



# NIGHTLIGHTS

SUMMER 2024

## The Night Ministry Became My Haven

By Denishe Medeline Mberi, Graduate of The Night Ministry's Youth Housing Programs and Social Media Influencer

On February 14, 2020, I wrote the following in my journal.

“My life is falling apart. I want to put myself back together, but I don't know where the pieces go. I'm blindly walking into my future with no guidance, but even though I am afraid of the consequences, I am excited about the future.”

At the time, I was a 19-year-old depressed college student who had just been released from a psychiatric ward. After I was released, I quickly found out that there were no resources to aid me in transitioning back to my old life. The only thing I received was medication that I couldn't afford and two sessions with the school's only guidance counselor. Without any support, I ended up suspended from school and without housing.

After months of couch surfing, I came to The Night Ministry. I remember the first day I got there. One of the workers walked up to me and asked how my day was. At that point, I was 20, and it was the first time someone had genuinely asked if I was okay. After that interaction, The Night Ministry took me under its wing and put me around a group of adults who cared about my future and overall growth. It became my haven, providing me with the support and resources I desperately needed.

Thank you, Candace Musick, for being my first mentor. Michelle Thomas for co-creating a safe space for people who were often ignored. Henry Merrill for being the father figure I always wanted. Tamara Jamison and Tracy Walker for helping me while I was going through some of the hardest moments of my life. And Allison McCann-Stevenson and Carol Sharp for being the representation of successful Black women.

*“The Night Ministry took me under its wing and put me around a group of adults who cared about my future and overall growth.”*



Denishe shared her story at The Night Ministry's Lighting Up the Night Gala in May.

Four years later, I successfully transitioned out of The Night Ministry's Pathways Program with my own apartment, a solid social circle, a profound relationship with God, and a deep love and admiration for myself that will stand the test of time. Today, I finally understand why I was excited about my future all those years ago. ◇

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# Advocate Uses Her Story to Speak Out for Unhoused Youth

As a mother who experienced homelessness in her teens, Sharday Hamilton knows firsthand how our social safety net can fail young pregnant and parenting mothers and their children.

Sharday did find stability with the help of The Night Ministry. Housed with her son for seven years now, she has also found her voice. An advocate for unhoused youth, she speaks to legislators and policymakers at the local and national levels about improving services and expanding resources for unhoused young people.

Sharday shares her remarkable story in a filmed talk that is part of **FIRSTHAND: Homeless**, a series on WTTW, Chicago's PBS station, that explores Chicago's homelessness crisis. We spoke with Sharday about the experience and the importance of speaking out.

## ***The Night Ministry: Why did you decide to participate in the FIRSTHAND project?***

Sharday: I'd never really had the chance to share my full story, so this was an opportunity to open up about who I am, who I was, where I came from, and how I'm doing. A lot of people are scared or unable to share what happened to them. Now other youth can go listen to my story and know that there are people out here fighting and standing up for them.

## ***What is advocacy to you?***

Before I went through my homeless journey, I knew nothing about it, but it means a lot to me now. Advocacy means that I'm able to be a voice for myself and others. My experience was a tragedy, but I can be out here and help change that for others.

*"My experience was a tragedy, but I can be out here and help change that for others."*

*– Sharday Hamilton, Youth Advocate*



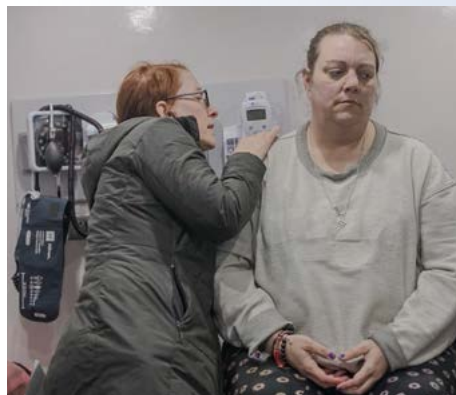
An advocate for unhoused youth, Sharday Hamilton is the Youth Engagement Outreach Coordinator with the National Runaway Safeline and a former Peer Outreach Professional at The Night Ministry. Photo by Ken Carl for WTTW.

## ***Why is it especially important to speak out as a young mother?***

I don't want any kids or young people to go through the same thing that I did, so if I have to be out here fighting and letting them know that it's okay to stand up for

themselves, then that's what I'm going do.

Watch Sharday's talk, "Finding A Way Home," at [www.wttw.com/firsthand](http://www.wttw.com/firsthand) or by scanning the QR code. ◊



## **FIRSTHAND: HOMELESS — THE ROLE OF FREE & CHARITABLE CLINICS**

Saturday, August 17, 1 to 3 pm

Legler Regional Library, 115 South Pulaski Road, Chicago 60624

Free and charitable clinics like The Night Ministry provide essential health care to underserved individuals and families, including those experiencing homelessness. Join The Night Ministry and WTTW for a discussion with experts and practitioners about the crucial role these clinics play in helping our vulnerable neighbors address their medical needs. Registration and more information at [www.thenightministry.org/freeandcharitableclinics](http://www.thenightministry.org/freeandcharitableclinics).

# Celebrating our Lighting Up the Night Honorees

It was our privilege to honor those who have made a lasting contribution to the mission of The Night Ministry and our community at our Annual Gala on May 23.

## Lamplighter Award

### Chicago Transit Authority

The Lamplighter Award symbolizes an unwavering commitment to our mission and to those we serve. Since the fall of 2020, the CTA has collaborated with The Night Ministry and the City of Chicago to bring human connection, housing support, and health care to unhoused individuals sheltering on the Red and Blue line trains.



Left to right: President & CEO, Carol J. Sharp; CTA President Dorval Carter, Jr.; Clinical Supervisor Stephan Koruba

## Beacon Award

### Alicia Pond

The Beacon Award symbolizes extraordinary generosity and dedication to The Night Ministry's mission. Through her many years of service on the Board of Directors, including several as Board Chair, and as a steadfast mission ambassador, Alicia has advanced the agency's critical work, underpinning our ability to serve our vulnerable community members.



Carol; Alicia Pond; Stephan

## Legacy of Light Award

### Rev. Barbara Bolsen

The Legacy of Light Award commemorates the lasting impact of individuals who brightened the lives of our community with their kindness, compassion, and service. During her 23-year career at The Night Ministry, Rev. Barbara Bolsen stood with the communities she served. Her legacy is richly woven into the programs and the culture of The Night Ministry, and her kindness, compassion, and service have brightened the lives of those whom we serve.



Carol; Barbara's brother Bill Bolsen; Director of Strategic Partnerships Tedd Peso



It was a special day at The Night Ministry's Open Door Shelter – West Town when the Cole Family joined us to dedicate Rachel's Room. Named in honor of a beloved Cole Family member, Rachel's Room offers a space for the young people who reside with us at West Town—including young mothers and their children—to visit with their families while they stabilize and move toward greater independence. In memory of Rachel, the room is beautifully adorned with a butterfly motif, creating a warm, inviting, and inspiring environment. Thank you to the Cole Family for your ongoing support of our mission!

# The Legacy of Rev. Tom Behrens



*Rev. Tom Behrens, The Night Ministry's Founding President & Former CEO, provided visionary leadership for decades that deepened and widened the agency's impact in Chicago and expanded the range of services available to unhoused individuals.*

It is with a heavy heart that we share the news of the passing of Rev. Tom Behrens, the Founding President & Former CEO of The Night Ministry. Through his decades of service, leadership, and advocacy, Tom helped change the landscape of homelessness services.

After graduating from seminary in 1976, Tom began working with a diverse coalition of congregations to perform compassionate and nonjudgmental outreach on the streets of Chicago. In addition to pioneering this outreach model, Tom played a key role in bringing the community together to address homelessness. He identified service gaps and sparked action to fill them.

In the late 1980s, Tom successfully advocated for the passage of state legislation allowing nonprofits to operate shelters for unhoused youth. This paved the way for The Night Ministry and organizations around Illinois to expand services for unhoused young people.

Tom also oversaw the launch of The Night Ministry's Outreach & Health Ministry Program in the early 1990s, when an RV was outfitted to offer mobile healthcare services. Today, our programs have expanded across the city to include case management and resources like food and clothing, serving thousands of people each year.

Tom's tireless efforts transformed countless lives and set the standard for compassion and advocacy in The Night Ministry's work. His spirit will continue to guide us as we carry forward his mission of providing human connection, housing support, and health care to those who are unhoused or experiencing poverty.

The Night Ministry named its Open Door Shelter – West Town Behrens House when the facility opened in 2007. In recognition of Tom's legacy, one of our Health Outreach Buses will also be named in honor of him. ♦

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# Health Outreach Bus Expands Services into Encampments

It's 4 p.m. on a Tuesday when The Night Ministry's Health Outreach Bus pulls into the parking lot of a public park on Chicago's Northwest side. Lining the park's perimeter are several tents, whose occupants make their way toward the vehicle to receive resources like food, water, harm reduction supplies, and medical care as well as assistance with their housing needs.

That's just what the Bus program does. But something is different this afternoon. On any other day that the Bus is out on the streets, the vehicle is stationed in the middle of neighborhoods such as Pilsen, New City, and South Shore. But one day a week, the Bus is now adopting the model of the agency's Street Medicine Program by visiting a round of encampments to provide services to their residents.

The move comes amidst growth in the number of Chicagoans who are living unsheltered. And it represents The Night Ministry's ability to pivot its operations to respond to the changing needs of the city's unhoused population and maximize the impact of its services.

"By taking this on, the Health Outreach Bus is becoming more flexible and mobile," said Edward Davis, Bus Outreach Supervisor. "But whether we are visiting neighborhoods or encampments, we follow a schedule, so people know where we'll be and when. "That's something the people we serve rely on."

"People recognize us because we're such a mainstay in the community," he continued, "and that helps greatly in connecting to encampment residents."



*Sylvester Farmer, Health Outreach Bus Driver, drops off a meal and socks outside a client's tent.*

Juan Roca, Manager of Outreach Operations, agrees. "The clients are very appreciative. They say, 'Thank goodness you're coming here, because not many other services do.' The Night Ministry's persistence means a lot to them," he said.

The change also represents a larger trend among The Night Ministry's Health Outreach services: staff crossover among the Bus, Street Medicine, and CTA Outreach programs.

The result is a greater continuity of care for the agency's clients and increased reliability of services. ◊



## JACKIE'S STORY

"A friend of mine told me about The Night Ministry and about Stephanie, a case manager that worked there. I went up the Forest Park stop and talked to her and it's been great ever since then."

After five years on the streets of Chicago, Jackie is now in his own apartment with the help of The Night Ministry and supporters like you.

"You just don't know how nice it is to have your own space," Jackie says.

Hear more from Jackie about his journey to stability in our new video. Visit [www.thenightministry.org/tomorrow](http://www.thenightministry.org/tomorrow) or scan the QR code to watch.





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## Jason's Story: "The Night Ministry Supports Me Like Family"

Jason struggled with homelessness and addiction on Chicago's streets for nearly two decades. Today, with help from The Night Ministry and a substance use treatment program, he has a home of his own along with stability and hope.

"It means everything to me, having a place. I have the basic necessities. When you're homeless, you don't have a bathroom or a refrigerator. You can't lay down on your couch, or turn the fan on, or wash your clothes. Now I have that. This is a new start for me," he said.

Jason moved to Chicago from Louisiana to be with family in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. But he soon found himself without stable housing. He lived in encampments along Lower Wacker Drive, where he connected with The Night Ministry's Street Medicine Team, which brings health care, survival resources, and support directly to unsheltered individuals.

"The Night Ministry looked out for and cared about us. They were the only people who would come around when it was zero below," Jason said.

Jason accessed harm reduction supplies like sterile syringes offered by The Night Ministry before seeking help for his substance use. He credits those resources with keeping him and others around him alive and as safe as possible.



Jason relaxes on the couch in his apartment, which The Night Ministry helped him obtain.

"When they started with harm reduction, you didn't have people sharing needles anymore. You don't see as many infections from what I see now and what it used to be years ago."

*"It means everything to me,  
 having a place."  
 – Jason, a client of Street Medicine*

Jason especially values his relationship with staff members Stephan Koruba, Clinical Supervisor, and Sylvia Hibbard, Street Medicine Case Manager, who helped him get back to stability and continue to provide support.

"Sylvia got me my insurance and my Link card, which allows me to access food assistance. Stephan picked me up and took me to most of my doctor appointments," he said. "The Night Ministry supports me like a family. They didn't give up on me." ♦

## Thank you to those who generously gave at the \$500 level or higher to support our mission between April 16 and July 15, 2024.



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