Preble Street
Turning Hunger and Homelessness into Opportunity

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

BY MONICA WOOD      PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELONIE BENNETT

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How's this for an idea: Find the thirty bleakest street cases in the city — the least loved of God's creatures, the ones cops know by name. The ones purpled with scars, napping under loading docks, towing barges of trash bags, hectoring mailboxes, and yelling at phone poles. Build a handsome apartment building, staff it with social workers 24/7, and ask these lost, limited souls to move in, one tenant per fresh, furnished unit.

Require nothing. No Medicaid number. No treatment plans.

There's a revolution afoot to solve homelessness in America. Portland, Maine, is helping to lead the charge.
No permissions, no stamps, no forms in triplicate. They don’t even have to be sober.

It’s called “housing first,” a revolutionary concept for ending homelessness. The idea is to offer safe, permanent housing to chronically homeless people as a first rather than last resort, and only then attempt to address their mental illnesses, multiple addictions, and physical deprivations. The experiment began about fifteen years ago with a handful of programs in large cities like Washington and New York. Thanks to impressive cost-benefit analyses, other cities have recently joined the front lines — including Portland, home of Logan Place, the only housing-first project in Maine and one of the few in New England. A collaboration between Avesta Housing, the nonprofit developer that owns and operates the building, and Preble Street, the social-service agency that provides the tenants’ support, Logan Place has entered its fourth year and appears to be thriving. Twenty-five men and five women occupy the clean, well-lighted efficiency apartments supported by staff who, in the words of one tenant, “treat you like an actual person.”

Housing first’s crusader-in-chief is Phil Mangano, executive director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. A Bush appointee, Mangano is a freight-train talker and unabashed fan of Mark Swann, director of Preble Street. “Mark met with resistance, as most of us do at first,” Mangano tells me. “But he’s a forward thinker who wants to change the status quo. You know, he could have lived a good, easy life just managing the programs he already had in place.” Instead, he was planning a housing-first exemplar at a time when similar projects were so rare he didn’t yet realize the concept had a name.
On a chilly and cheerless Monday morning, I’m waiting to meet Swann at Preble Street’s day shelter, where people out of luck and options come for coffee or a pair of mittens or boots that don’t fit but will have to do. Temporarily one with the huddled masses, I loiter at a front desk clogged with people in ill-fitting eyeglasses, third-hand hats, and unraveling scarves, some carrying suitcases or backpacks or paper bags, others without a single possession but the clothes on their street-bent backs.

Swann arrives a few moments later, a little harried after a morning spent on the phone. “Every time the temperature drops,” he says, “the media call with the same story: look at all these freezing people.” He tries to sound patient. “Well, the homeless are here all year-round, and I’d like to change the conversation.”

Does he ever. Stylewise, he’s Mangano’s opposite. Youthful and bearish — teddybearish, actually — with graying hair and a snowy goatee, he begins his rap in the soft-spoken tones of the lifelong do-gooder. But at age forty-six this guy is no pushover, and after two decades in the misery business, he’s weary of addressing homelessness; he intends to solve it. “I run these places,” he says, looking around at the teeming shelter, “but shelters and soup kitchens are not the answer. The cots are ten inches from each other. Your cat gets better than this in an animal shelter. These are tragic places. Tragic and awful and wrong, wrong, wrong.”

C onceived in the eighties, the soup-and-shelter model aims to work as a way station for luckless souls rocked by personal calamity: lost job, eviction, natural disaster, family violence. For most clients the typical shelter stay lasts two weeks. After that, the “80/20 rule” kicks in: 80 percent of services gobbled up by 20 percent of clients, people for whom shelter life becomes not a stop-gap but a state of being, night after night, year after year, in some cases decade after decade. To Mangano, housing first represents a new technology. “Twenty-five years ago, homelessness exploded after deinstitutionalization,” he says, referring to the practice of transitioning mentally ill people from institutions to the community — which often meant the street. “Our ‘technology’ was soup and a blanket, and we’re still using it. Well, I was also using pay phones back then, and a typewriter. There’s no lack of compassion out there, but if charity could eliminate homelessness, it would have done so by now.”

Conventional wisdom writes off the 20-percenters as a lost cause. “We called them ‘service resistant,’” Mangano says, “or ‘not housing ready,’ as if we were labeling shirts and pants. For housing programs we always took the ‘cream,’ the ones considered most likely to succeed. But research gathered over many years showed us plainly that the cream would have gotten into housing regardless.” Housing first is the “anti-cream” strategy, targeting the 20-percenters, the shirts and pants. “People called it foolish, they called it naïve. But we have the data now, and the number that comes up again and again, in all these studies, is the same: 85 percent. Eighty-five out of one hundred ‘service resistant’ people succeed in supported housing. For that last 15 percent, we just haven’t gotten creative enough.”

As I leave the day shelter and follow Swann across the street to his office, we pass through a logy throng of people smoking cigarettes, hunching against the cold, blowing on their hands. “Hey, Mark! You need a haircut!” calls one of the men, a nearly toothless fellow wearing two coats. A 20-percenter for sure. Swann acknowledges him with a chuckle and a wave. “We’ve worked with some of these people a long, long time,” he says. “They know us and they trust us. That’s how something like Logan Place can work.”

Swann’s office carries a grassroots vibe, no doubt a holdover from his early days at Preble Street, when he was a pony-tailed Bowdoin grad on a staff of two, managing a hundred thousand dollar budget. Today he runs the whole shebang, and though the budget has swelled to $4.5 million, its ratio remains the same: half public funding, half private. “That’s not common,” he notes, “and it shows a lot of community support — churches, private donors, the United Way, corporate funding. Private support is crucial to creativity, because you get fewer restrictions: you can follow the mission, not the money.”

Swann had an epiphany about that mission about ten years ago, after attending twenty-four memorial services at the soup kitchen in a single year, the final one for a man whose frozen fingers had to be uncurled from a shopping cart that held his worldly goods. “I realized we were doing something very wrong if the best we had to offer was a mat and a meal and a sad-sack memorial service in our kitchen.” Most revolutions begin with a moment of truth, and that was his. “There was a belief that these people weren’t capable of being helped, that nothing we did would make any difference. But what if we built housing for homeless people, period? Not people with this or that diagnosis, this or that level of ‘readiness.’ ”

Thus began a creative, unremitting, many-tendriled, $4.1 million campaign of planning and collaboration with Dana Totman, Avesta’s president, that culminated on March 24, 2005 with a ribbon-cutting at Logan Place. To skeptics, such intense efforts on behalf of the chanciest people seemed doomed from the get-go. But one of the unspoken tenets of housing first is, in Mangano’s words, “the belief that housing is therapeutic all by itself.”

National research on housing-first projects can be tricky to interpret, because cities design variations on the model, blending heavily-supported tenants into an existing neighborhood, for example, or requiring tenants to pay varying portions of the rent, or none at all. (Logan Place tenants pay 30 percent of their income, if they have one.) Despite this grab-bag of styles, the average retention rate for the studies I looked at was consistent with Mangano’s 85 percent. Cost analyses also fall into a pattern, in places as small as Portland and as large as D.C., showing significant cost savings “in every single case.” Mangano asks, “Would you rather pay $13,000 to $25,000 per person, per year to provide homeless people with dignified housing that leads to a trajectory of recovery, or $35,000 to $150,000 to keep them on the street?”

Armed with a belief that housing first is the answer to clearing Portland’s streets for good, Swann asked for a local cost-benefit study to prime the pump for phase two: Florence House,
HOUSING FIRST

Logan Place in Portland has taken an unconventional approach to helping homeless people repair their lives. The idea is to offer safe, permanent housing as a first rather than last resort, and only then attempt to address residents’ mental illnesses and addictions.
a fifty-unit building for homeless women. Thomas McLaughlin, co-director of the Social Work Center for Research and Evaluation at UNE’s School of Social Work, co-authored the study and wound up a true believer. “We were able to get detailed cost data on individual people,” he says. “Other studies have attempted this but were forced to rely on good-faith estimates. We wanted to get as close to an exact picture as we could.”

**Twenty-five formerly homeless men and five women occupy Logan Place’s clean efficiency apartments.**

So far, the picture looks good — astounding, if you consider the hair-raisingly risky participants. The first thirty souls pulled off the street and into Logan Place had occupied a total of 5,163 shelter beds in the previous year. Besides hogging shelter beds, the study’s subjects had drained countless hours from the city’s system of public health and safety. After one year’s tenancy, nights in jail plummeted, from 176 to 21; police contacts, 97 to 19; ambulance calls, 78 to 26; emergency-room visits, 188 to 39. The community saved $972 per tenant, a modest amount compared to some places, but a savings nonetheless. And then there are the less tangible, palliative effects of getting people off the street. “It affects everybody in a community,” says Mangano, “to see people lying in doorways. It affects tourists and pedestrians and merchants.” He points out that Portland is a smart, literate community that can support five independent bookstores within a few square miles. “Cities like this can look at the irrefutable evidence that housing first is better for the community, the tenants, and the taxpayer. That’s a trifecta you can’t get at the race track.”

Ed Page would certainly agree. “I was the third person to walk through the door,” he says of his four-year tenancy at Logan Place. From a comfy chair in his pleasantly cluttered unit, this forty-year-old, bespectacled, chain-smoking “practicing witch” tells me about his twenty-two years on the street. Like many tenants here, he’s the product of a fractured upbringing — fourteen foster homes, in his case — and his life on the street consisted of “being drunk every day.” He tried to get a GED, but gave up because “when you’re living in shelters you don’t look too good, you don’t smell too great, you don’t want to go the way you are.” He has since acquired that GED, along with a resuscitated interest in writing and art, thanks to a donated computer and art supplies provided by staff. He still drinks, he admits, but not the way he used to. “I drink in here sometimes, but I don’t have to worry about getting beat up or robbed.” He points to the fridge. “I’ve still got two bottles left of a six-pack I bought two months ago. I mean, that’s a change.”

As a charter tenant, Ed confirms my hunch that Logan Place had a rocky rollout. The police were there a lot at first, he says, because “people had a lot to learn about being good tenants.” As the landlord, Totman, too, learned some “hard lessons” from the experience. “Some residents, or their guests, were misbehaving. The police took note, the neighbors took note, we had to go before the city council, [then-Police Chief] Mike Chitwood identified Logan Place as a new trouble spot.” So he and Swann met with the chief, and after convincing him of their fervor for making the project work, the chief went so far as to hold his monthly officers’ meeting at Logan Place. “That was a turning point, when they saw who was actually living here, the same people they used to scrape up off the sidewalks.” Some they no longer recognized in their new haircuts and better-fed faces — even after being told their names. “I think it was then they realized that Logan Place was a solution and not a problem.”

Over four years Logan Place has housed a total of fifty-two tenants in the thirty units, which reflects the efforts of a work in progress. Eleven were evicted, five moved voluntarily, one went to jail, three returned to the shelter, and two died (cirrhosis is a common malady). This is the story of the street. However, of the thirty tenants currently housed, over half have been there for three or more years, and three-quarters for more than two, a sign that the experiment has found its footing. “It was a ghost town here at first,” says Maria Tripp, the Logan Place service coordinator. “People stayed in their apartments. They didn’t know what to do.” A program of group activities helped coax people into a sense of community. One of the first was a “stone soup” dinner, at which a staff member read the fable aloud. Most tenants had never heard it, but it resonated. “We got so many requests to read it again that we posted it,” Tripp says. “I think it’s still up there.” In the meantime, Logan Place launched a neighborhood outreach, planting rafts of daffodils along the street and holding neighborhood barbecues. When Florence House, slated for a nearby property on Valley Street, was first proposed, it drew virulent resistance. “Some of the Valley Street owners came down here,” Ed says, “and tried to get our neighbors to talk trash. But nobody did.”

“We called these people ‘service resistant’ as if we were labeling shirts and pants.”

Four years ago, they might have. To make a Logan Place work requires a terrific concentration of community will — something Portland has plenty of. “It’s been easier to persevere through tough scrutiny and resistance.” Totman says, “because the city leaders have been incredibly supportive: the city council, the planning board, the police, the fire chief, everybody. Florence House is on its way, and we’re already thinking about the next one. Of all our projects, Logan Place is the one we’re most proud of, because it’s made the biggest difference in people’s lives — between living and dying in some cases. If we can get five or six of these around the city, we’ll have a tiny homeless shelter.”

A relative newcomer to Logan Place, Judy Tedford remembers having to pinch herself after waking up in her own bed that first morning. “This ain’t no jail, I can tell you that. It’s like a family here.” In her
immaculate unit just down the hall from Ed’s, afternoon light floods her pale, wizened face. Her pond-blue eyes are arresting kind. She gives me a meticulous tour of her new home: her cupboard filled with cans from the food pantry, her collection of painted rocks, her spotless bathroom where she doesn’t have to stand in line to take a shower. From there we move into the common areas as she numbers the perks of living here: the field trips to lakes and museums, the friendships, the group meals, the holiday parties and neighborhood events. Everything in the building still looks new, the walls sunnily painted and festooned with framed prints. She takes me to the third-floor library, a bright, modest room furnished with donated books and plush reading chairs, then out back, where the bird feeder’s own tenants plummet and land safely. A large barbeque — which Judy, a one-time forklift driver, helped assemble — gleams on the small patio.

Just over the fence, in a tangle of woods, is “Hobo Jungle,” a squatters’ camp where Judy lived for almost two years. She still misses all the cats they fed, and keeps a couple of photos from the place on her wall, but it looks cold and barren out there and I hear no trace of nostalgia in her voice. Between the lines she tells a story of a life wrecked by the fragile floor of her life and landed in the shelter. “I was scared to come here at first,” she says, sipping coffee at a small, sunny dining table a few feet from her bed. “But people were nice. There was this one friend, he taught me to cook, he knew his way around, he was more acquired than I was.” She also likes the Frederick Street neighbors, especially one with “this refreshing little dog, very sassy and feminine, I buy biscuits for her whenever I get groceries.” Like many of the tenants, she plans to start working at the front desk, which functions as an informal volunteer-training program. You have to dress appropriately and be professional, and Charlotte longs to be a “sample gesture to the program.” Ed already works the desk, hoping it will serve as a resume for his goal to volunteer at Mercy Hospital, where “they do a lot with the street.” He wants to be a social worker someday, helping the street people to whom he feels a deep connection. “You need your hopes and dreams,” he declares.

Not surprisingly, the Logan Place study recorded improvement in tenants’ physical health. With a roof over your head, a medicine chest to store your meds, a door that locks, and a social worker to whom you can offer a cup of tea from your own stove, life gets better. Once you can take off your shoes and trust that nobody will steal them, you gain the freedom to address things that sit a bit higher on the hierarchy of needs — health and well-being, for instance. The statistic that intrigued me most in the Logan Place study was a 93 percent increase in mental-health contacts that resulted in a one-third decrease in cost, because tenants opt for regular outpatient treatment in lieu of cyclical, terrifying, desperate episodes that involve the expense and humiliation of ambulances and trauma teams.

Charlotte Gould, a friendly fifty-year-old with an endearing vocabulary, has been “under the auspices of the psychiatry” for thirty years. Her clinical diagnosis, she tells me, is “broken brain.” She gives a complicated account of her bloodlines, a story of planned kidnappings and secret parentage and the influence of her “messiah,” who died four years ago, after which Charlotte dropped through the fragile floor of her life and landed in the shelter. “I was scared to come here at first,” she says, sipping coffee at a small, sunny dining table a few feet from her bed. “But people were nice. There was this one friend, he taught me to cook, he knew his way around, he was more acquired than I was.” She also likes the Frederick Street neighbors, especially one with “this refreshing little dog, very sassy and feminine, I buy biscuits for her whenever I get groceries.” Like many of the tenants, she plans to start working at the front desk, which functions as an informal volunteer-training program. You have to dress appropriately and be professional, and Charlotte longs to be a “sample gesture to the program.” Ed already works the desk, hoping it will serve as a resume for his goal to volunteer at Mercy Hospital, where “they do a lot with the street.” He wants to be a social worker someday, helping the street people to whom he feels a deep connection. “You need your hopes and dreams,” he declares.

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A week later, on a starless subzero night, I attend a small gathering in a vacant lot to celebrate the groundbreaking of Florence House. Totman and Swann are there, along with others from Avesta and Preble Street, plus board members, volunteers, and Governor John Baldacci, who arrives hatless to join thirty bemittened celebrants huddled around an outdoor heater. The lion’s share of funds will come from the state this time around, owing to the promising Logan Place study, to the fact that Logan Place required no state funds, and because, in Baldacci’s words, “Mark Swann is a hard guy to say ‘no’ to.” Candles are lighted, one from another, and placed in a mound of fresh snow, a flaming bouquet that illuminates a circle of faces. A former shelter client, wearing a knitted hat and too-small jacket, steps up to read a poem. “I had one dress, and I slept in it,” she reads, shivering in the candlelight. In this plunging cold, it’s easy — and hard — to imagine. As she slips back into the shadows to mitten-muffled applause, it strikes me that this ceremony might look a lot like one of Swann’s “sad sack” memorial services; then Dee Clarke, another former shelter client, literally dances out of the circle to deliver a fulsome, whoop speech filled with her personal joy in knowing that women like her mother, who lived with her children in an abandoned building, will get their chance to live in dignity. “A year from now,” she proclaims to one and all, “fifty women will lay down their heads on their own pillow in a safe, secure place they’ll call home. And for the first time in a long time, they’ll rest easy.” She turns to the governor. “And Governor Baldacci, you will lay down your head on your pillow in the Blaine House, and you’ll rest easy, too.” Visibly moved, the governor steps toward this redeemed and redeeming woman with the booming voice and wild
hair. She nods, and he briefly touches his forehead to hers. “It’s always better to light a candle,” he says, uncharacteristically brief, “than to curse the darkness.”

A few days later, I visit the women’s night shelter to get a better idea of who, exactly, will be laying down her head one year hence in Portland’s second housing-first project. Despite the clearly compassionate staff, one of whom runs the blankets through a warm dryer before handing them out, there’s no refuting Swann’s characterization of this shelter as a “tragic” place. One of the women here, once a Portland homeowner, is eighty-nine years old. Another is a full-time college student, who sits down in her jammies to tell me that nobody at school knows where she’s lived for the last six months. Another, pretty and middle-aged, has come in with two grocery dollys packed with clothes, her routine for the last year and a half. If you didn’t know, you might take her for a schoolteacher, but her tale is depressingly familiar: a husband too quick with his fists, a child given away to Grandma for safekeeping. These women move in for the night, some dragging comforts — a sunburst-yellow bedspread, a giant stuffed Mickey Mouse — evading the frosty cold but facing a slow burn of group desperation. “I lost my meds! I lost my meds!” warns a wiry little woman who pushes another woman into a wall, itching for a fight. I look around at these stunned faces — who, really, believes she will end up here? — and think, You won’t need a Medicaid number. Or a treatment plan. No permissions, no stamps, no forms in triplicate. You won’t even have to be sober.

You just move in. Lay your head on your pillow. Rest easy.

“Portland’s leaders have been incredibly supportive: the city council, the planning board, the police, the fire chief, everybody.”

Preble Street

Our Mission: To provide accessible, barrier-free services to empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty and to advocate for solutions to these problems.

Our Programs: Adult Day Shelter - Community Casework - Connect Team - Florence House - Food Pantry - Homeless Voices for Justice - Lighthouse Shelter - Logan Place - Soup Kitchens - Teen Center

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