

# COMING HOME 2017

THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP OF POUGHKEEPSIE, NY



## 2017 IN REVIEW

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For the five participants who completed the second cycle of the Coming Home Program at the Unitarian Universalist (UU) of Poughkeepsie, the experience was truly transformative. These 5 came to know the power of fellowship, belonging and acceptance, and discovered strengths and new perspectives to help manage their trauma and transition from victim to survivor.

**1** Beyond these five, many more lives – of participants, mentors, congregants and others – were touched in significant ways. Even if a congregant could only attend one community dinner, or a participant had to drop out because of family commitments, the unconditional positive regard they experienced in their brief time as part of a restorative community will not soon be forgotten.

Young programs sometimes have growing pains, and there are lessons to be learned from this

year's cycle. As a trauma-informed program, we begin our journey together laying the foundation for creating a safe and respectful space. Some late comers, missing this foundation, struggled and left. Other participants were freshly home from prison (3 months or less) and began the program with the intent to complete, but then realized their lives were too unstable to commit to such a lengthy and intensive program. Others gained employment, which is a very important achievement, which meant they could not complete the 24 session program.

As we have high standards for graduation, five graduated, but three more – Donte Walker, Slathiel Merritt III, and Antuone Babbs – attended many sessions and showed up for graduation as “honorary graduates”. Antuone will be joining the program this year. Indeed, we are looking forward to another impactful year of Coming Home at UU this year!



“Coming Home was a fresh start, learning to trust, belief in others, to gain what I never had. The trust and belief in other women which developed the “Sisterhood” between a wide range of strong women— women to count on, to trust and love for a lifetime.” - Delia Hernandez

**Coming Home Staff:**

- Lisa Velazquez- Coordinator;**
- Sarah Franek- Facilitator;**
- Laura Storms- Peer-Facilitator;**
- Nick Garin- Outreach & Meal Coordinator**

## CONGRATULATIONS COMING HOME 2017 GRADUATES

- ◆ Dean Douglas
- ◆ Delia Hernandez
- ◆ Brendan Paredes
- ◆ Jayana Stalley
- ◆ Robert Wofford



**THE COMING HOME PROGRAM HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE IN PART THROUGH GENEROUS GRANTS & CONTRIBUTIONS.**

**WE GIVE SPECIAL THANKS TO:**

- ◆ The Community Foundation of the Hudson Valley
- ◆ The Jeannette F. Schlobach Fund
- ◆ The Jonah Sherman Family Fund
- ◆ The Richard S. & Harriet K. Fein Fund
- ◆ The Steven Family Fund
- ◆ The William and Marcella Teahan Memorial Fund
- ◆ Go Fund Me Campaign and other Contributors
- ◆ UUFB Bridge Club
- ◆ The New York State Convention of Universalists
- ◆ The Unitarian Universalist Association
- ◆ Several Anonymous Donors

**COMING HOME 2017 WORKSHOP LEADERS**

Coming Home 2017 included workshops on yoga, storytelling, trauma, learning to trust, SoulCollage® and more. Thank you to those who provided invaluable programming:

- Danicia Ambron
- Vincenza Corcoran
- Deborah Courtney
- Brian Doyle
- Muriel Horowitz
- Judith Knauss
- Jamie Levato & Ellie Limpert of the Poughkeepsie Farm Project



Special thanks to Judith Knauss who “set our table” week after week. Everything Judith touches becomes more beautiful.



Thanks to the stunning contribution by the Poughkeepsie Farm Project we learned how to cook two amazing dishes—“Chili on the Coming Home,” and “Relaxed Coming Home Kale Salad.” The meal was prepared with farm fresh produce they brought directly from their farm. Many of us even learned how to cut avocados for the first time! By the end of the night everyone was glowing with the joy of community that organically happens when we sit together around a safe table. We had full bellies of nutritious foods, pockets full of kale salad for the next day, and new friends from the Poughkeepsie Farm Project.

**POUGHKEEPSIE FARM PROJECT  
&  
COMING HOME 2017  
PREPARE  
“CHILI ON THE COMING HOME”  
&  
“RELAXED COMING HOME KALE SALAD”**

“Wow, I just have to say what an honor it was to be welcomed into your program last night. I know I can speak for our whole team in saying that the night was incredibly powerful, and it truly meant a lot to us. We are comforted and inspired knowing that we have such kind hearted, tireless neighbors working as advocates and mentors for returning citizens in our community. Thank you for all that you do.”

**Ellie Limpert, Poughkeepsie Farm Project**



**MENTORS & INTERNS**



Graduate Jayana Stalley and her baby daughter with Mentor Sandy Favata.

**Mentors**

Coming Home mentors attend mentor training and lovingly supported our participants

through 24 weeks of the program. Many mentors reported having been changed themselves through participating in the program—the boundaries of “us” and “them” dissolved and we became simply “we.” A special thanks to our mentors:

- Jeff Asher**
- Sandy Favata**
- Frances Johnson**
- Soozie Nowak**
- Vincent Pollina**

**Additional Supporting Mentors**

- Danielle Abdullah**
- Reed Asher**
- Cori Cumming**
- Nick Garin**

- Jolanda Jansen**
- Frances Johnson**
- Judith Knauss**
- Pat Lamanna**
- Walter LeFlore**
- Henry Southerland**

**MSW Interns**

Each program is assigned graduate students specializing in social work. Our students assist with case management and connecting our participants to resources. A special thanks to our MSW Interns:

- Kimberly Flowers**
- Christopher Khanamirian**

“The Coming Home Program was an enriching and enlightening experience. It provided me the opportunity to work with some dynamic people while learning about some of their life experiences. The program afforded the participants the opportunity to acquire coping skills, and share their stories.

-Kimberly Flowers

**COMMUNITY MATTERS**

We were delighted to have Nick Garin step in as the 2017 Coming Home meal coordinator. Through his outreach and collaborative spirit our dinner was prepared and our table was blessed by 16 different congregations!

All 16 congregations were invited to “break bread” with us the evening they prepared the meal and were invited to graduation thus furthering the ties between Coming Home and the larger Poughkeepsie faith community. Special thanks to all those who contributed to the meals. See the box to the right.

**Thank you to the following meal providers!**

- Christ Episcopal Church**
- Church of Messiah Outreach Committee**
- Dutchess County Department of Children & Family Services**
- Dutchess County NAACP**
- First Congregational United Church of Christ**
- Hindu Samaj Temple**
- New Hackensack Reformed Church**
- Poughkeepsie Farm Project**
- St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church**
- St. Kateri Tekakwitha Roman Catholic Church**
- St. Mary, Mother of the Church—Fishkill**
- St. Paul’s Episcopal Church**
- Shir Chadash**
- Temple Beth-El**
- Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Poughkeepsie**
- Vassar Temple**

**BEULAH BAPTIST**

Coming Home has begun to see an extraordinary connection take hold between The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Poughkeepsie and Beulah Baptist Church. Beulah has been our steadfast partner – providing transportation to the participants week

after week, mentoring and now having a representative on the Coming Home Committee. Beulah Baptist members were present when The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship held a ceremony raising a Black Lives Matter banner. It is very encouraging that Beulah Baptist has

begun a prison ministry program supporting families with family members who are incarcerated. These two congregations, separate on paper and demographically, have come together strengthening their social justice missions and in turn seeing Coming Home into its third program year.

## EVALUATION OF COMING HOME 2015-2016

In October of 2015, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Poughkeepsie, NY launched the first Coming Home Program. This program, that serves men and women who were previously incarcerated, introduced healing through a community environment. The first program cycle was 19 consecutive weeks plus 4 follow-up sessions.

**Analysis of data** from the four graduates of the 2015-2016 program revealed the following information. While the results are encouraging, we cannot make statistical assumptions with such low numbers. All of the Participants wanted to improve their education. Their goals included stable housing, employment, dealing with probation and completing it, and resolving foster care issues to have children home again. Although they were motivated and hopeful the realities of their lives presented significant

needs and challenges throughout the 19 week 2015-2016 Program. That said:

**The Sense of Coherence (SOC) Measurement Tool** assesses how well someone is functioning and managing life's circumstances, and coping with what has been dealt to them. Coming Home aims to improve these scores. **The Pilot program revealed a significant increase in the SOC.**

Their improved coping means that they experienced an increased ability to be resourceful and make meaning of their life challenges. They also gained a general understanding about what has happened to them and what opportunities exist to help them meet their goals.

**The Post Traumatic Checklist (PCL)** assesses participants for symptoms of

PTSD and reaction to trauma. We have found that higher levels of trauma scores are correlated with lower levels of the SOC scores, indicating that individuals with more active trauma symptoms are functioning at lower capacities, than those with less active symptoms. Coming Home aims to decrease these PCL scores. All four participants began the Pilot Program with high levels of trauma, way above what would receive a diagnosis of PTSD. **The Pilot program revealed a remarkable 16 point decrease in PCL scores.**

In addition, data outcomes for **the Pilot Coming Home program revealed an exceptional 21 point increase in participants feeling 'socially supported.'** Given that recidivism is highly correlated to feelings of isolation and alienation, this is a significant mark of healing.

### THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP OF POUGHKEEPSIE

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For more information about how to get involved in Coming Home, please contact  
Lisa Velazquez-DeNapoli,  
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A special thank you to Sarah Franek as she departs the Coming Home team. Instrumental as the facilitator for the first two cycles, Sarah was invaluable as a team member and will be missed by participants, mentors and community members. Thank you, Sarah!!

#### Thanks to the Beck Institute

Finally, we'd like to thank Fordham University's Beck Institute on Religion and Poverty, an organization with a rich history of partnering with faith organizations to promote social justice, and building bridges toward a just, equitable and compassionate society. The experienced staff at Beck consulted with the UU on resources, staffing, budget, and presenters needed for the program, provided invaluable training for congregational leadership and mentors, and supervised the social work interns who were an integral part of the program.

Ongoing Coordinator Meetings and Learning Collaboratives ensured fidelity to the restorative community model, as well as a forum to brainstorm creative solutions to any challenges we were facing. Beck's help with fundraising was critical, and their data-intensive program evaluation ensures that Coming Home keeps delivering the positive results for participants that we have come to expect. Thank you, Beck!

## Coming Home 2017– THE VOICES OF OUR GRADUATES

We hold great value in hearing from those who have enriched their lives as participants in these programs. Their continued journey reminds us of the power of healing in community. With Laura we are grateful to have one of our first graduates continuing in a leadership role. Laura was the peer facilitator in the 2nd program and will be the co-Facilitator in the new cycle beginning October, 2017. Brendan, one of this year's graduates, reflects on what is unique about the Coming Home program.

### Laura's story



Mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, death of a child, police interventions and subsequent arrests, stigmatization, self harm, suicide attempts, low self esteem was the baggage I carried with me at the onset of my journey.

Psychiatric hospitalization, inpatient rehabilitation, psychological treatments, partial hospitalization, electronic monitoring, probation, court appearances, moral recognition therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, AA, NA, victim impact programs, several court mandated programs, peer to peer counseling, mental health counseling,

the lists goes on.

One day during my weekly meeting at the women's wellness center, Ms Lisa Velasquez came to speak to us about the "Coming Home" program. This was definitely different I thought. Lisa was kind, sincere and this wasn't a mandated program. For the first time in a long while I was offered the opportunity to make a choice, a good choice at that.

I committed to attend the weekly meetings, not knowing exactly where I fit in or what to expect from the other participants and mentors. With all of the treatment, therapies and programs I had completed, I had never experienced anything like "Coming Home". Here, we were welcomed into a safe, caring community of people. Walls were broken down, trust was being built. Relationships bloomed, compassion and understanding was doled out with every meal we shared. I was accepted, not judged nor condemned for my past transgressions. Through mentoring and peer support I was a person of value,

someone who was capable of making a positive contribution to society. My Coming Home community had faith in me. They loved me until I could learn to love myself. My self worth and dignity slowly was restored with each word of encouragement and praise I received. I began to believe that I was not my diagnosis or conviction, I was, I am a person of worth.

After graduating from the Coming Home program, I was asked to return to the next session as a peer facilitator. I was honored and I jumped at the chance to continue to share this extraordinary fellowship with my peers. This year, I have the pleasure to serve as co-facilitator with the sincere hope of offering to others the same compassion, belief and empowerment I was shown. Through the gifts I have been given throughout my time with the Coming Home program, I am eternally grateful and forever changed.

Very truly yours, Laura Storms

### Contact Information

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## Coming Home 2017– THE VOICES OF OUR GRADUATES

“In this plate of food, I see the entire universe supporting my existence.”

~A Zen blessing~

### Brendan's story

Having been down the conveyor belt of inpatient rehabs, outpatient clinics, state imprisonment, and mandatory 12 step groups, it took about 2 weeks for me before I realized that Coming Home was truly unique. I was impressed with the initial survey from Fordham, because it was the one survey that didn't make me feel demoralized or standardized. Which was the first time I ever felt that from any program, as all law enforcement rehabilitation was based on the criminal mind philosophy.

Fordham found the thing that revealed to me the

perfect church to work with, allowing the best intentions of academia, and the best altruistic intentions of the Unitarian Church to flawlessly intertwine. But what's truly unique is how difficult it is to describe the effectiveness of what I call Coming Home's therapeutic approach, because there was no outright approach, or clearly defined strategy of therapy. So this balanced out with the ancient power of bonds that are built during communal eating. And that might sound mystical in a sense but it's not.

When I was in jail the

most about the inner workings of jail was how they fed me. You can tell a lot, if not everything, by how people feed you. Slaves are fed scraps, and prisoners are fed scarcely enough. Food distribution has its own caste system—the homeless are not served lobsters. Obviously, the psychological experience as it relates to eating can be talked about in depth, but Coming Home had this balance where everyone's contributions enhanced each other's purpose.

The reason Coming Home works is not because of what they do, it's because of

what they *don't* do. The facilitators were naturally able and shrewd to every nuance to where they masterfully directed the program, unstructured in a sense, with the only apparent template to be flexible, which is not an easy thing to arrange. The facilitators were key, and had to be sensitive so as to not define anyone, while also managing to direct by letting different conversations develop and take on their own life, which I think is a very difficult thing to do for a lot of clinicians, so I was impressed by Fordham.

~Brendan~

Brendan graduated from Coming Home 2017. We wish him health, happiness and wholeness as he continues his journey.

~The Coming Home Family

## Coming Home is part of the Restorative Community Collaborative.

A major initiative of the Beck Institute of Religion and Poverty at Fordham University has been the creation and growth of the Restorative Community Collaborative (RCC), a Beck-supported partnership of 13 faith communities. These communities of faith host evidence-informed programs that meet the needs of individuals in transition: the homeless, those returning from prison and military service, and domestic violence survivors.

## What are Restorative Communities?

They are communities that are dedicated to social justice in action by cultivating fellowship and connection with people in transition. These restorative communities counter people's experience of isolation and alienation by building a trusting, safe space where all participants have a voice and a role, and where our shared humanity as well as our struggles and achievements are recognized. Over 24 sessions people benefit from an environment that fosters caring relationships that help people grow. They come to know the reality of second chances, reconciliation and forgiveness. Education on concrete and relational skills empowers participants and fosters a solution-focused approach to problem-solving, goal-setting and achievement that enables participants to develop new ways of managing their life challenges.

## Congregational Involvement

The power of Restorative Community is not only the impact it has on participants, but the extent to which it enriches and benefits the congregation. Congregational involvement is critical to the success of the program. Congregants who volunteer as mentors, cooks and program presenters often report a renewal and an enhanced understanding of the larger systemic issues impacting marginalized populations. Congregants are invited to share in the weekly meals that are one of the cornerstones of the program. "Breaking bread" provides wonderful fellowship and connection.

For more information about how to get involved in Coming Home, please contact Lisa Velazquez-DeNapoli,  
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