To Serve Better

Stories of people committed to public purpose and to making a positive difference in communities throughout the country.

ABOUT THE PROJECT
Boston Health Care for the Homeless founder Jim O'Connell has dedicated his life to helping the city's most vulnerable citizens. Photos courtesy of Rick Friedman, Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program and from iStock

JIM O'CONNELL, HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL

“When you spend time with people, you start to see their lives open up.”

Early in his career, Harvard Medical School graduate Jim O'Connell

Massachusetts
To Serve Better

 approahced him with a one-year opportunity to help the hospital become more involved in the larger Boston community, he couldn’t pass it up — and the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP) was born.

Thirty-five years later, that one-year opportunity has expanded into a lifetime of providing medical care to some of the city’s most vulnerable residents. Kick-started by a multi-city grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, today BHCHP partners with individuals and organizations across the hospital, shelter, government, and non-profit ecosystems of the Boston metropolitan area to help provide medical care for the city’s homeless population.

At the core of the organization is a program designed to take into account the experience and expertise of homeless people and homeless advocates. Roughly one-third of BHCHP’s board of directors is made up of individuals who have experienced homelessness.

“The first principle that came out of that [partnership] was that doctors, and certainly the healthcare system, didn’t understand that the immediacy of life on the streets and in the shelters made it really hard to keep [medical] appointments,” says O’Connell. “Health…is relegated to a distant priority by people struggling to survive each day, scouring for food or a bathroom, seeking a safe place to sleep, and finding a safe haven from the elements and the dangers on the streets.”

With a mandate to go directly to the people, BHCHP set up clinics at
even just a cup of coffee. Building trust through a consistent presence, patience, and placing each individual’s needs first, whatever they may be, helped.

“One of the things we were taught early on is that nothing happens quickly,” says O’Connell. “You have to be there, be consistent, you have to engage people, you have to get to know them.

“I realized that most of the time we were caring for homeless people in the hospital, they didn’t trust us and were reluctant or afraid to share their stories. Our ability to offer the best of care was limited because we rarely understood what was truly going on. When [you] … spend time with people, you start to see their lives open up. As you get to know the stories of those who have spent years on the streets or in the shelters, you begin to see the stunning courage and resilience of those who have been dealt society’s worst possible hand.”
But, while medical school had trained O’Connell to be efficient, quick, and independent, it hadn’t prepared him to simultaneously attend to the complex web of social and societal challenges that impact homeless populations. Forming relationships and collaborations with a range of experts spanning social services, city government, and the non-profit worlds was a necessary step towards treating the whole patient.

“Almost everyone who is living chronically on the streets has survived horrific childhood adversity and trauma; 25 percent of the people living on the streets of Boston chronically cannot read or write. That’s not a problem of right now — that’s a social determinant of health that should have been addressed when they were 4 or 5 and 6 or 7 years old,” O’Connell explains.

“We as a society failed to address the failed schools, dangerous neighborhoods, and the persistent poverty and racism that limited their choices and opportunities, and we are now seeing the consequences of our collective failures.”

Although the challenges are real, O’Connell is quick to point out that the work brings more joy than sorrow. Once a solitary venture, BHCHP has grown to over 500 staff members, including almost 30 doctors working with an equal number of nurse practitioners and
O’Connell. “This is difficult and challenging work that can only be done by teamwork and community collaboration.

“Caring for vulnerable populations is now a dynamic career path attracting skilled and compassionate doctors, many of whom are former chief residents from the best training programs who could have chosen almost any specialty. While we may not change the world overnight or end homelessness in our society as yet, we are making a difference in the lives of the individuals we care for. … It’s been a daunting but rewarding opportunity that reminds us each day why we became doctors in the first place.”

ABOUT JIM O’CONNELL

Dr. Jim O’Connell (M.D. ‘82) is the president and founder of Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, a non-profit group that works to provide and ensure access to the highest quality health care for all homeless individuals and families in the Greater Boston area.

STATE / TERRITORY

Massachusetts

AFFILIATE(S)

Harvard Medical School

MORE LINKS

Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Spain has served his country with distinction as an Army ranger and master parachutist, leading troops in Kosovo, Iraq, and Germany. Photos courtesy of Evgenia Eliseeva, Harvard Business School and from iStock

**EVERETT SPAIN, HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL**

“Make the world a better place.”

Colonel Everett Spain likes to live by a code. So at 18, when he walked through the gates of the United States Military Academy and saw West Point’s motto — Duty, honor, country — he knew he was in the right place.

Today, Spain continues to epitomize that motto as a professor at his alma mater, teaching and mentoring students who strive to do the same.
“The reality is, I feel better about myself when I am actively serving others,” Spain said. “That’s a little bit of an oxymoron … [but] I know that, if I’m not actively serving other people, both on a tactical level — helping someone move their furniture — or on a strategic level — changing policy, whether in the military or beyond — I don’t feel [fulfilled].”

Today, the colonel continues to serve his country as head of West Point’s department of behavioral sciences and leadership, where cadets and colleagues alike look to him for advice and guidance. Every year the program sends 30 of the most qualified captains in the Army to elite graduate programs around the country, after which they return to West Point to teach new cadets alongside Spain.
“It’s a little bit of a leadership factory here, and I find myself just really honored to be directing some of that. In addition to teaching the cadets, which everyone’s familiar with, the ability to mentor and educate these captains to go be the senior leaders of the Army is very special for me,” the colonel said. “I invest in them … they’re like my nieces and nephews, so to speak.”

Spain teaches his students not only how to lead but how to lead with character, which includes five facets: moral, performance, civic, leadership, and social.

“What’s a leader there for?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s for the character.”

“We try to teach [that] to our cadets, so if they find themselves in the places I’ve been, or other places, that the character lens will apply, and they’ll be able to do things that are honorable when our country and other people need them to do it in the face of stress.”

That lens came sharply into focus for Spain on April 13, 2013 in Boston, as he was escorting a visually impaired runner for the final leg of the Boston Marathon. As they approached the final 100 yards, two bombs went off, stunning and injuring runners and spectators alike. Spain sprinted to the finish line, and after ensuring his partner was safe, he went back into the smoke to give medical attention.
Throughout their careers, his students will likely face similar challenges that threaten their lives and others. But as a professor and a mentor, Spain is clear about the difference he wants his students to make.

"Make the world a better place," he said, another code he lives by. "A West Point commission is an honor and a privilege, and a commission means [that] you’re given a task and a responsibility. It’s not an end state in any way, it’s a beginning."

ABOUT EVERETT SPAIN

Colonel Everett Spain (D.B.A. ‘14) is a professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point and head of the department of behavioral sciences and leadership. During his more than 28 years of service in the U.S. Army, he has been the commanding officer of the U.S. Army Garrison-Schweinfurt in Germany, served as the aide-de-camp for the Commander of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, and served in the Bush-Obama transition as the deputy chief operating officer of the U.S Treasury’s Office of Financial Stability. He is a recipient of the Soldiers’ Medal, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Combat Action Badge, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, and Secretary of the Treasury’s Honor Award.

STATE / TERRITORY

New York

AFFILIATE(S)

Harvard Business School

MORE LINKS

West Point department of behavioral and health sciences

Turning Point: Step Change
“Our job is to create spaces where people from all walks of life can get past the barriers of our words to have frank and honest conversations about genetics. And when it works, the connections that happen between people are inspiring.”

MARIE GELBART, SOUTH DAKOTA
Morissa Sobelson Henn develops, supports, and implements suicide prevention strategies in Utah, including testifying on suicide prevention for the Committee on Ways and Means. Photos courtesy of the United States House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means and from iStock

**MORISSA SOBELSON HENN, HARVARD T.H. CHAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH**

“I have never been involved in a topic where I had more hope and more energy and more reason for optimism.”

It was a warm July evening in Utah and Morissa Sobelson Henn found herself sitting in a packed auditorium a few miles south of Salt Lake City. The room was tense. Gun-control activists were hosting a town hall, and gun-rights groups in the politically conservative state
control group, she walked over to the gun rights activists and thanked them for coming to engage on the topic. They thanked her for coming to speak with them as well, before everyone left for the evening.

Reaching out to people with diametrically opposing views on emotionally challenging topics is vital to the success of Henn’s work. As a graduate of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and program director for suicide prevention and mental well-being efforts at Utah-based Intermountain Healthcare, she firmly believes bringing people together can help save lives.

“If we’re going to come together on what is one of the most politically divisive issues of our time, suicide is where this bridge can actually be built, because the gun-owner community is disproportionately affected by the issue of suicide, and they hold strong values around protecting loved ones,” she said. She attributes much of her understanding of this approach, and its underlying public health evidence, to the pioneering work of her mentors at the Harvard Injury Control Research Center.

“Two-thirds of gun deaths in the U.S. are suicides,” she said. “Here in Utah and in other high-gun states, it’s 85 percent.” From 2016 to 2018, Utah had the fifth highest suicide rate in the nation, a majority of which were caused by firearms.

Gun-rights supporters have indeed become actively involved in the issue, and some of Henn’s closest partners are staunch activists, thirsty for data on firearm availability and suicide rates. They work with Intermountain and its community partners to get the latest
Personal stories of suicide in the community have also driven gun owners to engage on the issue.

“Suicide doesn’t discriminate,” Henn said, as she recalled stories of gun owners who shifted their thoughts on firearm access after losing someone close to them. Many go on to help educate others on the importance of reducing access to guns for people at risk. She compares the approach to taking the keys from a friend who has been drinking, a form of harm reduction.

“The tragedy of suicide can connect people from very different backgrounds, and from that collective grief a common goal and purpose seems to emerge,” she said.

Henn and her team have already made meaningful progress. They successfully helped push several initiatives across the finish line, including developing and implementing a program that has educated over 1000 Utah health-care providers on how to talk to at-risk patients about access to guns, making free gun locks available in pharmacies, clinics, and hospitals across the Mountain West region, and most recently, launching a $2 million campaign with gun rights, government, and faith leaders aimed at improving gun storage behaviors.

Looking to the future, Henn sees a path to ensuring that fewer people take their own lives with a firearm. The evidence is promising. Thanks largely to reductions in the number of firearm suicides, Utah’s suicide rate has declined slightly during the last two years — which is notable, especially since the suicide rate in the U.S. as a whole continues to increase.
in a suicidal crisis has access to a firearm.

“That’s the dream, and I think we’re really starting to make progress.”

**ABOUT MORISSA SOBELSON HENN**

Morissa Sobelson Henn (Dr.P.H. ’19) is the Community Health program director at Intermountain Healthcare in Utah, where she helps develop, support, and implement community health strategies with a focus on suicide prevention in the state.
Siders is a social scientist and a lawyer, advocating for audacious climate adaptation that’s fair for everyone. Photos courtesy of A. R. Siders and from Pixabay

A. R. SIDERS, HARVARD COLLEGE

“Being uncertain doesn’t mean that we can’t address [the effects of climate change].”

A.R. Siders, who last year became assistant professor at Delaware University’s Disaster Research Center, thinks her newly adopted home state can act as an example of how climate change adaptations can be successfully implemented throughout the country.

“Because it’s a small state it has some real opportunities,” said Siders, whose career combines a law degree with a Ph.D. in environment and resources with the goal of finding climate solutions that can be transformed into workable policies.

“In Delaware, people in government know each other. They’re connected. We are all a maximum of an hour and a half away from a central point. You can have more cross-department collaborations. You can have more personal connections that help drive some of the decision-making.”
retreat (like housing buyouts) — which each act in different ways to protect people and infrastructure from the issues that climate change precipitates, like rising tides and forest fires.

Siders explained that right now the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Army Corps of Engineers are implementing these adaptations throughout the country in a patchwork method that involves very little collective planning and can ultimately waste time and resources.

As an example, Siders pointed to the interaction between seawalls and beach nourishment. “One of the best predictors of where we do beach nourishment,” the process of adding sand to an eroding beach, “is where we’ve already built seawalls. Someone builds a sea wall, and then the beach in front of it erodes away. So then we come back in and we beach nourish it.”

Her solution to dealing with a task so complex is to think of it in simpler terms. “I tend to think about this like dieting,” Siders said, explaining that a lot of us get the motivation to eat healthier because of some end goal we want to reach. “But along the way it’s not going to be fun and games. Along the way it’s going to be really hard work; it’s going to be eating lots of broccoli. But you do it because you can imagine that end outcome.”

Beyond needing a unified goal, Siders explained that a successful response to climate change also needs unified leadership.

“It would require more motivation than I think there is currently. I think a lot of people are aware, but … we need more leadership on
preparing for the unknown, including the U.S. Navy, where she spent time as a Presidential Management Fellow. “The military has no problem planning for an uncertain future. That’s all they do. They plan for the ‘what if.’ Being uncertain doesn’t mean that we can’t address [the effects of climate change]. It just means that there’s a different set of ways to approach it.”

Though her work can feel overwhelming and even grim, Siders emphasized that it’s important to stay positive.

“[Addressing climate change] a huge problem, but we can break off pieces that are manageable, and we can try exciting new things.”

Which is exactly what Siders is doing. Besides her ongoing research, Siders and Jola Ajibade of Portland State University are working on a book that collects perspectives on climate relocation from a variety of people, like poets, photographers, and landscape architects, as well as everyday citizens.

“At the moment it’s tentatively titled ‘Unheard Voices of Managed Retreat,’ Siders said. She hopes the book will help people look at climate adaptation from new angles.

ABOUT A. R. SIDERS

A.R. Siders (A.B. ’07, J.D. ‘10) is an assistant professor at Delaware University’s Disaster Research Center. Her work focuses on climate adaptation policy, with an emphasis on justice and equity.
What advice would you give to young people?

“Commit early to your passions. Pay little attention to what seems marketable or fashionable or you think seems safe. Everything that I was told was a safe, sure bet has evaporated in the last 25 years. The creative classes, the things in which we're adding value by making things up - that's been remarkably durable in a way that 30 years ago, I would not have imagined.”

CHARLES WALDHEIM, FLORIDA
To Serve Better

Debt starting with your very first paycheck. It may sound silly, but young people especially are not being taught the basic tools they will need to succeed in an era of high student debt and infinite repayment options, so find a mentor and set some goals.”

Colleen Greene, Wisconsin

“Try to listen to people you disagree with on a scientific, moral, or practical level. It will make you think in bigger and sharper ways about issues you care about, and you might even discover some surprising areas of untapped commonality.”

Morissa Sobelson Henn, Utah
“I wanted to really make a difference.”

The trajectory of Kenneth Tucceri’s career is nothing like a straight line. But as he recounts it, what emerges is a map that follows his winding path through sometimes surprising turns across the nation and the world, to a goal of making a difference by inspiring others to find their own way.

In his current day job he serves in the Massachusetts Army National Guard as a communications specialist, telling the stories of his
“I wanted to use my passion and skills toward my service,” he said. “I didn’t want to just join and serve in a way that I could be proud, but I wanted to really make a difference.”

But this isn’t where the Tewksbury native’s story began, nor where it ends. First came a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from the University of Massachusetts Lowell, followed by short stints in corporate America and sales.

In 2008, Tucceri quit his job and set out to hike the Appalachian Trail, an experience he credits with defining his career path. He realized that in his life he was looking for more than just a job but a way to give back.

So Tucceri enlisted in the Florida National Guard. It was after transferring from his unit in Florida to one in his home state to attend Harvard Extension School that Tucceri decided to sign up for a two-year stint in the Peace Corps.

And that’s how he ended up teaching English and life skills in Lesotho, a small, landlocked kingdom inside South Africa. It was a job he was good at and loved.
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“The hardest thing by far that I have ever done was the day I left [Lesotho]. It was the saddest and most painful thing, and that’s good,” Tucceri said. “The people of Lesotho are the most accommodating and kind people I’ve ever encountered — it’s amazing.”

While in Lesotho, Tucceri was the only native English speaker in his rural village. But he went there seeking a challenge.

“If you go and just complete your objective for two years [that is fine],” Tucceri said. “But if you go and develop friendships and relationships, then a part of you will be there forever.”

He said one of the lessons he’s learned is that the biggest risks he’s taken have led to the biggest rewards.

“I would have never joined the National Guard without that initial step, and I would have never joined the Peace Corps if I didn’t join the military,” Tucceri said. “A friend I made while stationed in Cuba had done the Peace Corp and the Navy. I thought it was the coolest thing, and that I had to outdo him,” he said, jokingly.

Back home, Tucceri is preparing to graduate from Harvard Extension School and working closely with the members of his unit on pressing community needs.

Once he finishes his museum studies program, he hopes to work for the National Park Service (where he did an internship when he was
“[Museums] have a really unique part in our society,” he said. “They are a place people can get necessary primary source information, to tell the stories that are there that can inspire people and guide them through life and elevate their potential.”

And if his own story can help someone else along the way so much the better.

“Over the years I’ve adopted an attitude that I’m going to do [something] because no one is going to stop me, and I hope that inspires someone else,” he said.

ABOUT KENNETH TUCERI

Kenneth Tuceri (A.L.M. ‘20), a member of the Massachusetts Army National Guard, alumni of the United States Peace Corps, and Massachusetts native has committed his career to inspiring others and doing what he can to be a positive force. From working on the front lines, dealing with pressing issues in his home state as a member of the Guard to spending two years of his life in Lesotho, a rural African country, creating friendships and sharing cultures.

STATE / TERRITORY

Massachusetts

AFFILIATE(S)

Harvard Extension School

MORE LINKS

Kenneth Tuceri
In Nashua, N.H., Hannah Stohler leads Marguerite’s Place, a transitional housing nonprofit for women and children in crisis that also provides residents with childcare, legal support, mental health counseling, employment training, financial education, and peer mentoring as they build independence. Photos courtesy of Marguerite’s Place and from iStock

HANNAH STOHLER, HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

“We have an opportunity here to break the cycle.”

Diana* never thought she’d be homeless. But one day in 2017, after months of escalating conflict with her husband, she found herself standing outside her Nashua, N.H., home with a suitcase, four young children, and nowhere to go.

While applying for space in an emergency shelter, Diana learned about a wrinkle in the rules: If there was an opening anywhere in the state, she had to accept it. This means she had to leave Nashua, uprooting her kids from school and home. This weekend, they are expected to arrive in Concord, N.H., and an uncertain future awaits.

“[...] We have an opportunity here to break the cycle.”

To Serve Better
top of a waitlist, and she and her family could move into subsidized housing — an apartment in a sunny house with a backyard and yellow flowers growing out front. And it would be right in downtown Nashua. It was one of 10 apartments that make up Marguerite’s Place, a transitional living program for women and children in crisis.

“Every single person who’s presently living here has some significant experience with trauma — whether that is domestic violence, substance use, or sexual abuse,” says Hannah Stohler, M.Div. ’16, executive director of the nonprofit, which, in addition to providing affordable housing, offers residents childcare, legal support, mental health counseling employment training, financial education, and peer mentoring. “We have an opportunity here to break the cycle, [but] it’s not pretty on a day-to-day basis. Growth and progress aren’t linear.”

No one knows this last part better than Stohler herself, whose own career path took an unexpected turn when she was in her 20s.

For years, the Connecticut native thought she would become a minister, having spent her childhood as part of a progressive United Church of Christ congregation that was “really committed to engaging community and building community.” That, and her church’s “kick-ass female leadership,” inspired Stohler to take the next step and enter Harvard Divinity School after graduating from Tulane with a degree in Spanish.

At Harvard she began to think about things differently. Besides her
became “pastors and rabbis and ministers and imams,” and many others who trained for secular leadership roles in communities across the country and around the globe. Stohler concluded that what was most important was finding one’s own gifts and using them to better the world.

“I know that I have skills and gifts in building programming and leading,” she explains. “It is important, fundamentally, to my spirituality and to who I am as a person to be engaged in community-building work. That’s my purpose as designed by God.”

Although Stohler did not become a faith leader, she says the Christian values with which she was raised — humility, love, empathy, and justice — have guided her every step. And while developing budgets and attending organizational meetings may not always feel like “spiritual endeavors,” making a real difference in the lives of those in need is, for her, an act of devotion.

Particularly when it comes to clients like Diana, who went back to school and was able to open her own business. Stohler knows that without organizations like Marguerite’s Place, stories like Diana’s would be less common.

If Diana “had to fight for market-rate [housing], she wouldn’t have had the space to really reset,” Stohler says. “Now we’re so excited to watch her launch in the next six months.”

* Name and identifying details have been changed to protect individual’s privacy.