Thank You Dellenna!

Dellenna has helped to take care of hundreds of women in the Jennifer House family during her 10 years as a staff member, serving as Director since 2013. She is an alum who took part in a Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach jail visitation group and "slid under the door" to live at Jennifer House at a low point in her life.

Dellenna has earned three college degrees while working at Jennifer House—an Associate’s degree in Addictions Counseling from MCC, Bachelor’s degree in Social Work from Nazareth College and a Master of Social Work degree from the Greater Rochester Collaboration of Nazareth and Brockport in 2013.

Her story of recovery from addiction and incarceration has made Dellenna an inspiration to Jennifer House and people across the Greater Rochester community. She is an accomplished public speaker and soon-to-be-author who openly shares her story of recovery and accomplishment.

Supporters of SCPO can join in wishing a fond farewell to Dellenna on March 4 and 5 at Spiritus Christi Church, when she will be a featured speaker at the Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning Masses, and will attend a coffee hour at 10:30 a.m. at Hochstein following the 9:30 a.m. Mass.

More about Dellenna Harper in this issue of State of the Heart:

Appreciation
New Director Sarah Lee thanks Dellenna for being a guiding light to the residents, alumni and staff members of Jennifer House (page 3)

Book Excerpt
Co-author Jane Sutter provides an introduction and opening chapter of Dellenna’s memoir, tentatively titled No more selling my soul: My recovery from a decade of addiction and prostitution (pages 4-6)
On Thursday, January 26th, we celebrated the 15th year anniversary of Jennifer House and the 9th anniversary of Nielsen House at Spiritus Christi Church.

Throughout the evening, tears flowed easily in the eyes of all as precious stories of vulnerability were shared. I wondered if they were happy tears, joyful tears or sad tears. I concluded they were healing tears, the kind that fall when hearts are shared from the depth of the soul. This level of sharing comes from the very special place where there is only a thin veil that separates our humanity from our divinity. It is a place where we realize we are all truly created in the image and likeness of God, the God who dwells within.

Two men from Nielsen House and two women from Jennifer House shared their thoughts that night on having a safe place to rebuild their lives.

The first gentleman talked about having no place to go when he was released from jail, because he was not from the Rochester area. Nielsen House opened its doors and welcomed him. This gentleman’s brother was released from prison two weeks later and went to a shelter, but spent many days at Nielsen House visiting his brother and getting support from the safe environment. One day his brother stopped coming to Nielsen House. A few days later the gentleman heard that his brother had died of a drug overdose. He shared his heart and tears with the community, telling us how the Prison Outreach and Spiritus Christi helped him and his family through this incredibly painful time. He made it very clear that he could not get through this without help from the Spiritus Christi community. Today he holds a steady job and his first child is on the way.

Next, two women shared how Jennifer House became family for them when all other doors were closed. Jennifer House opened its doors and welcomed them fully. Today, Jennifer House continues to be family and provide support in their daily lives.

An 11-year-old child spoke of her father, and shared that when he relapsed she told him he needed to go back to Nielsen House. Her father listened to her wisdom. Today he is clean, sober and fully engaged in the lives of his three children. The daughter shared how she loves to go to Nielsen House and spend time with her dad doing homework, cooking and baking together.

We gave thanks to the Spiritus Christi Community for the beautiful way it continues to embrace the Prison Outreach program. Historically, the community has helped to provide more than 1,200 residents of Jennifer House and Nielsen House a quality, safe home in a family setting. Our residents receive food, clothing, shelter, structure, unconditional love and the message that each person and his or her life are precious.

As Spiritus Christi Church was forming, parishioners decided to make sure all people feel welcome, and that all are treated equally. Spiritus Christi committed to having a Prison Ministry and homes that welcome men and women in transition. The church owns no buildings except for Jennifer House, Nielsen House and Grace of God Recovery House.

We celebrated and thanked the men and women of the Prison Outreach who teach us that we are all human, that change is possible, and that life is a process. We celebrated their courage as they face the challenges in their daily lives and heal from wounds of the past. We thanked them for inspiring us to work on our own lives, for teaching us to be honest with ourselves, and to share our joys, struggles and hearts with others.
When one hears the word “light,” they often think of a bulb or a lamp. One might also define the word as a switch on the wall or a ray of sunshine. When Jennifer House thinks of the word “light,” however, Dellenna Harper defines it entirely.

A light is something that helps us receive insight and direction. Dellenna is that. Some lights shine so brightly that they galvanize people. Dellenna does that. Then there are lights that amaze and captivate people. That is Dellenna’s specialty. As for rays of sunshine, she has warmed Jennifer House with her spirit, leadership, and an honored faith that she has gifted to all.

Dellenna Harper has been the light that has guided Jennifer House for almost a decade. She has led women to places beyond their own belief or wildest dreams. She has challenged others with compassion, sharing her powerful personal story and wisdom. She has also challenged herself to dream bigger, reach higher and never give up. These aspects of Dellenna have made her a great role model and phenomenal leader.

It is not possible for Dellenna to walk into a room and not be heard. She is so bright that everyone gravitates to her thoughts and words. Her compassion for others is beyond belief. Her willingness to forgive and accept others in the place they are speaks volumes, to say the least. Her ability to honor the need for hope and understanding, as well as love and stability, have defined the integrity of Jennifer House.

Her interaction with women—be they Jennifer House residents, alumni or even women in the community—is so breathtaking that it is hard to put in words. She has the ability to navigate the way for others so eloquently, from a place in her heart that is deep and honest.

Dellenna is currently in the transition from leaving Jennifer House to return home to Minnesota with her family and daughter. Jennifer House understands and supports her move, but one of our greatest hopes for her is to know that no matter where she is or whom she is with, this is always her home. This is where her light shines so bright, for the house she led and for the women she has guided for so many years. So Dellenna, thank you. Thank you for the light of your mind, body, spirit and soul. Thank you for your patience, dedication hard work, sacrifice and love. And lastly, thank you for taking Jennifer House to a place that serves as a solid foundation for so many women who are broken and shattered, but with your light have been able to find a way.
I am so overwhelmed with news that I don’t know where to begin. I will start with the Mass on January 26th and work my way back. The men who shared their experiences at Nielsen House were incredible. There was not a dry eye in the place. Their stories were filled with happiness and sadness. The work our men do is hard emotional work.

Thank you to the parishioners who gave gifts at the Mass in the Park. Thank you to the Prison Outreach for providing the extra it takes to make the holidays special for our men and their children.

Chris and Dyllon are success stories with no end, and their work continues. Chris’s teenage daughter surprised him and joined her mother in the back of the church. The three younger children—twins Kristen and Kelis, along with Chris Jr., who likes to be called “Li’l C”—joined their dad on stage. Dad and son wept openly on stage as he shared the hard road he had been down and his journey today.

Dyllon shared about support he received from the ministry while at Nielsen House. He lost his brother while living at Nielsen House and was supported by his peers and our staff. We held a memorial service for his brother at the house with Rev. Mary officiating. We were delighted to support him during a difficult time. Dyllon is doing really well and we remain a strong support in his life.

We have been implementing family reunification with the men, their spouses and children. Nielsen House currently has eight fathers who are engaged in their children’s lives. On January 21st, we had a sleepover for these dads with their kids. There are 14 children between the fathers, ranging in age from 15 months to 12 years. The kids arrived at noon and we took them ice skating at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park at Manhattan Square. The skaters returned to enjoy a bagged lunch that the dads had prepared the night before.

Immediately after lunch we had two Twister games going, one for the toddlers and one for the tweens. Then we played Family Feud—it was so much fun. When the games were done, the dads each made pizza with their children. Two other residents were in the kitchen frying chicken wings, and the entire house ate wings and pizza for dinner. They had popcorn and movies for the evening. The dads were supervised by the evening and overnight staff, then I returned early the next morning to help prepare breakfast. We had a sit-down breakfast of waffles, pancakes, French toast, eggs, and juices. Then the moms and grandmothers picked up the children, and the men resumed their daily activity.

Last year’s Halloween was special. It has been awhile since we’ve had resident who like celebrating Halloween, so we really got into it. We did not have many little ghouls and goblins to give treats to, but we were prepared for them. We had our annual pumpkin carving day with the men and their children. It was lots of fun and laughter.

Christmas and Thanksgiving were also very special around the house. For both holidays we had a very formal dinner table; we did not use paper products and adorned the tables with our finest dishware. No paper! Dinner was followed by karaoke fun. The men invited their families to both dinners, and we had about 20 to 25 people at the house for each. It was a beautiful time. Thank you to the parishioners who gave gifts at the Mass in the Park. Thank you to the Prison Outreach for providing the extra it takes to make the holidays special for our men and their children. We opted not to have the usual Christmas party for the kids because so many had other plans, but they came at different times to pick up their toys and some dads took the gifts to their children.

The house is full, full, full and continues to work off a waiting list; the need for Transitional Housing is increasing. We thank all of you for your continued support. We look forward to the spring and the Gala. Have a wonderful day!
Dellenna Harper has not been shy about sharing her story of recovery, speaking not just to the women of Jennifer House but in numerous public forums. Now Dellenna has written her memoir, tentatively titled, *No more selling my soul: My recovery from a decade of addiction and prostitution.*

“I decided to write the book because I believe my strength comes from my brokenness, and I feel obligated to tell my story to give others hope,” Dellenna said. “I truly believe that is what my purpose is, to tell my story so others will know that if I can do it, they can, too. I believe true humanity is sharing our experiences and in doing so we give others hope.”

Collaborating on the book is Jane Sutter, owner of Sutter Communications and former managing editor of the *Democrat and Chronicle*. Jane is the author of Sutter’s *Sodas Satisfy: A Memoir of 90 Years of Sutter Drug Co.*, a pictorial memoir of her family owning drug stores in her home state of Iowa.

Dellenna’s book chronicles her growing up in Minnesota, her downward spiral into drug addiction and prostitution, her imprisonment in Texas, and finally her journey in recovery that began when she became a resident of Jennifer House. “Dellenna is brutally honest in telling her story, and I admire her courage to share the details so that others might benefit and realize they are not alone,” Jane said.

Dellenna and Jane have completed the manuscript and are currently sharing it with publishing houses. Anyone with contacts with book publishers is asked to contact Jane by emailing her at jane@suttermedia.net.

“I Don’t Want to Die. Just Please Make Sure That Lady is Here.”

*An excerpt from No more selling my soul: My recovery from a decade of addiction and prostitution.*

When the undercover cops arrested me, one of them dumped out my purse, and I saw all kinds of stuff, even weed, that I’d been looking for in my purse for days.

The cops were doing a prostitution sting. They handcuffed me and drove me over to a parking lot behind a big building at Dewey Avenue and Driving Park. They put me in a paddy wagon with the other prostitutes they’d picked up. Then they went back out and arrested some more prostitutes. I remember that day vividly. I sat in the paddy wagon, just wanting to go to jail. After they’d arrested about 30 ho’s, they drove us to the jail and booked us. All the prostitutes were crowded into a small room. It had a toilet in a half cubicle that came up to your waist. When you were sitting going to the bathroom on this cold metal toilet, the guards could see you from the shoulders up.

I knew if I got a couple clean days under my belt, I could do the right thing. But I just couldn’t get an hour clean. I just couldn’t. I’d crack had a hold on me and I was caught up in its grips. I would stay up for weeks at a time, and when I finally crashed, I would wake up and not realize if it was dusk or dawn. The movie *New Jack City* is the most realistic depiction of that lifestyle. Chris Rock plays this character called Pookie. He’s got this girlfriend, and they’re both crack heads. He says, “You used to be a prom queen, now you’re a crack fiend.” I was never a prom queen but I was very popular in high school. In the movie, Pookie gets clean and goes undercover for the cops to help them catch a drug dealer. But Pookie relapses and says, “It’s calling me,” meaning the drugs are calling him. It’s so true.

I felt so relieved that I was being arrested. I had always told myself I would be clean one day, I just had to survive the jungle. I had to live to see that day that I would be clean.

But the relief didn’t last long and a battle started raging inside of me. The other prostitutes started coming up with a plan that when they got let out of jail, they were going to go get high, and I was going along with them. But wait, just a minute ago, I felt relieved and I wanted to stay clean. I was flip floppin’. Part of me wanted to go back to what I was familiar to, the misery and the pain. I knew what to expect from that. The other part of me wanted to do something different, but I was scared, I was terrified, because I didn’t know what to expect.

After spending several hours at the downtown jail, we were transported to the jail facility in the suburb of Henrietta. Normally, when you are jailed for prostitution, you couldn’t get an hour clean. I just couldn’t. I’d crack had a hold on me and I was caught up in its grips. I would stay up for weeks at a time, and when I finally crashed, I would wake up and not realize if it was dusk or dawn. The movie *New Jack City* is the most realistic depiction of that lifestyle. Chris Rock plays this character called Pookie. He’s got this girlfriend, and they’re both crack heads. He says, “You used to be a prom queen, now you’re a crack fiend.” I was never a prom queen but I was very popular in high school. In the movie, Pookie gets clean and goes undercover for the cops to help them catch a drug dealer. But Pookie relapses and says, “It’s calling me,” meaning the drugs are calling him. It’s so true.

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stay at the jail for seven or eight days before you get out. This time, for some reason, they transported us out to Henrietta, which is for longer stays.

One evening a prostitute that I got arrested with (I called her “Little Bobblehead” because of the way she bobbed her head up and down) came to my cubicle and said, “Come on, Baby Dee, let’s go to this group.” I didn’t want to go. “Get out of my cubicle.” I just wanted to sleep.

But something inside me said just get up and go to this group. I believe it was my spirit. We sat in a circle of about 10 of us, and introduced ourselves. Two women were leading the group and they talked about a place called the Jennifer House. I wanted to do something different, but I didn’t have anywhere to go, not anywhere safe. I didn’t have any income, I didn’t have anything, I didn’t have a plan.

One of the women said if you want to come to the house when you get out of jail, you’re more than welcome to; however, if you don’t want to come to the house, we would still love to have you in the group. She then asked me a question—I don’t remember what—and I said, “I tell people what they want to hear. I want some help but I’m always telling people what they want to hear, to get my needs met.”

To get into the Jennifer House, you have to sign a contract. She had one contract left, and she had handed it to Little Bobblehead, but Little Bobblehead was on the fence about whether she wanted to go there. I said, “I’ll go,” because I’m thinking this is my chance, this is the answer to my prayer. So the woman politely snatched the contract out of Little Bobblehead’s hand, and gave it to me. I’ve never seen someone politely snatch something out of someone’s hand like that. Later, the woman told me she gave me the contract because “you told me that you tell people what they want to hear. You told on yourself.”

When I signed the contract, and that was on a Wednesday, and I was getting out of jail on Friday. I told the jail guard, “Please make sure that that woman from the Jennifer House is here to pick me up, because if she’s not, I’m going with these other women to get high.”

“Well, just don’t go.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t want to die. Just please make sure that lady is here.”

Friday came and I was feeling really anxious. I wanted to go use, but a part of me was like, no, try this, you’re done. When the other prostitutes and I were released, I was planning to go out and smoke a cigarette, but before I got out the door, I heard an unfamiliar female voice calling my name. I was relieved, but I also did not like the way she was calling my name.

The woman told me she gave me the contract (for Jennifer House) because “you told me that you tell people what they want to hear. You told on yourself.”

When I heard her loudly call “Delleeeennnaa Haaaarrrpprt!” I was wondering what the heck did I get myself into. It’s a critical time when someone is released from jail or prison. If that woman from Jennifer House had not been there that day, I would have gone with the other prostitutes to get high.

When I speak to groups about my arrival at the Jennifer House, I tell them, “I basically slid under the door.” It was such a low point in my life. I was fearful and consumed with shame and guilt. I was broken, both mentally and spiritually. I was tired, tired of who I had become and tired of the way that I had been living. I had this gift called desperation as I was so beaten by the streets and the drugs. This state of desperation birthed in me the willingness and open mindedness to do whatever I needed to do. All I knew was my way was not working. That gift of desperation helped me to allow others to help me, as well as guide and direct me, which led me to stop digging a deeper bottom.

When I slid under the door of the Jennifer House, I felt this overwhelming sense of peace. My heart quietly spoke to me and said, “We’re home.”
When I first found out that I was being placed at Jennifer House for my internship, I was very excited, because I have always wanted to work with individuals suffering from a mental health issue. I was very hopeful that when I first arrived all of the residents would be welcoming, respectful, and open to sharing with me about their specific situation.

However, this is not what happened. I soon learned that I had to earn both their respect and trust. Often times, throughout my first month of interning, the residents would test me and see how far they could push me until I gave up or asked to be placed somewhere else. I began to feel as though I wasn’t equipped to be interning at the house, which led me to begin losing confidence in myself. I began to think that I would never be able to connect with the ladies and would never earn their trust.

I didn’t want to give up or throw in the towel after interning only for one month. Therefore, I sought help and advice from the Jennifer House staff in hopes of figuring out a new way to approach the residents and bettering my experience. Many of the staff members explained to me two key things, which I still keep in mind every day while trying my best to help the ladies. They explained, “Don’t take anything personally” and, “The most important thing is to be present with the women.” May I add that the staff members at Jennifer House are amazing?

After speaking with the staff, I decided that I was going to try a new approach with the ladies. I began to reach out in a more natural way, by starting to ask them about their favorite foods, their interests, their favorite artists, etc. Somehow, some way, after doing this, everything changed and the women began to open up with me a little more and share with me. This made me realize that it’s okay to connect with residents on a much deeper level other than in other businesses, and that it’s okay to share a little about myself with residents in order to let them know that I’m human too.

It has now been five months that I have been interning at Jennifer House, and I can truly say that I have learned so much about both the population with whom I am working and about myself. I have developed a lot of patience. I have learned how to be far more open-minded, and have also learned how important it is to be open and willing to try new things. However, I think the biggest thing that I have learned so far is to keep faith and to stay optimistic. The residents taught me that if you keep faith and stay optimistic, there is no way that anything can bring you down. I agree with this completely and I am very hopeful for what the next three months has in store for me while interning at Jennifer House.
‘Watching What (Dellenna) Does with the Women is Truly Amazing’

By Margaret Mooney

My internship at Jennifer House has been a dream come true. For over five years I have thought about this experience and it has finally become a reality. I built my college career around someday being able to work at Jennifer House. I learned about the program while I was incarcerated, and all the things I heard helped me to decide to become a social worker.

Throughout my education, I learned more and more about the Jennifer House, the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach program, and the amazing people who work there. When I started my education at Nazareth College I began to learn more about Dellenna Harper. She was a bit of a celebrity at school, talked about by many of the professors, and newspaper articles about her were posted in the hallways. When I started my internship, and spoke about it in one of my classes last fall, my professor asked if I was being supervised by Dellenna Harper. He even said, “She is the closest thing we have to a famous social worker here in Rochester!”

I have been so honoured to have the privilege to work under Dellenna and learn from her experiences, as well as pick up the pieces of wisdom she shares daily. Watching what she does with the women is truly amazing, and it gives me the urge to keep learning and reaching for more opportunities. Knowing a little bit about her story also provides me with inspiration to never give up.

During my internship, Dellenna was going through the hoops to get her (social worker) license. Although it was frustrating for her at times, she showed determination and a never-give-up attitude. That was an inspiration not only to myself but to the women at Jennifer House, demonstrating that just because something is difficult doesn’t mean it’s impossible.

Thanks to my internship at Jennifer House I learned about a job opening in October. I never would have thought to apply for a job that early, but since I knew about the opportunity and it was something I had wanted for so long, I applied. I am happy to say I was offered the position and gladly accepted. Upon graduation, I will begin working full time here at Jennifer House and I could not be more excited about it. I am so grateful to have the opportunity to be an intern here and learn all the amazing things I can from this incredible group of people that I am so proud to work with.
Holiday Gift from Northwest Charitable Foundation

SCPO Advisory Board Members Todd Schirmer and John Klatte visited Jennifer House in December to present a $5,000 donation to Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach from the charitable foundation established by Northwest Savings Bank.

Who is Seamus Roibeard?

What new Poem Has He Penned About Jim Smith?

Seamus Roibeard is the pen name of an anonymous Rochester author and poet whose passion and personal mission centers on lifting up and providing a voice for the invisible and marginalized people of our community.

In 2014 a signed copy of his poem “Freedom’s Choices”—which is reprinted here—was auctioned off at the Spring Gala, and we dare say that it fetched a pretty penny. Mr. Roibeard has penned a new poem about our Executive Director—titled “Fill Me, Empty Me – Jim Smith, God’s Disciple”—that will be auctioned at our March 29th event this year. Perhaps we can even convince Seamus to join us at the Gala.

Freedom’s Choices

By Seamus Roibeard

Grieve the loss, 
grieve the beginning, 
grieve the need to grieve. 
Windblown dreams staying put 
give purpose to the rage...

Always was, 
could be yet... 
cling to failed beliefs 
as unsatisfying friends 
Provide the rush, 
payoff for keeping the cage...

Lives unlived 
when death is preferred, 
sought, obtained out loud. 
The common good drives 
further down 
the souls with shoe gum worth...

Let go from within 
that which fails, 
binds, and comforts us. 
Healing let in gets 
terminally deferred 
as hope never openly gives birth...

Righteous claims for a better past, 
blinds today and tomorrow – 
Awaken, let go of the hidden bars, 
embrace life’s affirming voices. 
The power within 
holds freedom’s key; 
Celebrate freedom’s choices...

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Gratitude for Grants:

The Prison Outreach is grateful for the following gifts received or awarded since publication of the Fall/Winter 2016 newsletter:

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U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Private

Hubertus and Helmi Behra Endowment Fund
Christine Dowd/Apple Cash Match
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M&T Bank Charitable Foundation
William G. McGowan Charitable Fund
Laura J. Niles Foundation, Inc.
Northwest Charitable Foundation, Inc.
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Tompkins Charitable Gift Fund
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The Women’s Foundation of Genesee Valley
Wyman-Potter Foundation

United Way

If your employer participates in the United Way Donor Designation Program, you can direct your United Way contribution to the Prison Outreach by writing in the agency ID #1384 on your pledge form. Just ask your Human Resources or Payroll department for a pledge form, or call the SCPO office at 288-0504 to request a donor designation card.
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**Donate Online**

We have enabled online donations through PayPal or credit card, on our website. Please visit: [spirituschristiprisonoutreach.org](http://spirituschristiprisonoutreach.org) and click the “Contribute” tab at top.

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**Want A Speaker?**

Are you looking for a speaker for your club, or community group? Do you know of another church or community group who might want to learn about the Prison Outreach or support its work?

We have dynamic speakers who are anxious to tell the community about the great work the Outreach is doing to help ex-offenders transform their lives. The stories are compelling and the reduced recidivism statistics are impressive.

All we need is a name and contact information; we’ll handle the rest. Contact Jim Smith at 288-0504 for details or to schedule a speaker.