From Homelessness, to Housing, to Award-Winning Peer Advocate and Mentor

Milestone Supportive Housing Client Will be Honored by Reaching Home Campaign in June



Willie Thomas Miller, a resident of the Milestone Apartments program in Bridgeport, is an extraordinary man with a difficult past and an outstanding vision for a productive, positive future. Willie is a client of The Connection's permanent supportive housing program at Milestone, where he is an inspiration to staff and other residents. In early April he received word that he will be one of two individuals in the state to be honored at the Reaching Home Campaign's annual awards dinner in June. There Willie will receive the Carol Walter Supportive Housing Tenant Award, given each year to two supportive housing tenants in the state who show commitment to supportive housing advocacy, leadership, and an effort to make their community a better place.

Willie's path to the Milestone Program has been long and difficult. Willie lost his mother when he was just 14 years old. After she died, he stopped going to school and lost interest in many of the things that had helped ground him and kept him engaged with his world. He began drinking, using and dealing drugs, and engaging in other activities that he is not proud of today.

Because of his dealing and addictions, Willie spent many years on the streets and many more years in prison—his longest prison term lasted more than 18 years. "I spent 56 years of my life in addiction. I missed out on an awful lot," he says.

In spite of his many mistakes, Willie was lucky—he had a wonderful wife who was his grounding source. Unfortunately, after she passed away in 2005, Willie again lost his bearings, and again became homeless. When his daughters complained that he hadn't made any effort to see them, even though he was literally right around the corner, he knew something had to change.

"I was hiding in a box trying to stay out of the elements," he says. "That's not the way you want to live. It's not *normal*. I got to the point that I was fed up—I was tired of being tired. But I didn't know how to ask for help."

Willie reached out to 211 and was referred to the Homeless Outreach Team for an appointment. He was put in touch with Helen McAlinden at Milestone. At the time Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust and The Connection were accepting applications for the Milestone Apartment Building, which opened its doors in the spring of 2016. Willie became the program's first resident.

Once Willie moved into his new home, he began investing his time and energy in helping himself do better, as well as helping others. Willie went through drug rehab four times before moving to Milestone, but always had difficulty maintaining his sobriety because he had no home to return to. His ability to remain clean and sober came in August 2016, when he graduated from the inpatient substance abuse program at Lebanon Pines and returned home—to Milestone.

Today, Willie volunteers for the Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR) and other recovery organizations in Connecticut and has been recognized for his dedication, passion, and advocacy. He is working toward becoming a peer mentor when he fulfills his volunteer requirement. In the meantime he's planning to take Spanish classes at Housatonic Community College—and he's also exploring a career in the Physical Therapy field, focusing on the Geriatric population.

With deep pride Willie says of his still-new home, "You can't get me out of here. I'm here! I'm not going anywhere, anytime soon. This is *home*! I'm at peace when I come here."