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ENDING HOMELESSNESS

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WITH PATRICIA GOULD-CHAMP AND ALLISON BODANOVIC

CALL IT FATE.

CALL IT DESTINY.

CALL IT KISMET.

Whatever you want to call it, it was that strange thing that occurs when two people are in the right place at just the right time, their lives intersecting. In this case that crossing of cosmic paths, and the union that would follow, ultimately ensured that 86 people would have the most fundamental human dignity of all—a place to call home.

Something was at play here that brought two extraordinary women together, both of whom were committed to making life better for their fellow human beings. One was a pastor of a ministry that worked tirelessly to meet not only people's spiritual needs, but their physical needs as well; the other headed up an organization whose very mission is to end homelessness.

Dr. Patricia Gould-Champ, former pastor of Faith Community Baptist Church, and Allison Bogdanovic, executive director of Virginia Supportive Housing (VSH), light up a room with a pervasive goodness that radiates from them like an actual glow. I had been in their presence individually on several occasions in the past, but meeting them together for an interview was a road to Damascus moment, and the light was intense enough to throw you from a horse.

On June 11, under blue skies, well over one hundred people gathered at a ribbon-cutting ceremony in front Cool Lane Commons, an 86-unit supportive housing community in Henrico County, right on



Ribbon cutting on June 11 at Cool Lane Commons.

the border with the City of Richmond. It all began about five years ago with brainstorming session

with Patricia and Allison.

In some ways, though, the process started years before that moment.

Faith Community Baptist Church, founded by Reverend Patricia Gould-Champ, had a relationship with the nursing home that would eventually become Cool Lane Commons.

“Our relationship started when we were born as a church in 1995,” says Patricia. “The Cool Lane Nursing Home was there and what we would do was minister to the residents, and one of our ministers would bring those who were able over to us in wheelchairs. They would roll them across the street on Sundays, and then during the week we would go to each room and minister and so forth and so on.”

Shortly after that the nursing home began a slow decline. “They began to sell the beds, and soon the building became vacant,” Patricia remembers. Over the years the building fell into a state of disrepair. Because of its proximity to Faith Community Baptist Church, Patricia wanted to make sure that whatever use the building was put to was compatible with her ministry and the community at large.

“At the time, Mayor Dwight Jones,

who’s a friend of mine, said whatever is done with that building could not be done without a conversation with us at Faith Community,” says Patricia. Mayor Levar Stoney honored that same agreement.

And then about five years ago, Levar mentioned an initiative that Virginia Supportive Housing was considering for the site, and it’s a unique property because the land is in Henrico County, while the building is owned by the City of Richmond. Levar told Patricia that Allison would be contacting her soon. “And this whole time the building was getting in worse and worse and worse shape,” says Patricia. I didn’t really know of the marvelous work of Virginia Supportive Housing, and I had never met Allison.”

They would end up meeting at VSH’s housing community on Southside, a place called Studios of South Richmond. “I’ll never forget when I drove up to the Southside facility and I didn’t know what to expect because it used to be a motel,” Patricia remembers. “It was clean as a whistle. There was nobody loitering outside.”

From the moment Patricia met Allison, she felt a deep kinship. “We’re in this community room and it’s just the two of us and we sit at this table and she just began to share,” Patricia remembers. “She was telling me about the vision of Cool Lane. It was her passion, her spirit, her love for the people, and just sitting in that room our spirits were knit.”

Allison nods and smiles. “In these collaborations it’s so much about relationships because you have to really trust each other,” she says. “And what we’re doing is going to extend beyond us. We are laying the foundation for something that is really special.”

“I left that day knowing that I would be doing what I could do to say to the community that this is what we want this building to be,” says Patricia.

Converting the former nursing

home into a housing community was a massive undertaking that would cost about \$24 million by the time the project was completed. The brick structure had good bones, and the end results are stunning. It’s an extraordinary space that houses the apartments, and much more.

“We were able to salvage the first and second floors,” Allison says. “We call it adaptive re-use. The exterior walls are there. The inside, which used to be filled with nursing home rooms, has now been turned into apartments. Most of them are one-bedrooms, but there are a few studios.”

There’s much more than living quarters under the roof at Cool Lane Commons. Along with the common areas for residents to use, VSH now has its Richmond headquarters there. “We created the Bren Center named after Jane and Carl Bren who founded Virginia Supportive Housing 36 years ago,” says Allison. “It’s our new headquarters, and I go to work there every day.”

But one of the most important components of this community are resources for residents of the facility and the neighborhood at large. “We call it the Neighborhood Resource Center, so it isn’t just the apartments,” Allison says. “We’ve been able to create a neighborhood resource center where the church started this non-profit to serve the greater community, not just the eighty-six folks in the apartments.” She describes the support services offered to the residents of Cool Springs. “The supportive services meet people where they are, and they help folks on their individual paths,” Allison explains. “Do they need help in stabilizing their housing and activities of daily living? Getting their groceries, taking care of their health, getting to doctor appointments? Or do they need behavioral health support? Some of it is housing-focused case management that just supports folks, but it’s also linking them to all the other services the region provides. It can be the READ Center. What



VSH teammates at work in the office.



Cool Lane Commons.



Cool Lane Commons has 86 apartment units.



Allison Bogdanovic, executive director of Virginia Supportive Housing.

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

photos by JAY PAUL

photos courtesy of VIRGINIA SUPPORTIVE HOUSING



Apartment living room.



Community kitchen into the community room.



Dr. Patricia Gould-Champ--Queen Mother and Founder Visionary.

do folks need to do to get their GED?"

This kind of support really works and is employed at every VSH community. "Everything is customized for the person's goals," says Allison. "We're not doing everything, but we're there and we can point people in the appropriate direction. The average length of

stay for us is five or six years, and that's across all Virginia Supportive Housing units. Last year across all of our programs 94 percent of residents remain stably housed. This program—housing plus services—is the solution for ending homelessness especially for people who've been on the streets for a really long time and who may have a disability."

And Faith Community is part of this winning program. "The church will still be doing work with women who are pregnant, and also teaching about nutrition," Patricia says. "We will have a branch of the READ center, and then of course the residents have already discovered the feeding ministry, All About Love Hospitality, across the street at the church so they

come and get their groceries."

"It's like double support because we're there and the church is there," Allison adds.

Patricia considers the success of the partnership that hatched Cool Lane Commons. "I'm hoping this becomes a model for other partnerships between other churches and Virginia Supportive Housing,"

she says. "We have the community behind this facility."

"The partnership of our non-profits and our faith communities is essential," says Allison. "There's synergy between services Virginia Supportive Housing and Faith Community Baptist. Many faith communities like Faith Commu-

ity have land that could be devel-

oped into more supportive housing." And then Allison tells me something that's extremely encouraging. "We know in greater Richmond we need about 350 more units of supportive housing units for the folks who are experiencing chronic homelessness," she says. In the near future VSH will

begin construction on an 82-unit community on Rady Street in Richmond's Northside. "So after that one we only need three more buildings," Allison says. "This is the solution for ending homelessness. We can get it done."

Before the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Cool Lane Commons hosted an open house for residents of the neighborhood, and Allison overheard one person say, as she toured an apartment, "This is an apartment where I would want to live and I would feel comfortable here."

Allison and Patricia believe that the pandemic opened the eyes of many folks who had always taken their homes for granted. "It made people realize that you can't be healthy without a home," she says.

"When everything else fell apart," says Patricia, "at least they had a home."

Allison Bogdanovic thinks back on all the effort that went into creating this community. "Cool Lane

had twenty-four different financing sources," she says. "I can't tell you how many years it took to layer all those sources together. You are trying to make the funding sources work together to create new housing you and have a lot of roles and hoops to jump through, and our partners realized that and gave us some grace."

And then the moment came that made it all worthwhile. "It comes when you hand over the key to an apartment," Allison says. "And suddenly that person has a home again."

"And the dignity that comes with it," says Dr. Patricia Gould-Champ. 



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