



## Caring Unlimited and Audrey Beach: Fostering Boundless Futures

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Erika Blauch

Imagine walking into a home that is safe and located far away from danger and violence. Many of us are fortunate enough to already live in such a home, but for women who are victims of domestic abuse, the idea of a life in a safe, affordable, comfortable home all too often feels impossible.

Audrey Beach helps these women realize a brighter future. As Co-Coordinator for Transitional Housing and Services at Caring Unlimited, a Sanford-based organization that works to end domestic violence in York County, Beach spends her days helping the individuals enrolled in her programs, primarily women, flee abusive situations and transform their lives for the better, forever.

Caring Unlimited offers an array of services for victims of domestic violence, including a 24-hour emergency hotline and an emergency shelter. When an individual is ready to move from the shelter, she is invited to move into a temporary home in one of Caring Unlimited’s fifteen apartments. Before new residents move in, Beach takes time to help paint, furnish, and decorate each apartment. “Many people come to the shelter with literally nothing but the clothes they are wearing,” Beach says. “At the very least, we want them to have enough beds for everyone, a kitchen set, and items for cooking. But I also like to hang up curtains and artwork—anything to help the place look homey and welcoming.”

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Securing transitional housing is a labor of love for Beach and her colleagues, part of a journey that began nearly twenty-five years ago, when Beach first began working at Caring Unlimited as the administrative assistant. She soon took on the role of Chief Financial Officer and learned the ins and outs of fund-raising and budgeting for the organization. It was as CFO that she became attuned to the need for transitional housing. "I began helping women move from the shelter into apartments, and I couldn't believe where they went after they left us. The apartments were horrible—in poor condition and in dangerous neighborhoods. Many women would make the choice to return to their abusers and their former homes when they saw where they would have to live. It was then that I knew that transitional housing was what I really needed to pursue," she says.

Beach and others on staff began scouring York County for suitable apartments. "Our guiding principle was that we would not ask the women to live anywhere we wouldn't live ourselves," Beach says. They jumped at the chance to move into a former nursing home in Sanford, which now holds eleven of the fifteen transitional apartments and Caring Unlimited's offices. (Other apartments are located in Biddeford and Springvale.)

Beach's work extends far beyond setting up her apartments. Every person who moves into one of the transitional apartments must participate in the program's services, which range from parenting classes to career awareness. "A big challenge is getting people to understand that this is just a temporary solution and that we expect them to move on to something better after two years," Beach says. To that end, she and

her co-coordinator, Janie Waterhouse, meet weekly with those enrolled in the program to set goals and discuss progress, and every ninety days they review and update goals.

One important goal for many former victims of domestic violence is economic independence, and Caring Unlimited encourages women to enroll in the Realizing Economic Action Plan (REAP). REAP is an intensive curriculum that teaches women about personal financing and credit management and gives them the tools they need to make good choices.

Beach also helps connect women to educational opportunities through programs such as the Women's Independence Scholarship Program (WISP). WISP is available nationally to women who have left an abusive domestic situation and who are pursuing an education designed to provide economic independence for themselves and their children. "So often fear prevents women from taking action," Beach says. "They don't know how they will be able to pay for courses or child care during school, and WISP helps ease that burden."

While the overarching mission of Caring Unlimited is to end domestic violence for good, what gets Beach up in the morning is the opportunity to help each woman chart the course for a violence-free, fulfilling future. "We hope that once a woman leaves us, she will be able to spot red flags and decide 'I won't go down that road again.' Every woman has the power to decide how to live her life and plan her future."

How are you encouraging brighter futures? Tell us.

