

## &lt; COVERSTORY &gt;

## Jennie Lucca

*The Children's Inn at NIH*

**T**he National Institutes of Health is dedicated to improving medical care through research on some of the most challenging and mysterious illnesses. Children who come to NIH often do so because they have been diagnosed with a rare disease. Other times, it's because the available treatments that work for the majority have not been successful for them.

The Children's Inn at NIH, a nonprofit organization located on the NIH campus in Bethesda, contributes to studies for younger patients. Jennie Lucca, CEO, says the spirit of their mission is evident to most people who walk through their doors.

"It's an incredible, peaceful and safe environment," Lucca says. "Our mission is clear. We're here to support the children and their families, to reduce the burdens that come with illness. And we're here to support medical discovery.

"Every single day we get to make direct and indirect impacts. We work to keep families together because health outcomes improve when people have their loved ones around them. We also contribute to medical developments that help children all over the world."

The Inn opened its doors in 1990, offering 37 rooms for families of children



BY HILARY SCHWAB

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enrolled in NIH studies. The majority of those studies involve rare genetic diseases or cancer. Today, there are 59 rooms which allow the Inn to serve about 1,500 families each year. There is no cost to the families, and often that is the factor that allows a child to get the cutting-edge treatment at NIH.

"We're incredibly lucky," says Lucca. "We have a waitlist for volunteers, since so many of our community members are dedicated to our mission. Turnover is very low for volunteers and staff."

That's true for Lucca, who has worked at the Inn since 2003. "Our work is a privilege. It's not easy, but it's a gift to be able to do it," she says.

Lucca describes the relationship between NIH and the Inn as an "ideal" public-private partnership. However, it can make fundraising a challenge. "There's a perception that since we're on the NIH campus that we're funded by the government. We're not. There are countless benefits to our partnership, but it's important that people know we count on our donors, too."

## Mark Bergel

### *A Wider Circle*

In 2001, Mark Bergel volunteered for a program that involved delivering food to people in need. "That first day, I knew I had to do something. They were living with such scarcity. It was something I'd never accept for my mother or my children," he says.

Bergel crafted a strategic plan to end poverty, then called on his network for advice. All but one urged him to abandon his plan. "She understood poverty and had much more experience than I. Unlike the others, she said, 'You must do this. This is exactly what has been missing,'" says Bergel.

Bergel founded A Wider Circle the same year, with the mission to end poverty one person at a time. Part of that is "saying no to nobody." No proof of need is required because, "We don't want to add to the indignities our clients are already facing. When you do what we do, you just know. People are simply trying to survive and trying to protect their families."

Bergel first ran the program from his own living room. He stored donations in friends' basements and garages and depended on interns, since he couldn't afford to hire staff. A Wider Circle has grown from furnishing 1,000 homes in its first year to over 16,000 each year.



PHOTO COURTESY OF A WIDER CIRCLE

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While aware of the positive impact his organization is making in the region, Bergel isn't satisfied. "I'm much less patient these days. We're talking basic human rights here. Every day I'm constantly thinking about how we can do better for our families. My team sets a very high bar for ourselves, and we keep trying to beat it. There's so much energy and spirit focused on this effort," he says.

Bergel's overarching goal reflects that spirit. "I hope that in 25 years, there's no need for our organization any more. If we're not trying to put ourselves out of business, we're not doing it right." To accomplish this, Bergel says his method is simple. "I'm going to do whatever I have to do to help you. That's my perspective, because it resonates with my soul."

## Jackie DeCarlo

### *Manna Food Center*

The word "manna" refers to spiritual nourishment, which is fitting for Manna Food Center, a local nonprofit dedicated to supplying clients with better access to quality foods. Founded in 1983 to address the needs of those hit hardest by the recession, Manna was built through the collaboration of religious leaders, governmental agencies, local businesses and volunteers.

Executive director Jackie DeCarlo says the charity's programs have evolved to match changing needs. "Today, many people want information about healthy eating as well as access to more produce and a better variety of nourishing foods. We offer grocery store tours to give people tips on how to find the best foods they can with a limited budget."

It is a challenge for many, she says, since the most nutritious foods are often also more expensive. This disconnect is a high priority for the food-insecure and one Manna is focused on improving. Another related initiative involves establishing partnerships with local farmers to obtain fresh regional produce for distribution.

For others, Manna provides supplemental food packages sent home with children for the weekends. This program was designed to help address the gaps that free school meals often fill. The ingenious Community Food Rescue, one of Manna's newest initiatives, has a winning philosophy: keeping food out of landfills by distributing it to people in need.

"We work within our network to match surplus food with partners like local soup kitchens," says DeCarlo.

Manna distributes around 4 million pounds of food to over 11,000 families each year. It's a great step toward its goal to completely eradicate hunger in the community. And while those numbers highlight the incredible scope of its efforts, they also demonstrate just how great the need is. A need Manna can reduce thanks to strong partnerships.

"We have a wonderful team," says DeCarlo. "Our donors, staff, and volunteers are so invested in our mission. It's a gift to be able to work shoulder to shoulder with them. I'm proud of the extent of the dedication. It's not just about feeding our people, but also getting to know our clients, listening to their stories, and figuring out what they need and how we can serve them better."

Manna welcomes volunteers of all ages.



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## Bob Dorsey

### *Montgomery Avenue Women's Center*

**E**ver wondered where homeless people go when shelters close in the morning? Since 1984, the Montgomery Avenue Women's Center has been a rare daytime haven for women with nowhere else to go. Established to provide a clean, safe place for disadvantaged women to spend their days, MAWC now offers much more: meals, laundry facilities, computers, a mailing address and a telephone. They also provide career assistance, guest speakers and other activities.

Bob Dorsey, MAWC's executive director, has served the organization for more than 15 years, first as a member of the board. Before then, he was a Rockville city councilmember.

"I really didn't know what I was in for, but I've never regretted it in the least," he says. Dorsey knows how fine the line is between thriving and not. "Losing your home can be caused by something as unpredictable as getting into a car accident that leaves you unable to work."

MAWC is open every day, supported by staff and volunteers who work together to help women return to self-sufficiency. There are many success stories.

"I would guess that there's a small number of people who experience long-term homelessness, but most people leave the shelter system," says Dorsey. More often than not, it's a matter of having the right resources. Important things like healthcare and the basics required for having a job, like appropriate clothing and access to transportation.

Dorsey dreams of significantly reducing cases of homelessness. "We keep talking about it and keep asking the same questions. It's a good thing because it means the conversation continues, that we're focused on this major issue." He believes the solution



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could involve a mutually beneficial arrangement where people who have empty rooms get matched to those who could offer something in exchange.

"Or, why not reopen the closed military bases as housing for those in need?" he asks.

Dorsey would also like more attention paid to the people his team serves. "There are fascinating, amazing stories to each woman who enters our doors. I wish more people would take the time to see that, to realize that we shouldn't be looking past our fellow humans."

**MONTGOMERY AVE. WOMEN'S CENTER • 112 W. Montgomery Ave., Rockville, MD 20850 • 301.984.7765 • mawctr.info**



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## Tim Wiens

### *Jubilee Association of Maryland*

The Jubilee Association was inspired by the experience of several volunteers who had worked with people diagnosed with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The volunteers, members of the Hyattsville Mennonite Church, turned to their religious community for help.

"They wanted to provide the people with a home in the community, a setting that would offer a more normal life than big institutions could," says executive director Tim Wiens.

Wiens has served as executive director of Jubilee since 1979. He has been with the organization even longer though, first serving as a board member. "I certainly didn't expect to spend 36 years here. This job is a wonderful way for me to blend my vocation and my faith," says Wiens.

The Hyattsville Mennonite Church continues to be an affiliate of the program, and while spiritual wellbeing is part of the organization's mission, neither participants nor employees are required to take part in religious services or belong to any particular faith.

Jubilee serves approximately 140 people in 70 locations, and only 15 of the locations are managed directly by the organization. In addition, they offer programs focused on social skills and improving the quality of life for around 30 people living with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders.

Jubilee's success is due, in part, to its mission and its focus on progression. "People with developmental disabilities need assistance and support to live a normal life," says Wiens. "For some that involves group homes, for others it's the independence and pride that comes from

living in their own homes or apartments with limited, specific support from our staff."

Part of that progression is a potential collaboration with other agencies to transfer their properties into a jointly owned nonprofit. "The goals are more effective



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management and more affordable, accessible homes for our clients," says Wiens. The collective approach works for the Jubilee team as well. "People with developmental disabilities come from families of all political parties, races and economic circumstances. This creates a natural political constituency that can be mobilized to support the services. It's exciting to be part of a system that can get things done. Our driving philosophy is self-determination. We want people to have control over their own lives," says Wiens.

**JUBILEE ASSOC. OF MARYLAND** • 10408 Montgomery Ave., Kensington, MD 20895 • 301.949.8628 • [jubileemd.org](http://jubileemd.org)

## Melanie Samet

### *Mutts Matter Rescue*

**M**elanie Samet established Mutts Matter Rescue in 2010 to give homeless dogs a safe place to stay until they can be adopted into their forever homes. Samet left the business world to focus on the enormous need for no-kill options for canines. With the Humane Society estimate of 2.7 million shelter animals in the United States, animal rescues save countless lives each year. “It wasn’t something I’d planned, it was a calling. From volunteering for a city animal shelter to serving on the board of several rescues, I’ve always been passionate about speaking on behalf of animals.”

Samet relies on her “wonderful” volunteers. “There’s no way I could have made such a large impact by myself. To date, we’ve placed close to 2,000 dogs into homes with owners who have gone through our approval process. We are dedicated to making sure each dog will have the best life possible,” she says.

The rescue is all volunteer run – Samet doesn’t even draw a salary for her fulltime-plus hours each week – and her people give whatever and however they can. Some volunteers take pets into their homes until they can be adopted. Others screen applications a couple of hours here and there. “If you want to be a voice for our dogs, you can choose a role that works best for you. There are so many ways to help. Whatever time people have to contribute, we can work with it.”

Samet has channeled her experiences into saving even more lives. Certified to rescue animals from large scale operations like puppy mills and dog fighting rings,

she once helped to liberate over 130 dogs from a single property. “We see some of the worst of humanity. Some of the things we’ve witnessed will haunt us forever.”

There are difficult days. “We get hundreds of emails each day from organizations that have no space for



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dogs. We have to say ‘no’ more often than we’d like – which is never – but we can’t focus on those. Instead we count the number of lives we save each day.” Samet estimates that her rescue takes in around 30 dogs each month.

Most days offer plenty to smile about though. “It’s a privilege to work with dogs and saves lives,” Samet says. “They’re so full of hope, no matter what life was like before. The people, too. Every single time someone says, ‘You gave me my best friend,’ I’m reminded of exactly why I’m doing this.”

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