

People In Crisis offers help, needs support

Those aided testify how important local organization has been

'I call her the Mother Teresa of South Jersey because she has that kind of heart for the neediest of the needy and is on the front lines of care, going door to door.'
— The Rev. G. Douglas Eberly Jr.

CAPE MAY — Raising money to fix a cesspool for a down-and-out Vietnam veteran in Cape May. Making sure a health-impaired Northfield man has a place to live.

Those are just a few examples of what People In Crisis, Inc., of Cape May and Atlantic counties does, much through the hands-on work of Lana Samuels, who is repaying the debt of having her own life saved by doing she can for others who aren't able to get the help or access the services they need.

Right now she is appealing for the public's help to support the organization, which in turn supports those in crisis.

Samuels, who is based Ocean City, is co-president of the 501(c)(3) organization. Her motivation is personal: when she was in a severe accident and didn't have enough health insurance, and didn't know how to get through the complicated health system, a friend, Thomas, rescued her by offering financial assistance and resources. That allowed her to heal, but now the very person who helped her is in crisis and her mission is to not only support him but to do the same for others.

"I call her the Mother Teresa of South Jersey because she has that kind of heart for the neediest of the needy and is on the front lines of care, going door to door, seeing people in person, all of that," said the Rev. G. Douglas Eberly Jr., a retired Episcopal priest who spent years in Ventnor and now fills in for services at Holy Trinity Church in Ocean City, and around the Diocese.

What appeals to him about People in Crisis is "it is helping people who are falling through the cracks of our systems of care in this country. The support that they need is not forthcoming in so many ways. What Lana is doing is trying to find ways of supporting people whose residence is about to evict them or their health insurance ran out or any number of things along that line."

"There are a number of people who are at that point who are no longer being assisted," Eberly said. "She discovers who they are and does all she can to help. I believe I met her in Ventnor when I had my church there and we reconnected in Ocean City at Holy Trinity Episcopal."

Personal stories of need, help

John Powers, who grew up and spent most of his life in Northfield, graduating from Mainland Regional High School, felt he had nowhere to turn when he bumped into Samuels.

"Lana noticed me in the Dunkin' Donuts in 2018 and she wanted to know about my situation," he said. That situation was bleak.

The day of his surgery for a blood clot in his leg, he got a text message from a friend he was living with.

“He said his mother was kicking me out. He said my stuff could stay where it was, safe. I was discharged (from the hospital) a few days later and I was left on my own to take care of myself. I had no plan. I had no money. was not working,” Powers said.

Having been out of work for a long time, his sister had been the breadwinner of his family but she had died of heart attack in 2011 at age 45. “My sister used to take care of me and my mom. ... And then my mom got ill and I had to take care of her until she got put in a nursing home and I got evicted from probably the only home I’ve ever known.”

After hearing his story in the Dunkin’ Donuts, Samuels talked to colleagues at People in Crisis “and they wanted to work on helping me right away. I’ve known her ever since. She has taken steps in getting me fed, getting me clothes, everything you can think of.

“It’s been a rough journey, but it may come to something better soon enough, possibly. I’m being optimistic,” the 44-year-old said.

People in Crisis hooked him up with a day center that helps coordinate things for him, such as his medical appointments and other things that need to be done. He finally got an appointment with the Department of Motor Vehicles to get a new ID, which was a problem because he didn’t know how to go through the process of getting a copy of his birth certificate.

“That was a chore in itself,” he said.

On an important note, after Powers bounced around different places in different towns and at one point slept on a bench outside his mother’s nursing home, Samuels was able to find him shelter.

When he got his Social Security, Samuels secured him a hotel in Somers Point, where he has been able to stay for two years with rental assistance from Atlantic County. “Eventually I’m trying to get Section 8 so I can get an apartment I can afford,” he said.

His mother “has no clue” about his situation because he doesn’t want to add stress. His father died at age 45 from COPD. He laughs it off, but he seems concerned that he turns 45 in November.

“The organization has done a lot for being a little nonprofit that I think needs to get more attention across the country, not just in New Jersey,” Powers said. “People need to know what People in Crisis has done, not just me and Ed, but for everybody.”

A Vietnam veteran in need in Cape May

Many years ago, according to Edgar Neel of Seashore Road, “Lana was in Cape May and stopped by and saw me. I gave her a donation and she asked me if there was anything I needed. She has helped me quite a bit. She saved my life.”

The Vietnam veteran said he was being overcharged for his heart medicine. “I was down and out and I just wanted to give up and forget it. She helped me along the way and got me straightened out.”

The cost was so high, he said, that even after support through the Veterans Administration he temporarily stopped taking the medicine. Samuels was able to help him find a way to get it at a fraction of the cost he was paying.

But the troubles kept coming.

“The next thing you know, the roof was leaking pretty bad and Lana found someone who would donate the shingles and someone who would do the work for free,” Neel said.

He had a problem with his mortgage, and People in Crisis, through Samuels and board member Bob Heide, secured \$8,000 to help him keep his home.

Now he has a severe issue with his cesspool.

“The \$8,000 came from a grant and saved your home,” Samuels said.

“I was just about to go under and they came along and saved me,” Neel added.

His predicament came about because of health issues.

“I had PTSD from the service and developed COPD, and it is very difficult for me to get around. My health is going downhill,” he said.

Neel served from 1964 to 1968 on an aircraft carrier and did four tours of duty in Vietnam.

“People in Crisis has been very important to me. I wouldn’t be here without them,” Neel said.

“And we haven’t stopped,” Samuels added. “He needs a lot more help.”

Seeking donations

Samuels and People in Crisis are looking for donations and help through grants to continue their work.

Currently there is a GoFundMe page for Neel to repair the cesspool that is now threatening his property. The link is <https://www.gofundme.com/f/raising-funds-for-a-cesspool-for-a-vietnam-vet>

Samuels is known throughout the area for her direct solicitations. She goes door to door selling discount card to a variety of businesses that have come to support People in Crisis. But that is nowhere near enough to raise the kind of money the group needs to help Neel and the others.

People in Crisis is working to raise \$100,000 in the next few weeks.

“I am trying hard to fight for their lives alone, but going door to door won’t cut it,” Samuels said, although she continues to do it even with the pain she still suffers from the accident.

The other reason she goes door to door is to find other people who are still in need, just as she found Neel and Powers.

“Thomas (the friend who initially helped her) and a few other people may not survive or will be severely debilitated without the public’s support,” she said.

People in Crisis seeks corporate support, but many grant programs are not set up to help a single person.

To learn more about PICI and all the ways the group supports people in crisis, or to donate, go to peopleincrisis.org. Donations also may be sent to the co-president, Sandra Weibel, M.D. Her mailing address is Jefferson University Pulmonary Depart., 834 Walnut St., Suite 650, c/o Sandra Weibel, M.D., Philadelphia, Pa. 19107. To contact PICI, call (609) 204-9638 or email pici17@yahoo.com.