

**FRIDAY/SATURDAY**  
**BETSY C/FRANK W**  
**A PAIR OF BOOTS/A PAIR OF SHOES**

Betsy's last day at SMOC was on Friday, February 25<sup>th</sup>. Betsy Conway, or Sister Betsy as she is often affectionately addressed, was the first and only Director of our New Beginnings Program, a position she held for 17 years. Betsy is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph, who obtained an MSW from Boston College in the mid-90's and immediately began her professional career at SMOC.

Frank W.'s last contact with SMOC was on Saturday morning, February 26<sup>th</sup>, when the House Manager of 108/110 Arlington Street phoned Dougie Bradford, one of our Outreach Workers, asking for help. Frank had violated the rules by bringing a bottle of alcohol into the house and was threatening the House Manager. Dougie, who had known Frank for years, went right over to the house, hoping that he could head off a volatile and potentially dangerous situation. Saturday, February 26<sup>th</sup>, would also prove to be Frank W.'s last day of life.

It's pretty easy for me to reflect on Betsy's last day with us. I imagine her cleaning out her small office over at Bethany Hill where the program is located. New Beginnings is embedded in a larger residential community created by the Sisters of St. Joseph and SMOC in the mid 1990's. In my mind's eye, I see her introducing her replacement, Tom Jordan, to members of both the New Beginnings and the Bethany Hill community. I'm guessing she tried to keep her emotions in check. I'm pretty sure that she had tears in her eyes as she walked out of the building and headed to her car at the end of the day.

It's harder for me to either imagine or understand Frank W.'s last day on earth. A lifelong Framingham resident and a graduate of Marian High School, Frank's life had spun out of control a long time ago. Chronically homeless, controlled by and at the mercy of the demons of addiction, he had pinballed through both the correctional and institutional systems of care for more than 20 years. He had come to our shelter system and been placed in our First Step (CSPECH) housing. When Dougie arrived at the Arlington Street house that morning, he attempted to convince Frank to either go to Detox or check himself into

Leonard Morse. Frank belligerently refused. Dougie made a quick and accurate assessment, realized that the situation could spin completely out of control, and called the Police. When the Police arrived, they agreed to take Frank to his sister's house for a "cooling off period."

As Dougie later told me, "cooling off" wasn't going to happen that day. Later that afternoon, Frank blew out of his sister's house, hooked up with some of his drinking buddies, went down to the train tracks and proceeded to get himself totally wasted. Some time that night, his "buddies" deserted him. He lay down on one of those benches next to the tracks, and never woke up.

Betsy is a wonderful helper and someone I always enjoy talking with. Simply put, she made me think about the helping process. Oftentimes, after listening to her, I would find myself reflecting on her words. To me, she always had that unique ability in the profession to stay in the present, to accept the current situation without ever losing hope for the future. I never thought it was because she found things easy. In fact, I know she struggled with many of the same issues that those of us in this profession do.

The program she was responsible for, that she truly created a community with, had evolved tremendously during her tenure. What started as a residential, respite program for folks with an incurable, terminal illness (HIV/AIDS), evolved into a long-term residential program for folks with a manageable illness, thanks to advances in the medical sciences. Once a program that required strict sobriety had changed over the years into a program that was committed to helping the residents retain their housing even when they lost their sobriety. The conceptual framework had changed. And Betsy, at times, admittedly struggled with this shift to a harm reduction, low threshold housing program that used a trauma-informed conceptual framework to enable the participants to succeed. And, under Betsy's leadership, they did succeed. Simply put, New Beginnings is a jewel of a program.

I may have known Frank by sight, but that was all. What I do know, and have observed for many years, is the absolutely debilitating effect of the disease of addiction. Like many people we're connected with, Frank had the worst case, and when I say worst case, the images that come to

mind are of a fire in the brain. I've seen folks where the fire is light and the steps taken to contain frequently are successful. However, with other folks like Frank, that seems impossible. I can only equate this level of the disease to an all-consuming forest fire that never goes out, that rages incessantly despite the best efforts to contain it. Which means that it's always capable of breaking out, leaping whatever barriers or ditches you've dug around it, and consuming everything in its path, even life itself. In a nutshell, that was Frank W.'s life experience.

For a long time, I carried around the both the events of that weekend and my thoughts of Betsy and Frank. I had linked them together and could not understand why. Until one day, in the course of events, I came upon an image that led me to an understanding of the bridge between Betsy and Frank.

In order to describe it, I have to place how I came to this realization in context. So, here's the context.

After the lawsuit against the Town of Framingham successfully ended in late Fall 2010, I wandered through our Howard Street building and realized we had to pay attention to the environment. That started a several-month process where we both redesigned the environment and attempted to make it more respectful and esthetically pleasing, to both the people who work in the building and provided services, and came to the building looking for assistance. As part of the redesign, we decided to place art throughout the building on the walls. For those of you who have been in our building, you know there is a vast amount of wall space. We decided to use art in the form of prints, posters and pictures as a way to enhance and make the building more respectful.

So, when you're looking for art to fill wall space, you should not avoid Van Gogh. And that led to us ordering and placing a number of Van Gogh prints around the building. In the process of picking some of the Van Gogh prints, I found myself captivated by several of the still life paintings he did of shoes and boots. I ordered several of those pictures. When the prints arrived, I found myself staring at them intently. They were magnificent portraits that conveyed a multitude of feelings and impressions. Then I had one of those "a-ha moments." One picture, a

still life of an old pair of beat-up boots standing together, could have easily been the shoes that Frank died in, worn out, laces dangling, looking like they had little life left in them. They conveyed the hard life, misery and poverty that their owners must have experienced.

Another of Van Gogh's still lifes showed one boot upright, the other on its side, showing the sole with the hobnails peeking through. They looked well worn but ready to go, the owner placing them by the doorstep until he or she was ready to journey forth again. I can imagine Betsy wearing those boots.

Frank's path has ended. His boots will remain forever by the side of the door, unclaimed..

Betsy has already picked up her boots, put them on, laced them up, and headed out the door to once again take on the suffering in the world, to meet the challenges that the Franks of the world present, and, every day, attempt to make their life's path more fulfilling.

Jim Cuddy  
December, 2011