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For Youth, By Youth: A Third Student-Run Homeless Shelter

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Abstract

This past winter, the third student-run homeless shelter in the United States came into being. Two recent Harvard graduates, Sam Greenberg and Sarah Rosenkrantz, who had volunteered at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter as college students, saw a need within the Boston and Cambridge communities for a homeless shelter serving young adults. Drawing upon the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter's student-run model, Sam and Sarah worked with Harvard College undergraduates to open Youth-to-Youth (Y2Y) Harvard Square, a homeless shelter exclusively for young adults ages 18–24. This article features an interview with Sam and Sarah about their work to establish Y2Y Harvard Square and the experiences of the college students leading and staffing the shelter.

It has been my honor and pleasure to serve as the *Journal of College & Character's* "Civic Engagement on Campus" editor for the past seven years. For my final article for this column, I wanted to focus on a recent addition to the work of college students' civic engagement in which I may have had a small hand.

In 2008, I published *Shelter: Where Harvard Meets the Homeless*, which chronicled the work of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, the only student-run homeless shelter in the country, and the impact of this work upon both the college students who managed the shelter and the men and women who stayed there (Seider, 2010). Villanova Professor Stephanie Sena learned about the Harvard Square Shelter through my book (or, really, a public radio story spurred by the book) and worked with college students at Villanova, Temple, Drexel, Penn, and Swarthmore to establish the Student-Run Emergency Housing Unit of Philadelphia. I profiled their great work in a 2012 *JCC* column article entitled "The *Second* Student-Run Shelter" (Seider, 2012).

This past winter, a third student-run shelter came into being. Sam Greenberg and Sarah Rosenkrantz, who had volunteered at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter as college students, saw a need within the Boston and Cambridge communities for a homeless shelter serving young adults (18–24 years old). Drawing upon the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter's student-run model, Sam and Sarah worked with Harvard College undergraduates to open the Youth-to-Youth (Y2Y) Harvard Square Shelter in the winter of 2015. I had the privilege of serving on Sam and Sarah's advisory board as they engaged with Harvard College undergraduates to open the Y2Y Shelter. With Y2Y's first season of operation behind them, and the next season scheduled to begin in October, I sat down with Sam and Sarah to ask them more about the

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founding of the Y2Y shelter, the role of undergraduates in operating the shelter, and their plans for the future. The transcript from our interview below has been edited and condensed to fit within this *JCC* column.

SCOTT: **First, let me ask how each of you came to this work?**

SAM: I grew up in Cambridge, just down the street from Harvard. And I had the opportunity to think a lot about homelessness and social justice issues just growing up. I was really lucky to be in an incredibly stable and supportive family, [but] many of my peers didn't have that, including very close friends who did not have those opportunities and did experience homelessness. So I think coming to Harvard with a lot of guilt and a lot of uncertainty about where I fit in, and [started volunteering at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter]. I think it's the place where I learned the most and was challenged the most, and it was the place where I was the happiest and the saddest, and it was an incredibly meaningful experience to me. And while it's never the motivation for wanting to open more student-run programming, if it is the right place to do it and it can be done well, I know a motivation for me has always been the fact that for literally dozens of our peers and friends, it was a transformative experience.

SARAH: I grew up outside of Boston in a very stable and supportive family and from a very young age had an interest or an emotional response to homelessness. I started doing some volunteer work in high school. Then when I came to college, I started working at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. Like Sam, for me, it was the most important thing I did and the most difficult. I remember many conversations that I had at the shelter, and I think it really pushed me and tested my kind of understanding of the world, of myself, of how I interact with people. And then I think just believing that young people our age shouldn't have to live on the streets and that by a flip of the coin I could have had the lack of support and lack of incredible family that so many people experience that results in their homelessness, and that to me doesn't seem fair.

SCOTT: **Describe the Y2Y Shelter for me.**

SAM: Y2Y Harvard Square is a student run homeless shelter for young adults ages 18–24. We provide 22 beds and provide three tiers of services. We have our sanctuary level services where we do dinner and breakfast, showers and laundry. We have our pathways out of homelessness programming where our students work as case managers, as legal aid. We partner with other providers to provide medical care, mental health care. We do enrichment activities like art workshops, and finally our advocacy and leadership development programming, where we engage both our students volunteering with us and the young people staying with us in work telling stories, writing letters, being involved in sort of legislative and public advocacy and awareness.

SCOTT: **Tell me about the role of college students within Y2Y.**

SARAH: Y2Y is both entirely run and staffed by two groups of students: "staff members" and "volunteers." The volunteers are a group of 150+ students who [do weekly two-hour shifts at Y2Y] and make breakfast, make dinner, clean. And we have 30 "staff members,"

and those staff members are also students. They're not paid, but they're hired in a typical interview process and they undergo between 20 and 30 hours of training. At any given time, there are two student staff members in this shelter overseeing the volunteers and making sure guests are safe, and you also have an administrative responsibility so there's a volunteer director, a finance director, a fund raising director, etc. So really, it's run and driven by students.

SCOTT: Tell me about your decision to found the Y2Y shelter.

SARAH: Sam and I were both on the staff of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, and our sophomore year...we learned that there was a huge need for beds for young adults. Specifically in Greater Boston, there were only 12 shelter beds for young people but a need for many more than that. I think that year Youth On Fire, which is a daytime program, had seen over 500 young people who were experiencing homelessness, so kind of unanimously the service provider community and the community who works in this area said that we need short term shelter beds for young people, and this is a really dire need. We also learned that young people don't feel safe in adult shelters, that they often prefer to sleep on the street than in those shelters, with the exception we heard of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter because it was student run, it was smaller, it had a very warm and organic feel that many other shelters couldn't provide.

SCOTT: Tell me about the process of getting Y2Y off the ground.

SAM: One of the things that we were lucky to be able to do was get a really incredible group of stakeholders together. We had really incredible academic expertise, we had members of the community who provided services, who led advocacy or policy efforts. We had young adults who had experience with homelessness, and faith leaders and sort of a range of other people, and I think that was sort of something that made a profound difference to us. It allowed us to guide our [college] students more ably when working through some of the programmatic model. It allowed us to have a base in terms of starting to think about fund raising strategy. It gave us a perspective into how to pursue a space and how to ultimately design and renovate it. So we were so lucky to be so successful in having a broad base of stakeholders that really made this happen. And from there we were able to find a home at the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church in Harvard Square. We were able to line up an incredible community of design team and construction companies and workers and volunteers who really sort of went through the process of renovating the space. And kind of on a parallel track, we worked with our students and then the advisory board and other advisors on turning our research that we had been doing for over a year into an operating manual and operating policies, and then training our staff on those policies and getting them ready to go.

SCOTT: Tell me how this first season of operating the Y2Y Shelter went.

SAM: It was a really, really great season and extremely challenging, and we learned a lot from it. We had 22 beds for 22 guests, and we were full as of the fifth night, and for the vast majority of the rest of our nights. There were also lots of challenges. One thing that surprised us was how challenging it was for our students that, in this first season,

everything is a decision. There's an incredible amount of decisions to make and just this is hard work, and it really took a toll on our students. I think we also learned a lot about our guests. We learned a lot about our programming, we learned a lot about our physical space, and those things were great. Sometimes they felt like mistakes at the time but ultimately they were just learning.

SCOTT: Tell me about the experience of the college students volunteering at the Y2Y Shelter.

SARAH: I think overwhelmingly it was a positive experience. Lots of people said this has become the most important thing I've done at school, this has really changed what I want to do, what I find important, I think, in a way that shocked themselves. I think a lot of people found a lot of strong community in their fellow staff members. Definitely the best thing that people reported about the shelter was the conversations they had with guests and with the young people who were staying there. I think it was also really hard. By the end [of the season] people were really tired and burnt out, and I think that was a product of everyone being new and a lot going on. Kind of halfway through, we realized that we needed to infuse a lot more emotional and mental support to the students, and we were able to do that through supervision groups. And that helped a lot, but I think we realized that we need to be proactive about self-care and the student mental health aspect.

SCOTT: Tell me what you feel like the students working at Y2Y gained from the experience?

SARAH: I think there's the in-shelter experience of talking to guests and learning from people who have extraordinary lives and who have shared so much. I think people appreciated that and really take that as a gift. And I think there's the leadership and organizational skills, so the student staff you know were 100% responsible for the shelter. Sam and I wouldn't come in if someone didn't show up for a shift. We'd help them figure out how you find a replacement, but at the end of the day, they were responsible. And I think that level of ownership and leadership was something that's hard to find at other places, and even just the conversations that we were having. Every Sunday, there's a group that meets that's called the policy group, and they meet and discuss decisions around the shelter, so you know, anything from how many eggs should we serve to whether a particular guest should have a permanent bar. I think that group in particular was a huge learning experience for people. It really challenged assumptions and forced people to think critically about their values and their morals, and we had some really hard conversations in that group. I think that critical thinking process that is relevant to real world consequences was a huge gain for the students.

SCOTT: What would it be useful for student affairs folks to know about the Y2Y Shelter?

SARAH: I think again our student [volunteers] come away feeling good but also really bad, and I think that bad feeling is important to feel. It's a good bad. I think a lot of volunteer programs you come away feeling heartwarming, and you had these heartwarming experiences, and I feel like a lot of our students don't have that. They come away from a shift and cry, and they come away from a policy meeting and cry, and obviously you want our students to be happy and you know well supported, but I think experiencing what it actually means to do this work in a real way is much more valuable.

SCOTT: **Would you like to see other student-run shelters in other university towns across the country?**

SARAH: Yes, in so far as there's a need and there's the right support, and I think our biggest fear is one—that we're coming in and creating a program for the sake of doing it and there's really no need, and two—that it's done poorly. If it's done poorly, the stakes are very high. The stakes are the lives of young people—both students and young people who are experiencing homelessness—and my biggest fear is we would do that wrong, and that people get hurt. However, where there is a need, where there is the right infrastructure, we think that it can be an incredibly effective model, and it can be a safe space for young people and also a transformative experience for students.

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