

Coming In From The Cold

Part II

The Unicorn

Cheryl pulled the knit hat off her head and tried to hand it to me.

"Oh no, thank you, I couldn't take your hat, you need it. I'd like you to make me one just like yours."

"OK." Cheryl smiled and affixed her red and white handmade watchcap back on her head. Short, a little stocky but that feature may have resulted from the dozen layers of clothes she appeared to be wearing, sparkling eyes and a ruddy complexion. Cheryl had been introduced to me by Hope Johnson, her case manager at our SHADOWS women's shelter. We were standing in the basement of the Greater Framingham Community Church last Thursday afternoon, our Holiday lunch (ninth annual) starting to wind down.

After Cheryl wandered off, not before telling me about hanging out at the Amazing Things Arts Center and with Holli at Downtown Renaissance, Hope told me, "I'm so glad she's come in, she was outside for more than a year, you know, plus she's doing great at SHADOWS. In fact we've moved her upstairs."

"How did you get her in?"

"I just kept talking to her, urging her to come. She trusts me and finally agreed."

Our conversation ended, people were heading out and I needed to say goodbye to a few folks.

"Thanks Hope, I'd like to know a bit more about Cheryl. Let's try and catch up early next week."

We did. On Monday afternoon Hope told me that Cheryl survived by sleeping rough behind the Family Dollar store or on the steps

of one of the local downtown churches. Once the weather turned cold, she'd go into the "Dunk" when it opened then head to the Salvation Army, Drop In or Amazing Things as the day progressed.

"I don't think she'd have made it through this past weekend, if she hadn't come in."

Hope had a long relationship with Cheryl, who had had previous stays at SHADOWS.

"I've known her for years. I would just look for her. She trusts me. I kept coaxing her and as the weather turned cold she started listening. Finally she agreed."

Vanh, the SHADOWS program director, joined our conversation. Together they told me that Cheryl had moved upstairs to a room in the Meadows program which is located at SHADOWS, and that they hoped to house her soon through the Pay for Success program.

Then Hope said, with a clear tone of affection, "You know Jim, we call Cheryl 'The Unicorn.'" Hope smiled at my quizzical look and words "The Unicorn."

"You know, Female, Sober and Chronically Homeless."

"Tell her I still want that hat she promised to knit for me."