

A place to turn on the road ahead

Joseph's House helps meet needs so people can change their lives

By Tim O'Brien

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As a teenager growing up on Sheridan Avenue in Albany, Michele Warren saw her cousin murdered in front of her eyes.

"They lived next door to us," she said. "We were close."

A year later, she herself was the victim of a horrific crime that left her unable to have children.

For years, Warren said, she buried the trauma she had survived until one day, at age 42, she snapped.

"Apparently I carried it around all these years," she said. "Something happened, and I just went off. I never looked back."

She was working in a store, packaging meat, when she suddenly felt overwhelmed by emotion and abruptly quit. She ended up on the street, an alcoholic who buried her pain. Though she gained a reputation as funny rather than mean-spirited, she said, she looks back to those years with pain.

During the warm weather, Warren slept outdoors. When it became cold, she would seek temporary shelter at Joseph's House in Troy, but she ignored the staff's efforts to get her to stay.

"I lived up in the woods up by Prospect Park," she said. "I kept leaving. They kept trying to talk me into coming back."

And then, at age 53, just as abruptly as she had quit her life, Warren decided she could not live that way anymore. She turned to Joseph's House, and she says the result has transformed her life.

"I just felt like I was dying. I just felt I couldn't make it another night," she said.

Now 60 years old, Warren lives at the supportive housing apartment complex called the Hill Street Inn. She has been there for five years.

She had tried to get sober for years. She had gone to in-patient rehabilitation centers.

"I'd come right out and get drunk," she said.

When she decided she had to change her life, she said, Joseph's House hooked her up with an outpatient treatment program run by Conifer Park. They gave her a place to stay at the Lansing Inn in Lansingburgh.

"They put me in an apartment so I could go for my appointments in the program," she said. "I

think that's what helped. They gave me my own bed."

Two years ago, she moved to the Hill Street Inn.

Warren credits the staff with the way they approached her. Rather than telling her what she needed to do, they asked her what she needed.

"I told them I needed to go into a program," she said. "I knew I had to get sober. Therapy is what really helped me."

She learned how to cope with the post-traumatic stress disorder she now knows she has. Joseph's House helped her get Social Security disability payments for her PTSD. When they learned she used to enjoy playing guitar, they got her one that sits in the corner of her room.

The nonprofit's main emphasis is helping people find stable housing, said Amy LaFountain, supported housing coordinator.

"When people's basic needs are met, they'll be able to make changes on their own," she said.

Warren said she doesn't think she would have survived without Joseph's House.

"I don't know where I would be without them," she said. "I would have died without Joseph's House."

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