edu/beckinstitute

**Special thanks to the Beck Institute for funding, writing and printing this newsletter.**

Thank you also to Temi Pedro, a Beck Institute PhD research assistant, who collected and helped to tell the individual stories found within this newsletter.

 **the Reformed Church of Bronxville**  
180 Pondfield Rd.  
Bronxville, NY 10708  
914-337-6776  
[info@reformedchurch.org](mailto:info@reformedchurch.org)

## COMING HOME Through the Years: VOICES of our GRADUATES and MENTORS

We hold great value in hearing from those who have enriched their lives both as participants and mentors in RCB's Coming Home program. Their continued journey reminds us of the power of healing in community. Coming Home is based on a Restorative Community model, which counters people's experience of isolation and alienation, building a trusting, safe space where our shared humanity, as well as our struggles and achievements are recognized. Some of our participants and mentors shares their stories:

### Margaret's Story: A Mentor Reflects



Margaret Torell (left) and her friend, Lena

Over the course of the 2015-2016 church program year, I had the great honor and privilege to be a mentor and friend to a strong, courageous and funny woman named Lena—a woman with great fortitude and determination. She has a humility and self-awareness that reaches far beyond most. When I reflect on how being a mentor has had an impact on me, two things stick out.

First of all, Lena often referred to me as her best friend. Initially I thought, "How can that be? We haven't known each other very long." That was my skeptical

side coming out. But what she has given me in this short period of time is what we all should be so lucky to have and that is a best friend—a person with whom we can spend genuine time together without judgment, with honesty and acceptance. A best friend is a person with whom we can share our own story with trust and confidence knowing we won't hear about it on the news the next day. A best friend is a thoughtful, kind and supportive person who will laugh and cry with us. A best friend is a person who loves me for me.

Secondly, I grew up in a household with a father who was a minister, a mother who was the church organist, and siblings who were acolytes and Sunday school teachers. I have continued on with my own family in trying to instill the importance of the church and community and coming to our own understanding of what we believe. However, I don't think I have ever been surer of the statement, "God is good!" until after my year in the Coming Home

program with Lena.

Lena texts me "God is good!" almost every day, even though she might have had a day filled with bad news or unpleasant encounters. She always ends our dialogues at night with, "God is good and God bless you and your family." She has taught me that God's goodness is not revealed by things happening the way we want them to or having everything work out perfectly and in exact alignment with our desires. Rather, goodness lies in God's Mercy. And having faith and trust in that Mercy is what sustains us.

healing together

#### Contact Information

The Reformed Church of  
Bronxville

180 Pondfield Road  
Bronxville, NY 10708  
Phone: 914-337-6776  
[www.reformedchurch.org](http://www.reformedchurch.org)



#### The Beck Institute

Fordham University  
Graduate School of Social Service  
400 Westchester Avenue  
West Harrison, NY 10604  
Phone: (914) 367.3436  
[lightburn@fordham.edu](mailto:lightburn@fordham.edu)  
[www.fordham.edu/beckinstitute](http://www.fordham.edu/beckinstitute)



## COMING HOME Through the Years: VOICES of our GRADUATES and MENTORS

Many Coming Home graduates have gone on to leadership roles in the program. Read their stories:

### Brenda's Story by Temi Pedro



*Brenda, 2015 RCB Coming Home Graduate*

"We are sisters from another mother." That's how Brenda sums up the Coming Home

Program at The Reformed Church of Bronxville in Westchester County. Two years since graduating from the program in 2015, Brenda still has cherished memories of the love and support she experienced when she entered Coming Home after her release from the Taconic Correctional Facility. "We were just like sisters, everyone understood, no one judged you," says Brenda. After spending a year and half at Taconic, Brenda needed support and encouragement to move past the mistakes that landed her in prison. "I had a lot of doubts about myself, it was a silly thing that I did but you just feel really bad about yourself," Brenda says. For Brenda, the Coming Home Program became a new beginning and a safety net. "We became a family," says Brenda, "I could be having a bad day and when I got to the program, it was refreshing." Warmly, she remembers breaking bread with other participants and opening up about herself and hearing other women share their stories. "We were able to say what we feel and no one judged you. Because of that we all got strong together."

It was through the Coming Home Program and the support of her family that Brenda was able to do

what was needed to move forward and that was to forgive herself for the past mistakes. "I had to tell myself, you made a mistake and it's done" says Brenda, "once I forgave myself and I knew that God had forgiven me, everything began to open up for me." Today, Brenda has a full-time job as a House Manager at an SRO for veterans. Recently, Brenda has applied to become a certified Notary Public. She is also returning to school in September for her degree in Human Services Administration. "The program helps to strengthen you," says Brenda, "it taught me not to be scared but to have confidence in myself." Brenda is so grateful for the Coming Home Program that she has become a mentor herself, helping recently released men in the Coming Home Program in Rye, NY. "Helping people has always been something that I loved," Brenda says, "you get turned down so much (after release), but the program is so great because it snaps you back and makes you stronger."

### Juanita's Story by Temi Pedro



*Juanita, with the cake she made for the 2017 Coming Home Graduation*

When Juanita walked out of the Westchester County Jail in Valhalla, NY, she was determined to avoid the mistakes that resulted in her spending one year in a correctional facility. Even before her release, Juanita was taking positive steps to move forward with her life and leave her past mistakes in the past. One of those positive steps was entering the Coming Home Program at The Reformed Church of Bronxville in Westchester County. "The program was amazing," says

Juanita, "I had never been incarcerated before and the program just embraced me and loved me." Being active and connected to positive people and places became the lifeline that Juanita needed during her first year of reentry after incarceration. The challenges that men and women experience when they are released are overwhelming to say the least. During her time at Valhalla, Juanita witnessed a revolving door of women being released only to end up back behind bars and often because they did not have the support in place to help them through their reentry. For Juanita, the Coming Home Program became not just a place of support but a brand new family. "They cried with me, they laughed with me, they prayed for me, they began to occupy my heart." Juanita says, "I looked forward to going there, no matter the weather or obstacles." Being someone who didn't feel comfortable opening up and talking about herself in a group setting, the Coming Home Program became the place where Juanita could do so easily. "I found my voice in the Coming Home Program," says Juanita. She reflects on how she and her fellow program participants just clicked as they shared their stories. For Juanita, it was empowering to be surrounded by other women who had experienced incarceration and were

doing something positive with their lives. She also found connection and strength from the program administrators and her mentor. "The mentors and staff, they are here for you, they helped you with everything," Juanita says. The Coming Home Program not only provided emotional and social support but also tangible support including help getting clothes, finding a job, and getting back to school. "They gave me a sense of hope, I no longer had that hopelessness, and it was a feeling like no other," Juanita says.

It has been three years since Juanita graduated from Coming Home and the changes she sees in herself and in her life she traces back to the program. "It's through the Coming Home Program that I found the courage to do the things that I am doing today," says Juanita. Today, Juanita has her own cake decorating business, Mas Cakes. "I always liked to cook and bake," says Juanita, "but I didn't have confidence in my skills until I went through the Coming Home Program." The encouragement and support that she received from her mentor and the other participants inspired her to do what she loves to do – bake. "They believed in me when I didn't really believe in myself." When asked to sum up her Coming Home experience, Juanita says with confidence "my life is not clouded anymore, I love my life."