

## Heroes Of The Homeless Crisis: How *Amanda Blue And Healing Transitions* Offer Nightly Shelter To Anyone Who Needs It



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...Well, if anyone finds this magical city with cheaper housing, let me know! The affordable housing crisis is everywhere. Places that are less expensive tend to be in less than ideal areas, with limited public transportation and higher rates of crime and drug use. True, rural areas tend to cost less, but they also pose other barriers: lack of public transportation and access to jobs, access to services and resources like mental health care, and removal from one's social support system.

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*As a part of my series about “Heroes Of The Homeless Crisis” I had the pleasure of interviewing Amanda Blue, Director of Programs, Healing Transitions.*

*Amanda Blue, MSW, LCSW, LCAS, joined Healing Transitions in July of 2010 and is currently serving as Director of Programs. Amanda oversees the long-term recovery program, non-medical detox services, emergency shelters, child and family services, health care services, transition case management services, and outreach services for Healing Transitions’ men’s and women’s programs. Prior to her work at Healing Transitions, Amanda worked with homeless women at Urban Ministries’ Helen Wright Center. She is passionate about social justice and is integrally involved in efforts to advance availability and accessibility of resources in the community.*

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**Thank you so much for joining us! Our readers would love to ‘get to know you’ a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your personal background, and how you grew up?**

I grew up in a small town in central North Carolina. I had a great childhood by all accounts –

loving parents and a stable home. At the age of 13, I started down a path that took me on a few wrong turns. I struggled and had some ups and downs for about a decade. Luckily, I had the resources and the support system to turn things around. I made it through college and one of my professors gave me probably the best advice I ever got. He told me to get my MSW degree (Master’s in Social Work). I was still a little lost and wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I thought since I had been through a lot during my high school years, maybe I could become a high school counselor and try to help others. My professor told me an MSW degree would allow me to have more opportunities and variety in my career — and he was right. I ended up taking an Addiction Recovery course taught by the now-Executive Director of the non-profit organization I work for today, [Healing Transitions](#). Long story short, I’ve been working at Healing Transitions ever since. This is definitely where I was always supposed to be.

**Is there a particular story or incident that inspired you to get involved in your work helping people who are homeless?**

I think it was just fate! When I started my MSW program, I was assigned to do an internship at a local non-profit organization that happened to be a homeless shelter for single women... and the rest is history.

**Homelessness has been a problem for a long time in the United States. But it seems that it has gotten a lot worse over the past five years, particularly in the large cities, such as Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, and San Francisco. Can you explain to our readers what brought us to this place? Where did this crisis come from?**

We have a homeless crisis because we have a housing crisis. Housing is simply not affordable. Most Americans can't afford to live where they work and are paying more than 30 percent of their income for housing. This places a financial burden on those individuals and families. In large cities where housing prices are skyrocketing and wages are staying the same, it become continually more difficult to find safe, affordable places to live. At the same time, we face an ever-decreasing ability to access appropriate mental health or substance use services which are often underlying causes of homelessness.

**For the benefit of our readers, can you describe the typical progression of how one starts as a healthy young person with a place to live, a job, an education, a family support system, a social support system, a community support system, to an individual who is sleeping on the ground at night? How does that progression occur?**

The journey to homelessness doesn't look the same for everyone. Each person's story is unique, but there are some commonalities. For most of us, when we think about someone who is homeless, we're thinking about a chronically homeless individual. However, the vast majority of people without homes are families who experienced one too many crises at the wrong time. They may have lost their job, their landlord is selling their house, their car broke down, their child got sick, and on and on. They end up in a hotel and unable to save enough for a down payment or first month's rent. For those individuals who are chronically homeless — the ones we see sleeping on the street — it usually involves some form of mental health or substance use disorder issue. Many people with severe mental illness don't seek or receive treatment for a variety of reasons (fear, cost, transportation, etc.). For individuals with substance use disorders, the habits they have formed related to their addictions often alienate them from everyone around them. Their support system evaporates, they're unable to keep a job, and they end up homeless.

**A question that many people who are not familiar with the intricacies of this problem ask is, "Why don't homeless people just move to a city that has cheaper housing?" How do you answer this question?**

Well, if anyone finds this magical city with cheaper housing, let me know! The affordable housing crisis is everywhere. Places that are less expensive tend to be in less than ideal areas, with limited public transportation and higher rates of crime and drug use. True,

rural areas tend to cost less, but they also pose other barriers: lack of public transportation and access to jobs, access to services and resources like mental health care, and removal from one's social support system.

**If someone passes a homeless person on the street, what is the best way to help them?**

Sometimes, just being acknowledged- a hello and a smile — is a great way to help.

**What is the best way to respond if a homeless person asks for money for rent or gas?**

I come across this regularly myself. I let them know that I don't have any cash to give them, but I do know of resources and places that offer help. It's easiest to carry around something that you can hand to them easily — in our community, we have an online resource directory that's fairly comprehensive. I keep business cards with the information and link on them so I can hand them to out if needed. You may not get a happy response, but that's ok. Oftentimes people are familiar with those resources already, they have been through the system — they've had bad experiences at shelters or were unable to get help from a specific agency — and they aren't looking for that kind of help. But the next person might be.

**Can you describe to our readers how your work is making an impact battling this crisis?**

I wish I could say that we're making a larger impact, but I'm grateful that we're able to offer what we do. Our program is set up to offer nightly shelter to anyone who needs it. We don't have any requirements — they don't have to show ID, they don't have to have any income, they don't have to be sober, they don't even have to want to do anything about their homelessness. But most of them do, and for those who are ready, we offer case management to help connect them to resources and housing.

For those who aren't ready to make any changes, we offer hope. Without pressure, they're able to see others who were in their shoes turn things around — and sometimes they realize, if that person can do it, maybe they can do it too.

We also have a long-term addiction recovery program. Unfortunately for a lot of individuals, substance use is a contributing factor to their homelessness. We give people a place to stay and the tools to build their lives back up. Over 70 percent of those who complete our program are in recovery one year after completion, and over 90 percent are employed and housed.

**How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the homeless crisis, and the homeless community? Also how has it affected your ability to help people?**

Gratefully, COVID-19 hasn't impacted our community in the way it has impacted other areas. We had excellent guidance from local officials, and our shelters and programs acted quickly to prevent any massive outbreaks. To date, out of well over 500 beds across multiple agencies, I'm aware of 2 positive cases in a shelter.

However, part of making that happen was making a difficult choice to protect those who were already in our shelters by not allowing more people to enter. Luckily, our community came together and created "health hotel" options for those who are at high risk for health complications due to COVID-19. Our agency has been meeting daily for the last two months to figure out ways to creatively help those who are in need. We also opened up an off-site detox center so individuals would have a place to go other than hospitals or jails. We all just have to be creative right now.

**Can you share something about your work that makes you most proud? Is there a particular story or incident that you found most uplifting?**

In my earlier career, I worked at a women's shelter. For the past ten years I've worked at a program that offers not only shelter, but detox and a long-term recovery program. I still have women from those first few years who reach out to me and send me pictures of their kids. That makes me proud. What I get to see now though through recovery is something I could never imagine. Women and men are turning their lives around, and it's also changing the lives of their families and friends.

I see parents able to care for their children again. I see women and men getting to have a relationship with their parents and their spouses again, getting a job, and paying bills. We do a survey each year and ask our former participants for their income tax and property tax information. This year our alumni reported paying over \$5 million in taxes. We also ask about local property taxes. In our county alone, not including those who live in other places, we had 35 homeowners respond... homeowners! To go from living on the streets to owning your own home is just remarkable. The fact that there are so many more of these stories is incredible.

**Without sharing real names, can you share a story with our readers about a particular individual who was impacted or helped by your work?**

We had a guy who had been coming in and out of our programs for years. He had over 50 detox admissions, 5 recover program attempts, and 331 nights in our shelter. One time our local law enforcement brought him in, and he didn't have his seizure meds. Our current Executive Director went to get them for him in the crawl space of an abandoned building where he had been living. We decided to try some different approaches with

him. We helped him get income and recovery housing. He wasn't able to stay in that recovery house, but he has been living with his brother for close to ten years now. He no longer comes into our detox or our shelter barely clothed, unshowered, and intoxicated — he comes to donate clothes and volunteer. One of our guiding principles is “as many times as it takes.” We never turned him away, never told him he had his chance, never gave up on him. Now he serves as an example to others that you never know when someone's life is going to change. Wait for the miracle to happen.

**Can you share three things that the community and society can do to help you address the root of this crisis? Can you give some examples?**

1. Advocate for affordable housing.
2. Call your legislators and get involved in local efforts to address the crisis.
3. Make resources available to those who need them (SNAP benefits, etc.)
4. Remove the stigma and barriers to treatment for mental health issues and substance use disorders.

**If you had the power to influence legislation, which three laws would you like to see introduced that might help you in your work?**

1. Affordable housing legislature — Mandate developers to make a certain percentage of all housing units income-based — at 40 percent or below the Federal Poverty Line.
2. De-criminalization of Substance Use Disorders and greater access to treatment. We've made strides in this area with reducing mandatory sentencing and creating Recovery (Drug) Courts. However, there are still sentencing disparities for certain drugs and new laws that pose problems such as the Death by Distribution Bill that holds the person providing the drugs responsible for the death of a person who overdoses. Unfortunately, often this is a friend or another person with a substance use disorder — not a trafficker or dealer.
3. Expansion of Ban the Box — removing the criminal history question from applications. Our society still has deeply entrenched mechanisms of oppression that are difficult to overcome. Often times people with lower socioeconomic status end up with a criminal record, and we make it difficult for those being released from the criminal justice system to find jobs, housing, etc. Homeless individuals often receive trespassing citations. If we truly want to break the cycle, we must find ways to help these individuals be successful. One way to do that is to give

them an opportunity to get their foot in the door and a fair shot at an interview for a job.

**I know that this is not easy work. What keeps you going?**

The successes. It can be easy to get caught up in the difficulties and the losses, but you have to remember those who have been able to change their lives.

**Do you have hope that one day this great social challenge can be solved completely?**

I think we have to keep hope. I'm not sure I'll see it in my lifetime, and it would take a lot to get us there, but nothing is impossible. It will take significant legislative changes, an adjustment to our 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' mentality, and a commitment from society to help the least amongst us. But we can do it. Our future generations will hopefully do a better job than we have at exacting social justice.

**What are your "5 things I wish someone told me when I first started" and why. Please share a story or example for each.**

1. The first and most important one: "You're responsible for the effort, not the outcome." I learned this the hard way. I went above and beyond for every single client – I advocated for them, I fought for them – and if they succeeded, I succeeded – if they failed, I failed. I worked myself right into burnout. I had to learn that I'm not responsible for their choices, or their consequences. Those are not mine to own. But I am responsible for making the effort; for doing everything I am reasonably capable of doing. The rest is up to them.
2. That ties into number 2: "They're not yours." We have a tendency to take ownership of people and things that don't belong to us. When we call people "mine", we assume responsibility. Sometimes that's the appropriate word, but I avoid it like the plague. I don't own anyone. They're not "my staff", they're staff that I supervise. They're not "my clients", they're in the program I help run.
3. "What you see might not always be pretty, but what we do is beautiful." These all really tie together. We'll see some things that are hard to comprehend in this work and that are hard to look at. But at the end of the day, what we are trying to do is something that is to be admired and appreciated.
4. "Put your oxygen mask on first." You can't help anyone else if you can't breathe. Everyone will face burnout in this field. It's inevitable. But we can do things to minimize it and to bring ourselves back from it. You have to take care of yourself or you're no good to anyone.

5. "It'll be there tomorrow." There is no such thing as "being caught up." It's a false goal that I was always trying to meet. And when I couldn't, it felt like I was failing. Some things just might not get done, and we have to be ok with that.

**You are a person of enormous influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)**

I think my movement would be understanding. Find someone who is different than you — in whatever way — religion, culture, ethnicity, age, gender, etc. — and listen to their story. Genuinely listen. We all have things in common that we can find in order to relate to one another. We also have a tendency to judge and fear what we don't know. By taking the time to get to know someone, maybe we change that. Maybe we overcome our differences and we create a better place to live for us all.

**Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?**

Hmmm, that's really hard to just pick one. I have a few posted on my fridge so I can remind myself every day. One of my favorites is probably "Never let your fear decide your fate." I've had a lot of interesting experiences in my life, and not all of them were pleasant. But I don't regret them. What I regret are the changes I didn't take, the things I didn't do. It's really easy to get submerged in work and fall into this cycle of working late, coming home and resting, and then doing it all over again. This field can also be draining — it takes something out of you to do this, to hear the stories, and witness the struggles every day — so we have to make sure we are getting replenished somehow. For me, this means not being scared to get out there and meet new people, try new things... to live. We miss 100 percent of the chances we don't take. Too often we stay in things too long — jobs, relationships, places, etc. simply because the comfort of the familiar wins out over the fear of the unknown. This quote helps remind me to make decisions that, regardless of how they turn out, I will look back on and be grateful that I went for it.

**Is there a person in the world, or in the US whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)**

I'd like to have breakfast with Lizzo. I asked myself what celebrities I knew that were making an impact somehow. Lizzo was the first person that came to my mind, and as soon as I thought of her, I smiled. She is a role model for all women, of all ages and backgrounds. Her unwavering positivity and self-acceptance offers a beacon of light

amongst a sea of social media and societal influences telling us what we should look like and who we should be. And beyond that, I think she'd be hilarious and wonderful company.

**How can our readers follow you online?**

You can follow my organization, Healing Transitions, at [www.healing-transitions.org](http://www.healing-transitions.org), and also on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [LinkedIn](#). This was very meaningful, thank you so much!