

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis OUR HOUSE

In 1992, church member Suzie Ochs, RN (now PA), brought a grant application to her minister (Fred Muir) and church president (me). People were being hospitalized with AIDS-related infections, and then discharged to the city's night-time-only homeless shelter. Would the church sponsor a three-bed home with a live-in caregiver?

Would we! Fred and I had been looking for a social action program that could be supported by the whole congregation. With some trepidation, a huge insurance premium, and the promise that the outgoing president would become the project manager, the church voted yes! We named it OUR HOUSE. With the help of Suzie's all-volunteer group, HAVEN, we created a Housing Advisory Committee, rented property, got it completely furnished with donations, hired the caregiver, and took our first client, all within two months.

We were a place where people with advanced HIV disease could die with dignity "at home." More important, we were there to hug those whom others were afraid to touch, and to celebrate those whose sexual orientation had alienated them from their families and churches. The UUCA had just begun its work in becoming a welcoming congregation.

After two years, the UUCA board of trustees decided we could go it alone. What a congregational meeting that was! Passion and pride in what we were doing in the name of Unitarian Universalism fought against the argument that OUR HOUSE should be its own agency. We compromised. OUR HOUSE became a program of HAVEN, along with its HIV support groups, buddy program, and volunteer transportation. The UUCA promised to support HAVEN as a line item in its budget, provide rent-free office and meeting space, and allow its mailing list to be used for donor-based fundraising.

13 years later we have the same live-in caregiver and the same project director, who has become HAVEN's executive director, and three UUCA members serve on its board. In 1998, HAVEN added OUR PLACE, a transitional unit for three adults who can work. OUR HOUSE has become more transitional, too—of the 9 who died in our arms (sometimes literally) the most recent loss was in 2000. Now we provide a supportive environment for adjusting to AIDS meds and maintaining sobriety. One of our challenges is the lack of affordable housing. So this month we are opening OUR PAD, three more beds for permanent shared living in a drug-free environment.

Today's challenges are diminishing volunteer and financial support. So our clients are giving back: they are providing more and more support for each other. They take buddy training, put on our semi-annual picnics, and serve on our Consumer Advisory Board. And play Santa! Our biggest bash is our holiday party, for volunteers, staff, and clients and their families. It's held in the UUCA sanctuary, and all the food and presents are donated from our other supporting churches, sororities, and food banks. That's Santa's real-life buddy on his lap! He says HAVEN and OUR HOUSE saved his life. He's paying it forward.

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PS. One of the gifts I've received from this work is the opportunity to experience cultural diversity first-hand, since our clients are about 70% African American. I am a proud member of the UUCA Anti-racism Transformation Team, and my HAVEN experience makes me more dedicated than ever in helping us become an anti-racist anti-oppressive multi-cultural community.