

WALTER

RALEIGH'S Life & Soul

Chris Budnick



By Settle Monroe

photograph by Christer Berg

Connection and community are at the heart of Chris Budnick's work. Like many of the men and women who come to his organization for help overcoming homelessness and addiction, the executive director of Healing Transitions in Raleigh says his path to a meaningful and productive life came with challenges.

His early years were difficult. Budnick suffered a head injury as a young child, and his father left his family when he was a teenager. By the time he was 12 years old, Budnick was regularly using drugs and alcohol and suffering frequent bouts of depression. He attended his first 12-step meeting at 16, and by 19 he had completed an intensive

inpatient, rehabilitation, and treatment program. As a teenager, fresh out of rehab, he could not have imagined that one day he would lead hundreds of men and women to a path of purpose and hope. Today, Healing Transitions (formerly known as The Healing Place) has become one of the nation's flagship programs for men and women battling addiction and homelessness by providing shelter, food, and therapeutic support.

Budnick has been with the organization since its inception in 2001, and became its executive director last year. He also works as an adjunct professor in N.C. State's department of social work, and helps run Recovery Communities of North Carolina, an organization that holds events promoting recovery, community, and awareness.

Budnick is quick to point out that his path to leadership has been bolstered by many "guardian angels" along the way. A framed photograph of a middle-aged man with a hearty smile sits on the bookshelf in his office. "This is Bernie," says Budnick. "I had just gotten out of treatment, and he hired me to work in his restaurant. It was my first day of work, and out of the blue, he turned to me and said, 'I am 14 years sober. Today I can look people in the eyes.'" Bernie's commitment to his own recovery provided a much needed safe place for Budnick during one of the turning points of his life. "There have been others," Budnick continues, "People who took a chance on me and folks who hired me and believed in me."

Budnick extends this same grace and trust to the Healing Transitions participants and alumni with whom he works. "The men and women who go through the Healing Transitions program are some of the most determined and generous people you will ever meet."

He beams with the pride of a father as he describes the monthly Transition Ceremonies for participants who have successfully completed the rigorous multi-track and peer-led program.

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The organization offers three main services at both its men's and women's campuses: overnight emergency shelter, non-medical detoxification, and a social model recovery program. The social model program is based on peer accountability and includes earned privileges in exchange for added responsibilities.

The organization has been successful. Despite rapid local population growth, Healing Transitions and its partners have helped to reduce the Wake County homeless population

by 25 percent, Budnick says. He's also proud to point out that more than 70 percent of graduates are still in recovery after a year. Operating with a \$3.5 million budget, the nonprofit is now a proud living wage organization, meaning that each of its 50 staff members earn at least \$13.50 per hour. Most are Healing Transitions alumni, and about 70 percent are in recovery. Budnick takes great pride in his staff. "Having men and women come back to Healing Transitions to work inspires the folks working the program. It shows them what is possible."

The organization also benefits the entire community, Budnick says. "People in recovery pay taxes. The folks who have completed our program are dedicated to giving back. They volunteer. People in recovery are less dependent on emergency room visits and less likely to end up incarcerated ... They become citizens who contribute to our community." He also cites less tangible benefits, including a safe and revitalized downtown ripe for business development and real estate growth.

As he looks to the future, Budnick says he plans to grow long-term community connections and boost addiction advocacy and awareness. In the meantime, the participants continue to inspire his work.

Jessie Bennett, a student at N.C. State and the father of two young children, completed the program in 2013. He says Budnick's humble leadership approach has been a large factor in his own personal success. "I admire Chris's desire to make everyone feel important and everyone's voice heard. He leads by example, and he never talks down to anyone. He is always striving to help everyone become the best they can be and more." Budnick, an avid reader whose latest favorite book is Simon Sinek's *Leaders Eat Last*, says being a leader means always pushing himself to improve. "I want to create opportunities for the people at Healing Transitions to grow. I want for our participants to be a part of the conversations we're having. We must treat them as resources and not as objects. We ask our participants to embark on a huge journey of self-improvement, and we must be willing to do the same."