Josephine Burrell has been advocating for low-income housing for more than half her 77 years. And now, she wants to build low-income homes. Tiny homes. Homes that people with low-to-moderate incomes can own, afford and take pride in maintaining.

“It’s not enough to talk about getting poor people jobs or housing. Let’s talk about upward mobility,” Josephine says. “I want people to look at us differently.”

Josephine, a graduate of the Food Bank’s Speakers Bureau, began participating in an anti-poverty initiative at the Broome County United Way a couple of years ago. A small group formed and began meeting...
PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

I was honored to attend the graduation ceremony for our third Speakers Bureau class in Bath this summer. These events are always inspiring as we bear witness to the graduates’ powerful stories of poverty, trauma and incredible resilience. One of the common themes shared by many cohorts of this session was addiction and its impact on children, adults and families. As our graduates shared their experiences, I was reminded of Johann Hari’s TED Talk in which he states, “The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection.”

At the Food Bank, we have long recognized the power of food to help build connections which are essential to developing healthy minds, bodies and communities. We often reflect on how we could not do our work without the support of our community. Our connections are integral to our success and the success of our partners. Community connections are also essential for the people we serve. No one is an island; no one is truly independent. We are all interdependent in a larger ecosystem comprised of family, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, faith communities, schools, towns, counties, states and nations. It can be very easy to take these connections for granted, but they are vital to our ability to survive and thrive.

We are proud of the work we’ve done to build and sustain hunger-free communities throughout the Southern Tier. We will continue to push forward, grateful for the support of our partners, donors and volunteers who make everything possible.

In partnership,

Natasha R. Thompson
President & CEO

On June 18th, ten Steuben County residents graduated from the Food Bank’s Speakers Bureau in Bath and spoke in front of an audience of about 90 community members. The speakers shared their stories about poverty, homelessness, addiction, domestic violence, and abuse, while also offering countless examples of resiliency and ideas for change.

In so many ways, our society tells people living in poverty that their experiences and perspectives don’t matter. At the Food Bank, we believe that successful legislation and programs designed to lift people out of poverty must include expertise from people living with poverty and food insecurity.

Our Speakers Bureau program is a ten-week leadership development and public speaking training in which participants gain the skills and confidence to become leaders in their community and speak with decision makers about the realities of poverty, hunger and related issues.

Catholic Charities of Steuben County Turning Point in Bath recruited this session’s participants, and members of the Hornell Area Toastmasters Club provided public speaking training.

The Speakers Bureau offers far more than speaking skills. Speakers Bureau participants learn the root causes of hunger, which can alleviate some of the paralyzing blame they feel for circumstances beyond their control. Many discover a new sense of self-worth and become empowered to advocate for themselves and others. The Speakers Bureau format also forges new relationships with other hunger-relief advocates and creates a close-knit network of connections the participants carry forward.

“It’s people coming together to find that while our experiences are unique, none of us are alone in them. It’s all of us learning together about why poverty exists in the wealthiest country on the planet,” says Lyndsey Lyman, Food Bank Advocacy and Education Manager. “These folks are the movers and shakers; the caring individuals who will create healing spaces for themselves and their neighbors; the people whose stories and ideas we need at the forefront at this time.”

To learn more about our speakers, visit www.foodbankst.org/learn/speakers-bureau

Karen Ordway moved to Bath to escape an abusive relationship. She is looking forward to using the skills and connections she made through the Speakers Bureau to help others rise above their circumstances to escape poverty.
Did you know you can volunteer to harvest apples for the Food Bank, helping both local farmers and people struggling with food insecurity?

Farmers often find themselves with surplus or unmarketable produce, so we send volunteers to local farms to glean this produce for families in need. The Food Bank partners with Stoney Ridge Orchard in Erin and Reisinger’s Apple Country in Watkins Glen to glean apples as harvest season draws to a close.

J. Forrest Meekins, a regular volunteer at the Food Bank, gleaned with her daughter last year at Stoney Ridge.

“I liked the idea that local farmers were offering fresh produce for the Food Bank to be able to distribute to their clients.

Fresh produce can be expensive and if their food budget is limited, people may not be able to include as much fresh food in their diets as they would like,” Forrest says. “After less than two hours of picking, we had filled quite a few boxes with apples that might have otherwise been left unharvested.”

About seven percent of produce grown gets stuck on the farm and never makes it to market, according to the Resources Defense Council. This occurs due to poor market prices, meaning harvesting the produce is more costly than selling it. Sometimes, farmers can’t find enough workers to pick the produce.

Want to help glean this fall? Gleaning usually occurs on Tuesdays and Thursdays at one of our partner orchards from mid-September through October. Stay tuned on our social media, e-news and www.foodbankst.org/gleaning for details and schedule!
over brunch and talking about the concept of small homes that could revitalize blighted city neighborhoods and provide stability and dignity for people who’ve never had the chance to own a home.

“Working poor people cannot afford a regular home. Janitors, nursing aides, cooks, grocery workers — people who take care of things that make everyone’s lives better — their lives should be different,” Josephine says. “And middle-class people who work so hard to get a home can miss one paycheck, get evicted, and lose it all.”

Joining Josephine in her crusade is Judy Irwin-Salton. The pair met during Speakers Bureau training in Binghamton in 2016. Josephine was a participant, and Judy was a volunteer trainer from Binghamton Toastmasters, an organization dedicated to fostering public speaking skills and confidence.

“Listening to their speeches was inspiring,” Judy says. “What I got out of it was probably as much, if not more, than the Speakers Bureau participants.”

Two years later, Judy, also an advocate for people with limited incomes, heard murmurs about the Greater Binghamton Tiny Homes Community and set out to learn more.

“And it turned out to be Josephine behind the project!” she says. Judy has been a project committee member ever since.

Judy says tiny homes make sense, pointing out that big, existing, low-cost structures can come with the overwhelming cost of constant maintenance, which forces residents out when problems arise. “Older homes just aren’t sustainable for people with limited budgets,” she says.

The tiny homes project will develop well-built houses on small city lots; some just big enough for a family, others small enough for a senior couple or individual, and still others accessible for wheelchairs and medical equipment. But, all homes would be new builds with little to repair and small enough to maintain on a limited budget.

Built into the tiny homes plan are low interest mortgages, an investment savings plan for repairs, and an education program about basic home ownership and maintenance.

Judy says the tiny homes project will provide training in carpentry and other building trades, creating employment opportunities for neighborhood residents.

Josephine says the project has received an outpouring of support from bankers, attorneys, builders, designers, engineers, city officials, and other community members who want to get involved.

“Imagine this ‘poor little Josephine’... All my life, I was told I’m nothing, worthless, ugly, not good enough. And here they are, doing everything in their power to make my dream a reality,” she says.

The Tiny Homes Community is finalizing its not-for-profit status and aims to raise $1 million by next summer and build three homes before the end of next year.

And the end goal? Josephine envisions neighborhoods of tiny homes in Binghamton, filled with “kids on bicycles and seniors on their scooters, and people in wheelchairs out on the sidewalks in front of their own homes.”

We have no doubt that Josephine, and the community she has connected, will make it happen.