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LOCAL

Support for mentally ill adults

Interlude director: Everyone deserves chance to succeed



The News-Times/Carol Kaliff
Kathleen Deschenes is the new executive director of Interlude, a nonprofit agency in Danbury that provides housing and services for adults with chronic mental illness. Her job experience includes outreach work in New York, where she and fellow social workers plucked some of the city's most troubled people from streets and drug dens and got them into treatment programs.

By Nanci G. Hutson Tuz
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DANBURY In her 12 years as a mental health social worker in New York City, Kathleen Deschenes went places few would dare to go and mingled with people society tags as outcasts.

She stifled her personal fears, even risked her own safety, to reach out to the homeless and the drug addicts, most of whom suffered from some form of mental illness. Deschenes was driven by her belief that they deserve a chance at a fruitful life.

"It was the mountain going to Mohammed," said Deschenes, 34, the new executive director for Interlude, a nonprofit agency in Danbury. Interlude, at 60 West St., provides housing and services for adults with chronic mental illness.

As a part of an outreach team from Bellevue Hospital, she and fellow social workers plucked some of the city's most troubled people from the streets, subway terminals and drug dens, and got them into treatment programs.

"Almost every time I worked a shift we would bring somebody into the hospital sometimes voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily," Deschenes recalled.

Once these folks were rescued from the streets and received proper psychiatric treatment and supervised housing, "that proved an entry point for their stabilization."

For Deschenes, the reward for her efforts came later, when she started working in residential programs for the mentally ill and met some of the clients who once lived on the streets.

"Then I could see how someone really lived, and how their life kind of blossomed," she said.

Her extensive experiences with both inpatient and outpatient care for people with severe mental illness, some of whom were diagnosed as criminally insane, are strong credentials for the job she landed in Danbury in December, through an advertisement in The New York Times classified section.

"It just sort of jumped out at me," said Deschenes, who recently bought a home in Norwalk with her husband, David, a research librarian for Phillip Morris in New York City.

After spending 12 years living and working in Manhattan, Deschenes said, she was ready to apply her expertise in a more suburban setting. She grew up in New Haven.

"Interlude had the most similar philosophy to how I feel we should treat the mentally ill," Deschenes said. "We just clicked. That may sound hokey, but it's true. I like the diverse populations, dealing with younger people (80 percent of Interlude's clients in the supervised condominium program are between 18 and 22) and multiple diagnosis. I think there is a lot of opportunity for growth."



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She was selected from about 60 candidates who applied to replace Lisa Srenaski, who left the agency in June. Five finalists were interviewed.

"She brings a lot of clinical knowledge, a broad background in caring for people with mental illness, providing them with support and housing," said Sally Gundy, chairman of Interlude's board of directors.

Most importantly, Gundy said, she is committed to the work of Interlude and has fresh ideas about improving client services, including offering basic job skills and job training for clients. Too, she has a good sense of humor and a "bright openness."

Interlude has 55 clients and four residential programs, including one for mentally ill substance abusers. In December, the agency closed its free clothing bank, Thrifty Threads, for revamping. It will become more of a thrift store where clients could get some job experience.

Deschenes also works as an adjunct professor at New York University, providing field instruction for social work interns. In her prior job managing four residential programs she implemented an ongoing training program for staff; she would like to provide such training here.

"I think it's great we have gotten someone from outside of this service area who has a completely different outlook on the service system; and it's a fresh outlook so there's a lot of potential for growth and change," said Lisa Casagrande Koeppel, Interlude's director of operations. "Kathleen sees the potential that is there for our clients, and we want to do the best we can to capitalize on it."

"I'm interested in working with the residents," Deschenes said. "I want an atmosphere where clients play a role in decision making and creating services."

And she is elated with the staff, many of whom have worked for the agency more than 10 years.

"It's a really great group of dedicated people who have had to work through many hardships and have a clear focus of where they want the agency to be," she said. "And I'm coming in on the same page, so that makes for an easy transition for me and for the residents."

As for her career path, Deschenes said that after her first internship working in a hospital psychiatric ward and then working as the outreach leader, she knew this was the type of work she was meant to do.

"Either you love it, or you hate it, and I love it," she said.