

# THE SERRA PROJECT

Providing homes and hope for adults and children living with HIV/AIDS

**Q:** What is the interrelationship between poor health and homelessness?

**A:** Untreated disease and disability irrefutably contribute to homelessness and present barriers to its ultimate end. Most people experiencing homelessness rely on public healthcare safety-net systems. However, people without stable housing face numerous barriers to accessing these systems. The consequences of restricted access to comprehensive healthcare are reflected in extremely high rates of both chronic and acute health problems among people experiencing homelessness. Their well-being is further hindered by a lack of health insurance. While a number of community-based organizations have responded to the problems of access and utilization by developing healthcare programs specifically for people without housing, they have never been funded at levels that even begin to approach the health needs of all people experiencing homelessness.

## MISSION

THE SERRA PROJECT IS A NONPROFIT AGENCY FOUNDED IN 1987 TO PROVIDE SAFE, CARING HOMES FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS WHO WOULD OTHERWISE FIND THEMSELVES IN UNSAFE, UNHEALTHY LIVING CONDITIONS. OUR DOOR IS OPEN TO ALL REGARDLESS OF RACE, COLOR, RELIGION, MARITAL OR FAMILIAL STATUS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, ANCESTRY, GENDER, AGE, NATIONAL ORIGIN OR ABILITY TO PAY.

# NEWS FROM HOME

## What We Do and Why

**A Serra Project home is sometimes the only stable living environment a client has ever known.**

As the AIDS crisis has grown, so, too, has the need to house the rising number of homeless persons struggling with the disease. For The Serra Project, this has meant adapting its programs to two specific areas.

At one end of the AIDS housing spectrum is the need for 24-hour care, which The Serra Project offers at four group homes. Among the many services provided are nurse and social work case management, HIV-specific meals, counseling, advocacy and assistance transitioning to independent living. Casa Madona, opened in 1992, is especially significant in that it is the only group home in California specifically designed to meet the unique needs of women and children living with HIV/AIDS.

At the other end of the spectrum is the need for people to live independently—either alone or with their families—in homes of their own. The Serra Project provides them this opportunity through CHOISS (Community Housing Options at Independent Supported Sites), a program of permanent supportive housing. In 85 individual rental units scattered across Los Angeles County, CHOISS residents with multiple disabilities live independently while receiving the services they need to remain housed.

Each of our programs is tailored to specific health needs, allowing clients to transition to one or the other should their health status change. In both programs, the emphasis is on maximizing health, whatever the capabilities of the client.

Since its inception, The Serra Project has provided housing and support to nearly 1,200 AIDS-impacted persons living below the poverty line. In the last five years, 37% of them have been children. We continue to operate the longest-running AIDS housing program in Los Angeles County.



*The Serra Project helps sustain the inherent support systems families provide.*

## A Path to Independent Living

**Though every client comes to The Serra Project with a different story, they are linked by common goals.**

Many hardships bring people living with HIV/AIDS to The Serra Project—homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse. But sometimes they come together under a very different set of circumstances.

These include staying sober, sticking to medication regimens and seeking the help they need to function and build the necessary skills for self-reliance.

Their success can be attributed to many things: strength from their families, guidance from Serra Project staff, camaraderie they cultivate with one another. Ultimately, though, success comes when the client makes a commitment to succeed. Such is the case with Joseph (not his real name), who entered our Community Housing at Independent Supported Sites (CHOISS) program at age 41—homeless,

*Continued inside*

# Events, & People

IMAGES



Local hero Liz Gunnoe

The chance to be a hero doesn't come often but **Elizabeth Gunnoe's** quick thinking makes her more than deserving of the title. The full-time cook and Certified Nursing Assistant at The Serra Project's group home **Casa de Corazon** was at the stove when she happened to glance outside to see a man on the street being assaulted by another man. Liz yelled at the other man to stop, then grabbed gloves, gauze and a mask and ran outside, scaring off the attacker. She then assisted the bleeding man until the paramedics came. We commend Liz on her fast thinking and quick actions in reaching out to a stranger in distress... Since 1993, the **Until There's A Cure Foundation** has directed more than \$8 million to a full range of programs ensuring the health of HIV/AIDS patients and their families. Recently, The Serra Project benefited from the foundation

with a \$5,000 grant. Underscoring that it is up to each of us to be compassionate, understanding and responsible, Until There's a Cure uses a simple piece of jewelry to remind us that the fight against HIV/AIDS is an ongoing one. Reminiscent of MIA/POW bracelets worn during the 1960's and 70's, **The Bracelet** serves as a symbolic bridge in uniting people to keep the awareness alive. Available in different colors and styles, the bracelet can be ordered on the web at [www.until.org](http://www.until.org) or by phone (1-800-88-UNTIL)... More than 20 residents from our four group homes



Casa Madona residents enjoy Disneyland

enjoyed special outings to **Disneyland**. Group favorites included the Pirates of the Carribean and Small World rides and Main Street... In loving memory: We dedicate this issue of *News From Home* to **Terry** and **Scott**, both longtime residents of The Serra Project's **Casa Los Angeles**, who passed away this year.



Terry



Scott

**Save The Date!**

December 5, 2007

## A FAIRE OF THE HEART

Celebrating 20 years of Compassion, Community and Caregiving  
At The California Club  
Honoring The Serra Project's Founding Organizations

**“I am a longtime survivor of HIV with a diagnosis of AIDS since 1995. Although I have quite thankfully made significant progress against the HIV virus, it caused significant central nervous symptoms that brought about the expression of bipolar disorder, reduction in working memory and much difficulty with social integration. As a result, I ended up homeless. The Serra Project came to my rescue by accepting my application and giving me a new lease on life. With their help I have recovered much of my diminished self-respect, built up my deteriorated life-coping skills and have goals and hope for the future...” —Cesar**

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<http://www.serraproject.org>

with AIDS, a history of drug abuse, a prison record and a desire to change his life. These are notes from his case file.

**JULY 2001:** Joseph adapts well to his new living situation but has good and bad days regarding his health. He often feels tired. Joseph's Serra Project Support Service Coordinator (SSC) asks Joseph to make a conscious goal to keep all of his medical appointments and inform the SSC of any changes in his health status. Joseph agrees and the SSC sets up the systems needed to help monitor his health.

**AUGUST 2001:** Joseph attempts to establish new friendships. He familiarizes himself with his new neighborhood and attends AA meetings. His SSC congratulates him on taking these initiatives and cautions that lasting friendships often take time. If Joseph expects things to happen right away it could cause frustration and disappointment, setting him up for failure. The SSC encourages Joseph to pursue his interpersonal goals and, at Joseph's request, finds a local NA meeting for him to attend.

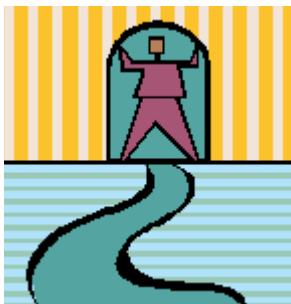
**SEPTEMBER 2001:** Joseph and his SSC go over his case plan. One of Joseph's goals is to bridge the gap with his two grown children. He follows through and visits them regularly. Joseph is congratulated for strengthening the bonds with his family and encouraged to continue to reach out to them. His SSC lets him know he is there to provide support should Joseph feel rejected emotionally. Results of a random drug test show Joseph is clean.

**NOVEMBER 2002:** Joseph goes to church twice a week and considers it one of his main sources of emotional support. He is thinking about getting a part-time job and discusses his options with his SSC. The apartment is always clean when his SSC visits him.

**June 2003:** Joseph is doing well and enjoying a better level of communication with his family. He would like to get a part-time job but is worried that the nagging side effects of his medications will rob him of that chance. His next medical appointment is in two weeks, which will provide an updated health status report for his file.

**FEBRUARY 2004:** Joseph is tired of his HIV status. "I don't feel like a normal person who has a job and a close family," he says. A bright spot is that he and his son have gotten closer. The talk shifts to future housing options and how Joseph's life has improved since entering the program. Joseph reacts with surprise and asks if he has to move immediately. The SSC tells him no, but reminds Joseph that one of his goals has been to develop the skills he needs to live independently. Joseph states he has "never felt so safe" as with The Serra Project and half-jokingly expresses a wish to "stay here forever." The SSC tells him to take his time. The Serra Project is there to support him.

**JANUARY 2005:** Invited to present his story to the advisory board of a government housing agency, Joseph speaks eloquently about how difficult his life was before coming to The Serra Project and how much he has benefited from the



*A major aspect of our program is helping clients develop life skills.*

structure and support he has received.

**MARCH 2005:** Joseph tells his SSC that, while he is doing well, he still has feelings of isolation. He copes by exercising and reading educational books. Although Joseph's son visits twice a month, his daughter does not return his phone calls. Joseph says he hopes that one day she can forgive him for his past behavior. The severe diarrhea, herpes and shingles Joseph experienced a few months ago are under control. He still goes to church and attends AA and NA meetings throughout the week.

**FEBRUARY 2006:** The subject of future housing resurfaces. Joseph understands he may be transitioning out of The Serra Project and characterizes himself now as a V.I.P.—a Very Independent Person. He states his wish to apply for Section 8 housing—a low-cost, county-run program. Joseph's SSC will assist him with the paperwork.

**July 2006:** Joseph waits for a phone call from the Section 8 office. He now has a sense of where he wants to look for an apartment. He reiterates his gratitude to his SSC for the help he has received in bringing his life back on track. He interviews for part-time work.

**OCTOBER 2006:** Joseph says he has made staying healthy his number one priority and his most recent health report bears that out: his T-cells are up and his viral load is down. Joseph asks his SSC if he has heard anything regarding the Section 8 application.

He is ready to move.

**Of the 171 previously homeless residents provided permanent supportive housing by The Serra Project in 2006, 79% had remained stably housed for at least one year and 63%—a 40% increase over the previous year—had remained stably housed for at least two years.**

**A client's intake interview tells the harsh realities of life before coming to The Serra Project**

**Medical:** HIV positive since early 90's; has lived with AIDS for 11 years. Compliant with medications.

**Background:** Latino, born in Los Angeles. Parents divorced; no contact with father after age 2. Started using drugs at age 9, leading to foster care; juvenile hall at age 12. Dropped out of school after 9th grade. Married in late teens, separated at age 24, now divorced. Two adult children have good relationship with mother.

**Incarceration:** 20-year history of drug-related arrests and convictions. Clean and sober since late 1990's.

**Income:** General Relief of \$221 per month, food stamps. Denied SSI.

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*We regret any errors or omissions.  
Please let us know if a listing needs to be corrected.*

**The Serra Project/Serra Ancillary Care Corporation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization funded by:**

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**We've Moved!**

The Serra Project's Administrative Offices are Now Located at:  
1245 East Walnut Street • Suite 106 • Pasadena, CA 91106-1878  
Our phone numbers and e-mail addresses remain the same.



**THE SERRA PROJECT**  
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