

Highlighting RCHP-AHC's First Project: Irayna Court

Submitted by Lori Freedman, AHC Tenant Services Director. This story features tenant, Sam H.

Twenty years ago, in 2006, RCHP Affordable Housing Corp. was incorporated, the tangible outcome of a group of people who struggled with, and educated themselves on, the question of what happens to homeless youth once they “age out” of foster care. Armed with financing from the NJHMFA Special Needs Trust Fund and Middlesex County HOME Investment Partnership funds, as well as State Rental Assistance Vouchers from the NJ Department of Community Affairs, the first project of the nascent organization was to create a shared housing community above the church for six homeless young women age 18-21.

Since opening in 2008, Irayna Court has provided housing and supportive services for almost 50 young women.

Each resident has their own bedroom and bathroom and shares a kitchen, living room and laundry room with the other young people and a Resident Assistant who lives there as well. While their previous experiences are different, once they move in, they all have in common the safety, security and stability that having a warm and welcoming home provides.

The experience of one resident, Samantha “Sam” H., exemplifies how homelessness can derail a young person’s development and how housing programs like Irayna Court allow residents the time and space needed to develop the life skills necessary to ensure that they don’t become homeless again.

Sam became homeless when she was 18 years old. She was working at the time but couldn’t afford an apartment and the shelters were all full, so she moved from place to place, sometimes living in unsafe conditions, “...just surviving. I wasn’t able to move up in my workplace even though my job was very important to me. I had to focus on where I was going to sleep that night...” One night when she was sleeping outside, a



couple of police officers found her and set her up in a motel room, taking her back and forth to work for a couple of weeks. **Then she found out about Irayna Court.**

Four days after moving into Irayna Court in 2021, Sam was terminated from her job due to the number of days she had missed work because of her homelessness. Here she was encouraged to go to college and did three semesters before taking a leave to work full time. **“It’s a big part of living here how much support you have. I wouldn’t have been able to go to school if I wasn’t living here.”** Sam has been at her current job since October 2022. “Three years at one job for someone who was told they’d never be able to graduate high school is doing really good!” Recently Sam returned to college and is set to graduate next year. “I get phenomenal grades now. Better than in high school and it’s all because I live here.”



Sam says she has learned a lot while living at Irayna Court, like how to cook, budget, and most importantly to not be afraid to reach out and ask for help. She has been connected with a variety of counseling opportunities, to the food pantry, and other resources. **“When I first moved in here you guys helped me put the sheets on my bed. You taught me how to compare prices at the supermarket.** Living here I’ve

met so many people of different backgrounds and cultures, different insights depending on what they’ve been through in life.”

In reflecting on her time at Irayna Court Sam points out that “I’ve been living here the whole time I’ve been an adult.” When she leaves Irayna Court, she says “I’ll take budgeting skills, 100% learning that rent is the most important thing in your life... how to have relationships with people, how to navigate stressful stuff that would tear other people apart... **My goal is to be a mom and get a job where I can help people like I’ve been helped....** It’s hard to be on your own at such a young age but you can’t give up.”

Many of the young people who have lived at Irayna Court over the years have pursued finishing high school and/or going to college, engaging in vocational training, getting a

job, perhaps buying their first car, learning to be responsible and navigating the many complex tasks that living successfully in society requires. Even for those whose departures were not as successful, Irayna Court provided a period of safety and respite in their lives from which they could draw strength as they moved forward.

As a result of RCHP-AHC's success in opening Irayna Court, we were asked to create a supportive housing program for 10 homeless youth in Newark which opened in 2010. From there we've gone on to purchase, renovate and create a variety of housing opportunities for homeless individuals and families, all with the same commitment to providing a safe, stable, secure and welcoming place to grow and thrive.

Many thanks to Sam for sharing her story. If you'd like to keep the momentum going, please [visit our Donation page](#) and put "affordable housing" in the memo field. Thank you!