

Hope House brings new chances

BE OUR GUEST
BY CHERYL ROBERTS

Hope House ground-breaking came too late for Miri Klau.

After a decade, the Greenburger Center is breaking ground on its long overdue and urgently needed residential Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) facility called Hope House on Crotona Park. The moment is bittersweet, because Hope House came too late for Miriam “Miri” Klau and many others.

Miri was often in Union Square Park, talking with friends and singing.

A beloved daughter, granddaughter and sister, a talented vocalist and classically trained pianist, Miri taught herself to play cello, guitar and saxophone. An artist, Miri drew, painted and excelled in metal work, especially wrought iron. She also lived with a substance use disorder, narcolepsy and mental illness. Tragically, Miri died of an overdose in 2021, after a year of hard-earned sobriety.

Miri’s father Daniel called me in 2016, when her legal troubles began. Desperate to find a residential ATI, he had heard about Hope House and Francis Greenburger’s struggles to locate a therapeutic alternative to prison for his eldest son. The Greenburger Center and Hope House model were actually borne of Francis’ deep frustration as he watched his son fall through a cracked mental health system and into prison.

Hope House, a first-of-its-kind, was designed for people like Miri and Francis’ son. Instead of prison, Hope House will offer up to two years in a residential trauma informed, therapeutic treatment milieu, with 24-hour security, on-site psychological treatment, and life and job skills training.

For thousands in New York and across the county, Hope House was exactly what they or their loved ones needed, instead of incarceration. Judges, survivors, DAs, politicians, parents and those living with brain disorders have all acknowledged that Hope House is a crucial, missing piece of the ATI puzzle. So why has it taken so long and been so damn difficult to break ground?

It comes down to money, mostly; a good dose of fallout fear; and leadership.

First, fear. It can be paralyzing. If a person with mental illness hurts someone after leaving an ATI, blame is immediately meted out to decision-makers: DA’s, judges, defense counsel and treatment providers. But, if that person hurts someone after leaving prison, a more likely outcome than had they been diverted, we shrug our collective shoulders, seemingly incapable of connecting the dots.

According to the Vera Institute of Justice, “[j]ail actually increases the likelihood of recidivism” while community-based programs, particularly “permanent supportive housing and intensive clinical support” are “remarkably effective” at reducing recidivism for those with serious mental illness.

While judges and past and present NYC DAs including, Darcel Clark, Eric Gonzalez, Alvin Bragg, Mike McMahon, Melinda Katz, Cy Vance, Ken Thompson and Dick Brown have supported ATIs, they have only been able to go so far with a felony population. Hope House’s unique security and treatment features will offer an additional diversion option, with the promise of better outcomes.

Second, money matters, a fact well known to federal legislators who, in 1965, passed and continue to support the so-called Institutions of Mental Disease (IMD) Medicaid rule. The rule has purposefully eliminated treatment beds by arbitrarily cutting off Medicaid to facilities larger than 16 beds. The IMD, and related rules, have been among our biggest obstacles and are also why so many people with serious mental illness are incarcerated, homeless or prematurely dead.

Fortunately, legislators including former NYC Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito; Congressman Ritchie Torres; past and present Council Members Elizabeth Crowley, Keith Powers, Rory Lancman, Danny Dromm and Erik Bottcher; Bronx BP Vanessa Gibson; and NYS legislators Carl Heastie, David Weprin, Luis Sepulveda, Julia Salazar and Danny O’Donnell repeatedly stepped up and supported gap funding.

Hope House also required enlightened leadership, and Gov. Hochul made Hope House a priority from day one. Without her, Hope House would not have made it to the finish line.

But, Hope House would never have gotten off the starting blocks without the tireless efforts of Greenburger Center and Time Equities Inc. staff; invaluable advice from the Center’s Board of Advisors and Directors; early and continued support from Bronx Community Board 6; legislative guidance from Pitta, Bishop and Del Giorno; and most of all, Francis Greenburger and his stubborn refusal to accept the status quo or the word “no.”

Francis’ efforts and those by other parents including Teresa and Dan Pasquini, Lauren Rettagliata, Norman Ornstein and Judy Harris, Laurie and Chuck Goldstein, Pete Earley and Shari and Garen Staglin, have driven the expansion of people centered mental health treatments and it is upon the shoulders of parents and loved-ones that Hope House stands.

Hope House will accept defendants from NYC living with mental illness, accused of felonies. Groundbreaking is planned for November.

Roberts is executive director of the Greenburger Center.