



# MORE THAN EMERGENCIES

WHEN WE COME TOGETHER

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It was a brisk January day when I found myself in a long, warmly lit hallway. Down the corridor some doors stood with holiday decorations still proudly on display. At my own house, it seemed we put up less lights and signs each year, citing the hassle of taking it all back down again as rationale. But I think there's an overlooked beauty in the indulgence of tinsels and knick knacks. It's a way of saying, *I'm here. This is my home.*

But today, there was only one door here to see, and I waited quietly for it to open. To my right was Community Paramedicine (CP) Provider, LPN and the person I'd be shadowing today, Jon K. The visit was, in a way, months in the making. After I proposed the idea of doing more stories on the CP Program, Vickie--the Community Paramedicine Field Provider--jumped at the notion. While there were many amazing people to highlight, there was one patient in particular she insisted I speak with: a young man by the name of Chris.

### BEYOND THE CALL

While it was Jon who was currently seeing Chris, Chris's relationship with the CP Program first began with Vickie. "I do the ground work, address what I can, then [the patients] are eventually paired with a CP Representative who works with them long term. Then, I go off to the next 911 call," she explained. "I met Chris through a staff referral following a 911 call after [he] suffered a bout of hypoglycemia." Chris had been living in his van for three months with no phone, no primary care physician and, perhaps most alarmingly, no medication--including insulin. Vickie started with identifying his most pressing needs, "I was able to secure an immediate new patient appointment [that day] working with one of Penn Medicine's family medicine groups."

After Chris was officially inducted into the program, he was paired up with Jon, "When I return to the office, I discuss patients I have encountered who fit our program...Jon jumped at the chance to work with Chris." Ensuring effective preventative care, Vickie emphasized, is more than disseminating resources—it's about building meaningful connections that encourage growth and stability.

By the time I met Chris, he had been seeing Jon for around four months. It was Chris's sister who welcomed us into the apartment, where he was temporarily staying. The blinds were pulled down, the silhouette of a small Christmas tree pressed against the back wall, and a crib with a small sleeping occupant stood in the middle of the room. After a brief introduction, Jon got to work taking vitals and catching up on how things had been going since they last spoke. With pen and paper in hand, I found a place on a nearby sectional. Now, it was my turn.

## BETWEEN STORMS

"I moved to the US due to the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017," Chris, originally from Puerto Rico, detailed the devastation that came from the back-to-back deadly storms, "Living in a tent inside a house was my way of avoiding centipede and mosquito bites and keeping roaches away from what little I had of food." After finding a job in West Virginia, he made the move to the States in 2020.

Like any major transition--especially in the aftermath of trauma--there's bound to be an accompanying shock. But Chris managed the shift well, propelled by the hope of a good future. Two years in, however, hardship would strike once again when he unexpectedly lost his housing and, in the wake of that, his job. For the second--but unfortunately not the last--time he found himself without a home. It would be at least another year before he would cross paths with Lancaster EMS, but when he did, things began to change.



Since connecting with the Community Paramedicine Program, Jon has helped Chris obtain a phone, secure employment and improve his overall health. In doing so, there's been another basic need checked on that list: friendship.

"I've been isolated for many years due to my past and I wish I had friends," he revealed. He went on to thank God for giving him "the chance to meet some awesome people who actually care" like Jon and Vickie.

The difference in Chris's situation before and after being referred to the CP Program is like night and day. Vickie recognized his own drive playing an integral role in that, "He was receptive to assistance, realized he was in trouble, but worked very hard with us to attain his goals. He didn't want a handout, just a hand."

It's transformations like these that makes Vickie claim the CP Program is "probably the best kept secret" in Lancaster County. "There are so many care gaps in healthcare and not enough resources," she expressed. "Our CP program is unique in that we address a variety of issues, including homelessness through Refresh Lancaster, addictions through our recovery specialist, transportation, food insecurities, etc." In a huge leap in the evolution of emergency medicine, EMS providers at Lancaster EMS now take the extra step of referring patients to the CP Program who are "potentially lost in the system and don't know who to ask or where to turn" for help.

Chris has experienced this saving grace firsthand, vowing, "The Community Paramedicine Program means an actual chance for me for the first time. I've always been dealt a bad hand in life. This [is] the closest I've ever been to a good future." When I asked a bit about what that future may look like, he excitedly took the chance to tell me about his own company he'd been working on, Black Canvas Holdings. His hope is for that to become a source of additional income, "maybe not for me but for future kids and their children in perpetuity."

While he longs to become a dad and have a family of his own one day, his immediate goal, however, is much more simple, "My dream is to own my own home and never have to worry about whether I have enough to eat or drink tomorrow."

When I finally asked Chris to describe *himself* to me, albeit an often awkward thing to answer, he didn't quite know what to say. But near the end of our visit when he piped up to notify Jon of a group of refugees in Lancaster who also needed help, that told me everything I needed to know. In another act of kindness just before leaving, he offered me, a stranger, the opportunity to hold his newborn niece. Gently, he placed the baby girl in my arms. She was beautiful, and the moment reminded me of when my own nieces were just as small. Experiencing firsthand the power of the relationship between nieces and their aunts and uncles, I left knowing there was already a person in that little girl's life with a heart of gold.

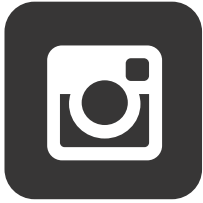
## THE MISSING PUZZLE PIECE

However, while Chris has made monumental strides towards stability, there is still one major hurdle that stands in the way: housing. Unfortunately, his stay with his sister will have to be finite. Soon, he will be asked to leave the property due to rules regarding roommate limits, finding himself unhoused yet again. Jon will continue to aid Chris in his search for a real home, but with limited resources and a full caseload, the task won't be an easy one. This is where we call on the greater community to emulate the compassion emergency and non-emergency care is founded on for help.

I'd like to end on a quote that remains as relevant today as it was when first birthed nearly 2,500 years ago. "Wherever the art of medicine is loved," the great Greek physician, Hippocrates, once spoke, "there is also a love for humanity."



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