



# AT THE CROSSROADS

## Spring 2016: Defining Success

In the nonprofit world, people are talking about “success” more than ever before. It’s a complicated topic, and it’s essential to ask some critical questions when thinking about it: who gets to define what success looks like? If people don’t meet these definitions, have they failed? How do expectations of success influence nonprofits and how they provide support? In turn, how does this affect service recipients? In this newsletter, we explore these questions as they pertain to our youth.

## How Do ATC’s Clients Define and Experience Success?



**“Success for me is about getting past all of the obstacles that life continuously throws at me. It’s being able to rely on the fact that no matter what, I know I’ll find a way to survive. It’s carrying with me my resiliency – almost wearing it like a shield.”**

**-Beck, ATC client for 2 years**

Success is something that is incredibly individualized, yet simultaneously universal. Ask people what it means to be successful, and you’ll often get similar answers: it means having money, a big house, a nice car, and a good job. Many also define success as finding happiness, whether it’s through having a family, feeling passionate about a career, or making the important people in their lives proud.

At the same time, a person’s vision of success is heavily influenced by their unique experiences. The environment that a person grows up in and the expectations placed on them by others can play a huge role in shaping their opportunities and goals. Success can also mean something different depending on what’s going on in a person’s life, and can change pretty drastically over time. In this way, success is a moving target that reflects where we come from, where we are, and where we want to go.

For ATC’s clients, success can be complicated. Things that many take for granted, such as access to food, clean clothing, and a safe place to sleep, can actually be major successes for our youth. There’s also the issue of perception. Our

clients often get dismissed as failures by society, and are only viewed in a positive light if they follow a clichéd “success story” narrative. The pressure to fit into this mold is pervasive, but our youth find ways to live their own lives, set their own goals, and define their own success.

### The many meanings of “success”

Beck has been working with ATC for about two years. An extremely resourceful person, Beck (preferred pronouns are they/them/their) didn’t connect with ATC by chance – they heard about our services from friends, and made a point of tracking us down on outreach one night. “I was very determined to get into this program, and I’m glad I did,” they explain. We’ve come to admire Beck’s determination, which is coupled with their ability to skillfully and thoughtfully advocate for themselves.

“For me, what success actually means is continuing to rely upon and recognize my own resiliency,” they declare. “It isn’t about how much money is necessarily in my bank account, but success for me is about getting past all of the obstacles that life continuously throws at me. It’s being able to rely on the fact that no matter what, I know I’ll find a way to survive. It’s carrying with me my resiliency – almost wearing it like a shield.”

Like many of the young people ATC serves, Beck survived on the streets by being smart, self-reliant, and adaptable. Now that Beck is living in a permanent supportive housing program, however, their definition of success has evolved beyond just survival. “Success for me is also about stability and consistency,” they explain. “Coming from a background of a lot of neglect and abuse and going through the system, I’m not used to programs actually caring about me personally, or giving me any type of consistency whatsoever. That’s something I never had, and I feel like it’s definitely going to help shape my success.”

Calvin is another ATC client who talks about success in terms of survival. When we met Calvin three years ago, we were struck by his kindness and caring nature. He’s the type of person who can get along with anybody, and manages to stay motivated during tough times. “I have a lot of different definitions of success,” Calvin explains. “I feel like me being here still – that’s kind of a success. A lot of kids in my race are, you know, dying early. I lost one of my best friends at 21. I’m not saying that he wasn’t successful or nothing like that, but just making it to this age I feel like is a big thing. Just making it to 26 is kind of like, ‘Okay, cool,

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# Letter from the Director

Rob Gitin

“Success” has become a dangerous word in the philanthropic and social service fields that has led to organizations turning their backs on the people who need help the most.

We get asked the question “How do you measure impact?” by potential funders more than we ever have before. Loosely translated, it means “How can you quantitatively show that you are succeeding with your clients?” It’s a reasonable question to ask before making a decision about whether or not to invest in an organization. If I were a funder, I would instinctively want some evidence that my money would result in good outcomes. The problem is the unintended consequence.

Organizations are facing pressure from funders, from their boards, and from their leadership to show impressive numbers. When ATC first started, quantitative evaluation was primarily used as a tool to *improve* your work – to learn, grow, and strengthen. Now, it is primarily used as a tool to *prove* your work – to show you are succeeding so that you can get more money. In order to sustain and increase their funding, organizations have to produce better and better outcomes; this includes metrics such as the percentage of clients who get jobs, go back to school, or get into housing, often within an unrealistically short timeline.

Because of this, organizations with limited resources are choosing to work with the people they think are most likely to succeed. In a bubble, the choice makes a lot of sense. Imagine you run a job program and only have enough money to help one person. If you think that Person A has a 75% chance of getting a job and Person B has a 10% chance, it makes sense to put your money toward Person A. You are more likely to see a good result from your investment of time and money. Plus, you are more likely to get money from funders who are excited to see you succeeding.

The problem is that almost all service providers are trending in the direction of focusing on the people they think are most likely to succeed, and there is great incentive to do so. There is little incentive to prioritize those who are seen as less likely to succeed, so they are being left out in the cold. Who are these people? They are the ones who need help the most. They are the people with severe mental health and behavioral issues, people with chronic substance use challenges, and people who have a hard time forming connections. Folks who are struggling the most to find health, happiness, and stability. They are exactly who should be prioritized.

We have seen how this trend affects our clients. Because we focus on the youth who are the most disconnected, our clients are having a harder time accessing services than ever before. They are seen as undesirable. Throughout their lives they have been made to feel that they are not wanted, and now this message is being reinforced by the system that’s supposed to help them.

It must stop, and it can stop. Philanthropy and government can incentivize organizations to take risks, and work with the most challenging people. Nonprofits can still track and analyze work with clients while allowing for personalized definitions of success. They can track the level of barriers that people face, and how long they have been struggling, as some of their quantitative measures. And, most importantly, all of us can stop deciding that some people are more deserving of help than others. Everyone has the potential to succeed, to achieve their goals, and to become the people that they want to be. For some, it just takes more time, flexibility, and individualized support than for others.

*You may notice that throughout this newsletter, we use they/them/their/themself as singular pronouns. We’ve chosen to do this because using gender-neutral language aligns with our core value of respecting individuality.*

*Electronic copies of previous newsletters are available to view at [www.atthecrossroads.org/newsletters](http://www.atthecrossroads.org/newsletters)*

## Mission Statement

At The Crossroads reaches out to homeless youth and young adults at their point of need, and works with them to build healthy and fulfilling lives.

## Our Core Values

- ❖ Prioritizing meeting the needs of our clients first
- ❖ Making services as accessible as possible
- ❖ Supporting empowerment
- ❖ Respecting individuality

## What We Do: The Basics

- ❖ ATC walks the streets of the Mission and Downtown/Tenderloin to reach disconnected youth on their own turf. We hand out basic necessities like food, socks, and hygiene supplies, and slowly build counseling relationships with youth.
  - ❖ We focus on youth who have fallen through the cracks of other services, and would not get support without us.
  - ❖ We meet with clients 1-to-1. We listen to them talk about anything they want, with no agenda and no judgment. We help them identify goals, figure out who they want to be, and how to become that person.
  - ❖ We keep working with clients after they leave the streets. We continue to support them for as long as they want, helping them build outstanding lives, not just lives of subsistence.
  - ❖ We partner with other organizations, connecting our clients with resources such as jobs, housing, education, health care, and mental health services.
  - ❖ We support other programs in their efforts to work with homeless youth through dialogue, trainings, and technical assistance.
  - ❖ We work with the government at the city and state levels to improve the continuum of support for all disconnected young people.
- "If you're helpless, homeless, and fearful of what's next, ATC is a place where you can go to get just a little bit of clarity. A little bit of hope."*
- Bubbles, ATC client*

## Get Involved with At The Crossroads

### Make a donation to ATC

You'll experience a sense of happiness and fulfillment that you've never known. You'll want to do it again and again! In all seriousness, the future of At The Crossroads depends on the generosity of individuals who believe in our work. If you value what we do, please support us! **Make a credit card donation at [www.atthecrossroads.org](http://www.atthecrossroads.org), or make checks payable to "At The Crossroads."**

### Join our email list

Sign up to receive emails twice a month about upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, organizational updates, and ways to get involved. **Email [getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org](mailto:getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org) with the subject heading "Join the ATC email list."**

### Volunteer

Do you have free time in the morning or afternoon? Come by our office to sort clothing, put away food, prepare supplies, help with administrative needs, or pitch in on a number of tasks that help keep us going. **If you are interested in learning more, please email [volunteer@atthecrossroads.org](mailto:volunteer@atthecrossroads.org).**

### Get your company involved

When companies and their employees engage in our work, it can have a huge impact. The opportunities are endless: team participation in our fundraising hike, grants, sponsorship of events, group volunteering, in-kind donations, individual and matching donations, or pro bono services. **To get your company involved, email [getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org](mailto:getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org).**



*Michelle, Dale, and Nicole are three of ATC's amazing volunteers!*

### Help with new clothing donations

ATC recently lost our biggest clothing donor, so we are in great need of stores and businesses to donate new clothing. In particular, we are looking for jeans, hoodies, T-shirts, and warm items. **If you can help connect us with a store or clothing manufacturer who may be able to donate these items, please email [getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org](mailto:getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org).**

### Watch and share our documentary

Monica Lam's 15-minute documentary takes you onto the streets and into the world of our clients and our work. **You can find the documentary at [www.atthecrossroads.org](http://www.atthecrossroads.org).** After you watch, share it with your community as a great way to introduce new people to ATC!

### Share our newsletter

Please spread the word about ATC to people you know who might be interested in our work! If you want to send anyone our newsletter, give us their name and address and we will mail them a copy. **Email [getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org](mailto:getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org).**

# Helping Youth Create Their Own Visions of Success



ATC's outstanding program staff! From left to right: Anna Fai, Joey Hess, Olivia Horan, Onyinye Alheri, Irina Alexander, Demaree Miller, and Shawn Garety.

**“For ATC, success is defined by each client. There are no right or wrong answers, and no accomplishments too big or too small.”**

**-Shawn Garety, ATC Program Director**

A few years ago, a client named Jeremy was at our office. A young man in his 20s, he was an insightful, charismatic person with a sharp sense of humor. He was often in and out of jail, and had spent much of his life on the streets. As Jeremy was sitting in our hallway, he overheard another client playfully poking fun at a staff member for having so much gray hair. Jeremy interjected, sharing a powerful thought: “Don’t make fun of him for that; I think it looks great. When I get my first gray hair, I’m going to be proud of it and celebrate, because I never thought I’d live long enough to see one.”

For youth on the streets, their definitions of success can look wildly different from more traditional ones. Simply making it through the day without getting arrested or harassed can be an achievement. At the same time, our clients often want the same things out of life as most others – stability, community, passion, and happiness. The spectrum of what success means to our clients is wide and varied. ATC supports our clients in reaching their own personal goals, and in doing so, we empower our youth to create a vision of success that feels right for them.

## A different definition of success

“In society, success often means money, power, material wealth, and happiness,” says ATC Program Manager Joey Hess. “For our clients, however, success is sometimes just surviving into the next day.” It’s nearly impossible for people to think about long-term goals when they are focused on day-to-day survival. Struggling to find basic necessities takes a huge amount of mental energy, and leaves little room to focus on the future. Because of this, ATC’s youth often define success within the context of addressing immediate needs. ATC Counselor Irina Alexander explains, “One of our clients refers to success as doing the best you can with what you’ve got. I think that our clients do an incredible job of recognizing where they’re at, what they are actually capable of doing with limited resources, and really just doing their best.”

This doesn’t mean, however, that our clients don’t want to reach for bigger goals. “A lot of our clients want to start families, have a house to live in, focus on making money, and be successful in those sort of ways,” says Irina. “What’s different is that our clients aren’t given as much as other people to start with, so it’s not a level playing field.” It’s hard for our clients to live up to high expectations when they have less privilege and fewer opportunities than others. “Overall, the same idea of success is placed on homeless folks as it is on society. They are expected to get services, to get sober, to get housing. It doesn’t take into account each individual’s struggles and experiences,” says Joey. “That’s what makes it so much more amazing when clients are able to define success for themselves, even if they know that society is never going to view it in the same way.”

## Dealing with the expectations of others

Youth on the streets are constantly told that they just need to work harder and be open to help if they want to build a better life. When they seek support, however, they often get judged. “Just being able to access services and find places where they can get the help they need is a huge success for many of our clients,” explains ATC Counselor Demaree Miller. “From society’s perspective though, somebody who gets services or needs welfare can be looked down upon. I don’t think it’s recognized just how difficult it is to get help.”

Often, the programs that target homeless and low-income communities have a specific definition of success that they apply to every person who walks through the door. Many programs require their clients to work toward the same goals, such as getting sober, going to school, getting a job, or getting on medication. While these goals can be great for some, other people may not be ready to tackle them all, may want to prioritize other goals, or may reject the notion that someone else gets to tell them how to live their lives.

“There’s pressure to meet a pre-determined outcome. People accessing services are expected to say what the provider wants to hear, or do what the provider wants them to do, in order to get help in meeting their needs. Rather than feeling empowered to define their own goals, most people are faced with mandates, time restrictions, and the expectation to meet someone else’s opinion of success,” explains ATC Program Director Shawn Garety. “Being held to other people’s standards often makes our clients feel judged and labeled.” Unfortunately, many of ATC’s youth have had negative experiences with service providers. Instead of getting the support they need, “they end up leaving on their own, or getting kicked out for not meeting expectations or for various other reasons,” says ATC Counselor Olivia Horan. “It makes accessing services even harder, it creates even more barriers, and it causes a deep mistrust of service providers.”

Sometimes, the way in which programs prioritize specific outcomes prevents them from working with people who are the most challenging and hardest to reach. ATC Counselor Anna Fai explains, “Many of our clients do not get services because they don’t fit the cookie-cutter outline. We work with a vulnerable group who are often in crisis. If they act out their emotions, they might be seen as a safety concern, and therefore not a fit for ‘success.’ It’s tricky, because what can be seen as threatening behavior is also an outpouring of someone in desperate need of support. There is a clear path drawn out for the most ‘functional’ to succeed – but what about the others? Where is their path for success, and who is deciding where it gets drawn?”

## “There is a clear path drawn out for the most ‘functional’ to succeed – but what about the others? Where is their path for success, and who is deciding where it gets drawn?”

-Anna Fai, ATC Counselor

Our clients are clever, and figure out ways to adapt to other people's expectations in order to get what they need. “They're really smart and know how to survive – they know how to work a system that doesn't work for them,” says Irina. “I've seen clients who have this different persona they use when they talk with other service providers. It's really cool to see that persona break down when they're at ATC, because they know that we're not trying to get anything out of them and they don't have to act a certain way around us.”

### Making it as personal as possible

“ATC works with a lot of people who have been filtered through many other programs, so we're kind of a catch-all for folks who have been failed by the system,” Joey explains. “We work with them to build up their self-esteem, so they start feeling like they actually deserve to set their own goals and define their own success.” It's our philosophy to develop in-depth counseling relationships over time, with no agendas and no judgment. We try to flip the traditional power dynamic by asking youth to tell us what their goals and priorities are. Shawn stresses, “For ATC, success is defined by each client. There are no right or wrong answers, and no accomplishments too big or too small. Our goal is for our clients to get to live the lives they want for themselves. It's an approach that empowers each person to be the expert on their own life.”

In our work, we strive to make success as personal as possible. Demaree states that at ATC, “nothing is one-size-fits-all.” No matter what a person's goals are – from finding housing to getting new shoes to publishing a comic book – we do our best to help them make it happen. “I have several clients who have told me that we're the only people they really talk to,” says Irina. “We're the only people they come

to, because they know we're truly focused on helping them feel happy in their own lives, however that may look.”

We also feel it is essential to celebrate our clients' successes. We believe it's important to appreciate their efforts, remind them of their strengths, and encourage them to acknowledge their own progress. Joey explains that, “ATC focuses on celebrating a client's successes, but more than that, we focus on celebrating the work they put toward their goal. We don't want anyone to feel like they can only get support once they accomplish something.” Irina adds that, “ATC also tries to recognize incremental success – little, tiny steps that may not be a big deal to most people. We might make a really big deal if someone calls us, especially if they don't have easy access to a phone. If they manage to call us one day, it can be a really big success in our mind and in theirs.”

### Keeping it client-centered

In some ways, it's easy for the ATC staff to embrace and uphold our client-centered approach because we've seen how well it works. Our youth are more likely to achieve success, in all of its forms, when they get to make decisions for themselves rather than being told what to do. Experience has taught us that success begets success: when clients accomplish their goals, it helps them see what they're capable of, and it motivates them to take bolder steps. It's our job to help them reflect on their lives, think about their priorities, and give them unconditional support as they identify and achieve their own goals at their own pace.

Still, at times, letting our youth lead the way can be challenging. We never push our clients to focus on goals they haven't chosen for themselves, but that doesn't mean we don't have personal thoughts about what we want for them. “It can be difficult,” explains ATC Counselor Onyinye Alheri. “You want what you think is best for that person, but sometimes you have to come to terms with it not being the same as what they want for themselves. But it's a welcome challenge that requires you to take a step back and remember what your role is. It's less about how you feel, and more about how you can support them.”

Ultimately, supporting youth in creating the lives they want is the best path to success. Anna explains, “It's about really listening to someone. Listening so well that you can sometimes hear what's not being said. Being able to connect someone to a resource, giving a lot of thought to the process, preparing them for different outcomes, and celebrating each step they take, big or small, is a success in and of itself.”

## How and Why Does ATC Celebrate Successes With Our Youth?



People always talk about how important it is to have someone there for you when you are down, but it is just as essential to have someone to talk to when you are up. When you achieve your goals, sharing your joy with people who care about you is one of the best things in life.

When we celebrate our clients for accomplishing their goals, it creates space to reflect on their journey and hard work, and can help motivate and inspire them to continue pushing forward. Plus, it's really fun! We love getting to tell our youth exactly how amazing we think they are. So when they achieve something that is meaningful to them, we make sure to pause and acknowledge it, often by giving them a handmade card. Here are a few things we have celebrated with our clients:

- Obtaining an ID or driver's license
- Getting off of parole or probation
- Getting a new job or a promotion
- Reuniting with a family member



**"I feel like me being here still – that's kind of a success ... just making it to 26 is kind of like, 'Okay, cool, I'm still here.' And I'm still trying to make it to where I want to go."**

-Calvin, ATC client for 3 years

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I'm still here.' And I'm still trying to make it to where I want to go."

Calvin currently goes back and forth between staying in shelters and with family members. "I ain't going to lie, I'm a little bit disappointed in myself for not being where I need to be right now, but I pray it gets better. I stay positive every day to try to make it better." He has many things he wants to achieve, like becoming fully independent, finding a full-time job he's excited about, starting a family, and having a place of his own. "My goal is to meet them before I'm 30," Calvin asserts. To him, that's what happiness truly looks like, and "happiness is success."

Stephanie's life has changed a lot over the past couple of years. "I feel very distant from that person. That person doesn't exist anymore," Stephanie says when describing her past. "I was living on the streets, I had a sleeping bag, and everything I owned was in my backpack or in a squat. I didn't feel bad because I was intoxicated somehow at all times." She used to use drugs and alcohol to escape, but now, "I don't want a reprieve from life anymore. I want to live and experience my life and be able to remember it with clarity."

Stephanie is bright and talkative, lives in an apartment with her partner, and is expecting a baby. She's excited to become a mom, and puts a lot of thought and energy into preparing for the future. "I'm happy where I am, and that's what matters to me. That's what I think success is – being happy and feeling okay with where you're at in your life." Stephanie rejects the more materialistic interpretation of success. "I don't want stuff to make me happy. I want the people in my life, and my relationships, and the little things in life to make me happy, you know? Enjoying a meal that my partner and I made

together and watching a movie is something that is a success to me."

ATC client Enrique has also made significant changes to his life recently. For many of the seven years we've known him, Enrique felt caught up in substance use and life on the streets. "I didn't have positive role models in my life," he recalls. Growing up without money and having to take care of his brother and sister at a young age, Enrique always felt limited. "A lot of negativity threw me off track, so I didn't get to reach none of my goals," he explains. "I was wasting my opportunities because I got stuck doing the street life stuff."

For the last year and a half, Enrique has been in a residential drug treatment program. He's very reflective about the past, feels proud of his progress, and is optimistic about his future. Enrique identifies some major successes since beginning treatment: he completed drug court and expunged his criminal record, has been working on getting his high school diploma, and has stayed sober. "Success for me would be getting my life together," he explains. "This is all brand new to me. This is the first time I've ever really felt like I'm doing something with myself, starting with recovery. I've been in my

addiction for a long time, and I don't want to waste any more time. It's too valuable."

## Navigating expectations

Even though ATC's clients develop personal definitions of success based on their own lives and experiences, they still have to deal with the opinions of others. "There's what the system expects of me, there's what society expects of me, and then there's what I expect of me. And those don't always necessarily align," says Beck. When our youth access programs that are supposed to help them meet their needs and pursue their goals, they often get pressured into a vision for success that replaces their definitions with a less personal, more generic approach.

"Service providers are very much influenced by what society's expectations of success are," Beck explains. "It's like, 'You have a roof over your head, why aren't you in school yet?' Or, 'You're in school, why don't you have a job yet?' It very much feels like it's never enough. It's not enough for them that I've managed to stay out of the psych ward today, or that I've managed to function as an observably normal person even though I've had six flashbacks, you know what I'm saying?"

Beck has had a number of experiences with programs that promoted a uniform idea of success with no room for flexibility. Unfortunately, these programs have made Beck feel like their own ideas don't matter. "It makes me feel angry and frustrated, but more importantly, it makes me feel like as a person, I'm not worthy ... because I need access to these services, these people now have this authority to control my life." Instead of funneling everyone down the same path, Beck wishes that service providers would focus on helping each person define their own goals at their own pace. "Sometimes I have to achieve what success is for me before I can even look at what they believe it is ...

**"I don't want stuff to make me happy. I want the people in my life, and my relationships, and the little things in life to make me happy, you know?"**

-Stephanie, ATC client for 10 years





**“I’ve thought about failure, but for me, that’s not an option. I might fail sometimes, but I don’t give up. I keep pushing myself to move forward and keep trying again.”**

**-Enrique, ATC client for 7 years**

I have to hold onto tiny, little examples of success to prove to myself that I can do it.”

Stephanie has also worked with service providers that emphasized their own priorities over hers, particularly when it came to her treatment for drug use. When she wanted to focus on getting off of methadone, she felt like the counselors and doctors around her held her back from reaching her goal.

“I was resentful at the counselor for not taking the time to get to know me. They just tried to put a general expectation on everybody, and if you didn’t meet up with that, then you weren’t good enough for their clinic,” she remembers. “I don’t like that everyone gets herded into the same thing, because I’m not in the same category. I didn’t want to be on methadone the rest of my life. It was just a stepping stone for me to get off completely.” Ultimately, Stephanie has ended up switching counselors, leaving clinics, and finding ways to work around the system to meet her needs.

While many of ATC’s clients have had negative experiences with these types of service providers, others respond well to the structure that they provide. For Enrique, getting into a strictly regulated drug treatment program was key to his recovery. “When I first arrived, they told me the rules. No hurting yourself, no hurting others, no use of drugs, no smoking, no sex, no acts of violence, things like that. It was a safe house, and I needed that structure, because I needed to be away from the other stuff.”

Enrique had to forgo contact with the outside world for three months, which allowed him to focus only on himself. He built up his self-esteem, worked on anger management and other issues, and learned how to make healthier decisions. He says that the program’s rules and expectations aren’t for everyone, but for him, they helped him stay on track and

earn certain privileges and responsibilities. Now, he’s a coordinator at the program, and sees himself as a role model for others. “It feels good, because they depend on me to keep this house safe,” he explains. “It makes me feel good because they trust me.”

### Finding motivation

Soon Enrique will be graduating, and will move into a sober living apartment that is owned by his program. Simply completing his intensive program is an extraordinary success, but he knows that he still has work ahead of him. “I’ve thought about failure, but for me, that’s not an option. I might fail sometimes, but I don’t give up. I keep pushing myself to move forward and keep trying again.” Enrique wants to finish his high school diploma, find a job, and mend family relationships. “I’m not fully successful yet, because I’m trying to become a better man for my son, a better son for my mother, and a better brother for my sister and my little brother,” he explains. “I’m working on being happy.”

Stephanie is also focused on family. “Right now it’s about making it to all of my appointments, making sure the baby is okay, and clearing out our apartment to make room for the baby.” She has already gotten to a place where she’s safe, happy, and has taken care of her current needs. Now, Stephanie is looking to the future. “I want to be comfortable and secure in my life and provide for my child,” she explains. Moving forward, her definition of success will expand to include her family, and her main goal is to become “a caring, loving, unconditionally there mom.”

With all of the changes that are going on in her life, Stephanie is glad she can turn to ATC for support. “ATC has always been a place I can go to and talk to someone who is going to listen and care and help.” Stephanie appreciates that ATC’s counselors prioritize

her needs and her goals. “I don’t think you guys have a goal other than just being there when people want and need someone,” she explains. “ATC focuses on what I want. I don’t think ATC has a goal other than for me to be happy, and to help me facilitate whatever it is that I want to do with my life.”

For Beck, most of their support comes from their “street family” – the people who have been by Beck’s side through thick and thin. “Sometimes I get stressed out or overwhelmed because I feel like their expectations can be high, but the difference is that their expectations are high because they see potential in me that I’ve never been able to see,” they explain.

“I grew up in an environment where there were no expectations that I was ever going to succeed whatsoever, and that shaped my perception of my abilities.” At this point, however, Beck has realized that the negativity from their past can’t hold them back. “To be honest, that’s why I try to hold onto my resiliency and use it as motivation moving forth, because I have proved them wrong. The fact is, I may not meet my own expectations of where I’d like to be, or society’s expectations of where people should be, but I’ve surpassed the expectations of what was supposed to be within my capabilities.” This knowledge is empowering, and helps propel Beck forward.

For Calvin, living up to the expectations of his family provides motivation. “My mom, my aunties, I mean everybody in my life has expectations of me just being better than what I am right now. I’m not a bad person or nothing like that, it’s just I’m not where I think I should be. I feel like I should have a good job right now, a car, a spot, all that,” he says. “Pressure is good, and it’s keeping me motivated through life right now. It’s the pressure to be successful that’s keeping me alive, you know what I mean?”

At times Calvin feels discouraged, but he’s determined to build the life he wants by the time he’s 30. “Failure to me is just giving up on life ... I’m going through a lot, but I can’t do that,” he says. “I feel like I still have time, I’ve just gotta sit down and do what I need to do.” Calvin also describes what success would look like in his relationship with ATC. “I’m very grateful for everything you guys have given me, but I feel like for a successful life, you guys would help me out to the point where I don’t have to get help anymore.” He looks forward to the day when he doesn’t call ATC for support, but calls us to check in, say hello, and let us know how well he’s doing.

# Challenging Traditional Models of Success: The Center for Harm Reduction Therapy



**Jeannie Little, LCSW**  
Executive Director

**Patt Denning, PhD**  
Director of Clinical Services  
and Training

**“We use the word progress much more than we use the word success.”**

*-Jeannie Little, Executive Director  
The Center for Harm Reduction Therapy*

Most substance use and mental health treatment models adhere to rigid and narrow frameworks for success. The “right” thing for people to do is stop using drugs and alcohol for the rest of their lives. There is only one definition of success: total abstinence. And getting professional treatment for mental health issues is considered to be a separate and often mutually-exclusive process.

Harm reduction therapy challenges these notions of success. It rejects the idea that there is one right answer that is supposed to work for everyone. It also recognizes that mental health and substance use issues often go hand in hand, and should be addressed in a holistic manner.

Jeannie Little and Patt Denning have been at the forefront of helping to shift the paradigms of treatment. They are pioneers, experts, and leaders in the field, and literally wrote the book on harm reduction therapy. They co-founded The Center for Harm Reduction Therapy, and for two years, ATC has had the privilege of collaborating with The Center to get training and consultation on how to best support clients with major mental health and drug issues. We are honored that Jeannie and Patt, as well as other members of their team, share their extensive knowledge and insights with us.

*In your experience, what did substance use and mental health treatment look like before the introduction of harm reduction therapy?*

**Patt:** I think the first characteristic is that substance use and mental health treatment were totally separated. As some people in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) would say, “You could either be a drunk or be crazy, you couldn’t be both.” So there was a clear limitation in previous treatment models. There was a fair amount of interest in the early 90s

in co-occurring disorders and attempting to integrate services, but to this day, they’re still not really integrated.

**Jeannie:** In ’91 I started working at the Veterans Affairs hospital. I worked on a dual diagnosis treatment unit, and as a unit social worker I was responsible for discharge planning, but I couldn’t find anywhere else for my patients to go. The problem was that you had to commit to being clean and sober for the rest of your life, and the relapse rate for people who also had mental health disorders was about 95%. So on the referring end, I couldn’t find anywhere that would tolerate working with people who were either always actively using or on-and-off actively using. They were commonly known as “revolving door patients.”

**Patt:** They were also called “double trouble,” and that really, really offended me. At many drug treatment programs, there was an incredible disrespect for the clients. They were badgered, they were belittled, and they were humiliated. So that really led me to begin thinking about, how are we going to work with these people?

**Jeannie:** It’s important to note that psychotherapists have always been warned off of treating people who are actively using, and have been told to refer people to AA or to other treatment before initiating psychotherapy. The rule of thumb is that you cannot start psychotherapy until you’ve been clean and sober for a year.

*How did you get involved in the development of harm reduction therapy?*

**Patt:** I started using psychotherapy techniques to work with people using drugs and alcohol, and realized that the same psychotherapy you could use for depression or anxiety was really very helpful for people with drug and alcohol problems. Which means exploring the meaning of their use, and understanding the behaviors involved. I went to a talk about harm reduction and the principles of accepting people where they’re at, accepting that people use drugs for reasons, that not all drug use is abuse, and really developing a collaboration where clients have a say in their treatment. People were stunned to hear this! I was very excited, so I got involved in the harm reduction movement. Over the course of a few years, I put together a treatment model that encompasses mental health and substance use, is client-centered, and is an empowerment and harm reduction model. I put that together and wrote the book *Practicing Harm Reduction Psychotherapy*, which came out in 2000.

**Jeannie:** My first exposure to harm reduction-like ideas was in the early 90s, and they really made sense to me. I started a daily therapeutic group for people who were actively using, had mental health problems, and had varying levels of motivation to do anything. On the second day, a man sat down and immediately fell asleep. And in traditional substance abuse treatment groups, you’re not supposed to fall asleep. I borrowed a few jackets, made a pillow, put his head on the pillow – and everybody was looking at me with their mouths wide open like, “What just happened?” That’s what really defined the harm reduction group culture: accepting people where they are and making them as comfortable as possible. If you do that, all else will follow, including people relaxing, taking a fresh look at themselves, and being willing to talk about themselves openly. The lack of judgment, and the radical acceptance, is what really makes harm reduction therapy so unique.

Is “success” something you think about in your work?

**Jeannie:** We think of progress as success, and we use the word progress much more than we use the word success.

**Patt:** We define success as anything that people want in their lives. Dan Bigg, who runs the Chicago Recovery Alliance, coined the phrase “any positive change.” So that’s really how success became defined in my mind. It’s a unique way of looking at success, because it both has a slight objective measure, which is positive change, but it also really embraces client autonomy in that the clients get to define what a positive change is for them.

Has harm reduction therapy grown?

**Jeannie:** Yes, and it’s amazing! When I walk into a room to do a training these days, people aren’t necessarily on board with harm reduction therapy, but they know about it, and their questions are pretty intelligent. In so many places it’s not a foreign language anymore, and I never would have predicted that. The number of people who reach out to us for training, and the number of people who already get it but want consultation to really integrate it into their practices – it’s just phenomenal.

To learn more, visit: [www.harmreductiontherapy.org](http://www.harmreductiontherapy.org)

## ATC’s New Staff Members and Staff Transitions

### Onyinye Alheri, Outreach Counselor



Born in Nigeria and raised in DC, Baltimore, and Oregon, Onyinye was looking for (more) adventure when she moved to the Bay Area. She has experience doing outreach with youth in Ecuador and group counseling for teenagers in St. Paul, MN, and joined ATC in November as an Outreach Counselor. Onyinye enjoys listening to her extensive

cassette collection, impressing us with her witty comebacks, and making good use of her free time (she recently finished training to become a doula). We’re excited to welcome Onyinye to ATC!

### Olivia Horan, Outreach Counselor



Olivia has been working in youth advocacy and support since moving to the Bay Area four years ago. She’s very involved in the harm reduction community, and coordinates a needle exchange in her spare time. Olivia came to ATC as an Outreach Counselor in November, and has been spoiling us with her delicious, home-cooked staff lunches ever

since. Originally from Philadelphia, she loves to throw on her running shoes and explore the East Bay. Olivia brings an upbeat, enthusiastic energy to ATC, and we’re glad she is on our team!

## Announcing Shawn Garety as Program Director and Joey Hess as Program Manager



Shawn Garety, Program Director Joey Hess, Program Manager

This is an exciting time for ATC! We’ve begun a growth phase that will significantly expand our services, and the addition of our first-ever Program Director is a critical step in this process. Shawn Garety, who has been a leader on our staff for the past 12 years, has stepped into this role. Shawn has basically been doing two jobs for the last eight years (which is just as insane as it sounds), so we’re thrilled that she will focus her considerable experience and talents on guiding the direction of our program work. Taking over as Program Manager and overseeing our day-to-day direct services is Joey Hess, who has been an Outreach Counselor for four years. We’re confident that Joey’s self-deprecating charm and expertise in supporting clients and staff alike will make our program stronger.

## Saying Farewell to Ivan Alomar, Longtime ATC Staff Member



From 2005 to 2016: Ivan hardly aged a day!

After more than a decade on our staff, Ivan Alomar is moving on to new opportunities. So many in ATC’s community had the joyous experience of getting to work with him; he brought his unique combination of brilliance, humility, flexibility, humor, passion, and insight to the organization, and we are forever changed because of it. Ivan is one of the best-liked people ever to work here, because, well, he is so darn likeable. He worked with all clients in the same way, regardless of their backgrounds or belief systems. He truly never judged. With his persuasive and powerful words, he fiercely advocated for systemic change, helping to build a better San Francisco for all street youth. Ivan will never be replaced, so why bother trying? Let’s just celebrate the legacy he is leaving.

# At The Crossroads is moving!

We're excited to announce that in 2017, ATC will have a brand new home! This whole process began in early 2015, when our current office building came under new ownership. We had hoped to remain at 333 Valencia Street – our office for our entire 18-year history – but soon discovered that our lease would not be renewed. What began as something stressful and a bit scary ultimately turned out to be a blessing in disguise, and became an opportunity to design our own space from the ground up. Stay tuned for more updates as we build an office that will be a home for our clients, staff, and community for years to come!

## The challenge

We knew that finding an affordable space that could accommodate the needs of our clients and staff would be a huge challenge. ATC joined the city's Nonprofit Displacement Mitigation Program, and through the program, we were able to apply for a competitive, city-leased office space at 167 Jessie Street in downtown San Francisco.

In November 2015, we received word that the city had chosen ATC to become the new tenant! We were honored to be selected for this incredible opportunity.

## Our future home

- ▶ At 5,000 square feet it's more than double our current space, but rent will drop significantly! We're getting an unbelievable deal, which will allow us to invest more resources into our client work.
- ▶ It's a shell space that needs a total build-out, which means we get to design the office around our specific needs. This will cost about \$1.8M, and the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development is providing the first \$950K!
- ▶ More and more of our client work is taking place downtown, so this new location will be great for both our youth and staff.



Here's what ATC's future home at 167 Jessie Street currently looks like. We have lots of work to do before we move in!

## Special thanks to our pro-bono partners

Architectural Resources Group (ARG) is designing a fantastic home for us. Thanks to David Wessel, Philip Rossetti, and Hallie Travis, our creative and hardworking ARG team. Miller Starr Regalia is providing brilliant real estate legal expertise, and we thank Amy Matthew and Lance Anderson for their invaluable help. Together, they are donating over \$100K worth of services!



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**Bold** indicates donors who have supported us for at least five consecutive years.

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Our donors are extremely important to us! If you notice omissions or errors, email [alisond@attthecrossroads.org](mailto:alisond@attthecrossroads.org)

Find a complete list of our Annual Fund, Summer SunDay Hike, and I Think I Can Campaign donors at: [www.attthecrossroads.org/contributors](http://www.attthecrossroads.org/contributors).

# Summer SunDay 2016



## Join At The Crossroads for our seventh annual fundraising hike up Mt. Tam on July 24th!



**Who:**

You! Hike as an individual or start a team and invite your community

**What:**

A gorgeous hike and gourmet picnic that raises money for a great cause

**Where:**

To the top of Mt. Tam

**When:**

Sunday, July 24th

Sign up now: [atthecrossroads.org/summersunday](http://atthecrossroads.org/summersunday)