



PO Box 2744  
Petaluma CA 94953

And homeless near a  
thousand homes I stood,  
And near a thousand tables  
pined and wanted food.

- William Wordsworth



Tuesday, April 23, 2019

Lagunitas Brewing Company  
1280 N McDowell Blvd, Petaluma  
5:30pm - 8:30pm



Live music from the  
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Dinner | Raffle | Activities  
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Buy tickets at [cots.org](http://cots.org): \$35  
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Proceeds support COTS  
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SPRING  
2019








# a note from chuck

It's four months since I've been with COTS and there is so much to learn about the communities we serve, our amazing programs and staff who make it happen every day, the stories of people experiencing homelessness, and our donors who give of their time, talent, and treasure without which none of this would be possible.

COTS is a special place and I feel honored to be a part of this legacy started by two courageous and fearless women and then carried on by people like our two previous CEO's John Records and Mike Johnson.

I hope you enjoy this look into the work we put into helping people find and keep housing. You'll hear from Kyle Muelrath on our property management team, and you'll hear from our clients about how they benefit from the support they receive from our staff members—both before and after securing housing. Finally, no newsletter would be complete without a celebration of our volunteers and supporters.

I am especially grateful for sharing this column with Pat Williams, our wonderful Board President. Pat and the rest of the board provide strong leadership for COTS – they care for those experiencing homelessness and for our staff, are engaged with our programs, help to make things happen, and govern with leadership and knowledge.

All my best,  
  
Chuck



I learned about COTS when I served as Chief of Police for the City of Petaluma. I joined the board because I saw not only the importance of COTS' work, but how willingly the entire community shouldered that work. This community inspires me.

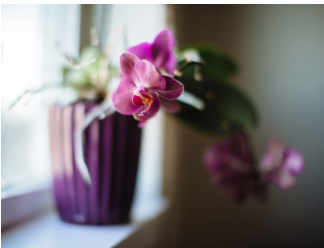
I want to report to you from my vantage as Board President that your investments in COTS' work

are sound. Our clients face the most challenging circumstances in Sonoma County history, and our team is making a difference for them.

Our work has always been to help people find permanent housing. But now we devote a large amount of resources to providing the services and support they need to keep their housing.

There is more to do, much more to do. Every day, we strive to do better than we did the day before. Each day is a step in the collective journey to end homelessness in Sonoma County.

The journey starts here at COTS.  
  
—Pat Williams,  
Board President



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**Kyle Muelrath is responsible for managing 25 multi-bedroom houses and apartments and 11 studios across two of COTS' permanent housing programs: Integrity Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing. Kyle meets weekly with his COTS colleagues who provide supportive services to our tenants.**

## Tell us about your job.

I'm mostly there to manage the properties, but, of course, you're always dealing with people—our landlords and our tenants.

With our landlords, we master lease everything so if there's a move-out or someone has trouble coming up with the rent, it's not anything the landlord needs to worry about. It can take a big weight off a landlord. Our rent checks always go out in time to get there by the first. When it comes to repairs, we take our cues from the landlord and how they like to do business. Some are happy to have us take care of small things and just send them a report. Others want to be notified about everything as it happens.

With tenants, I screen their applications. Then I meet with them to move in. I walk them through the lease and I give them a cheat sheet for easy reference. I do monthly inspections of all the common areas and quarterly inspections of the bedrooms, so I have a lot of interactions with the tenants. I myself have had a lot of roommates in my life, so I can empathize with them about the nuances of living with

people. And I can let them know that these are things any roommate deals with whether they're with COTS or on their own. You come home and someone borrowed your food or forgot to turn off the heat. That's shared housing. I have also dealt with the same kind of things.

“One of the tenants always tells me, ‘Kyle, we live in a very happy home.’ They speak highly of one another. That’s a beautiful thing.”

## What's involved with your monthly inspections?

Every month, I look over all the common areas. I'm looking for things that need repair and things that could turn out to be health and safety issues. I check smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors. I look for leaks, cracks, holes, things that are worn down. Quarterly, I go into bedrooms and look for the same things.

When I find something that needs repair or when one of our tenants tells me about something, I'll do a full diagnostic. If a landlord wants it, we can sometimes do a small repair as a way of expressing our thanks for doing business with us. If it's

something I can do, I take care of it right away. Otherwise, I can call in our maintenance guys, Gus Boyd and Robert Carson.

We try to do little favors here and there. Recently, I was doing a clean-up at one of the houses. I needed to do a dump run and the landlord had left quite a few items at the house. I offered to take them to the dump and he was extremely grateful. It saved him a trip. Little things like that let our landlords know we're grateful. No one is desperate for tenants in this market. We want them to know we appreciate them.

## What are some of the challenges of your work?

You have to be proactive about normal wear and tear issues—which we are. Some of the properties are older, too, so you really have to keep a watchful eye.

## Your favorite parts of the job?

You know, I'm from Petaluma. I grew up here. So, I'm happy to see that we can provide opportunities in this county for people who need a little support. I love to see the tenants building relationships. Every time I go over to one of our houses, they're playing music, it's very calm. One of the tenants always tells me, “Kyle, we live in a very happy home.” They speak highly of one another. That's a beautiful thing. ■



# Find Housing, Keep Housing!

**That's our motto. Once people find housing, we help them keep it! Here's what that looks like.**

## Relationships open doors

When a client comes to us with a housing voucher, we rejoice. The voucher enables a tenant to pay only part of the rent for a moderately-priced market rate unit. The Housing Authority pays the rest. But Ardell needed a very specific unit. She's in a wheelchair, so she required a ground floor unit. She also needs a live-in caregiver, so she needed a two-bedroom apartment.

Finding a unit that fits the voucher price point and a landlord who will work with the voucher program is not an easy task. Ardell and her Housing Navigator Pamela Kipp gave it their all. After a few weeks of looking, Pam

asked her colleagues for an all-hands on deck approach and fellow Housing Navigator Abigail Estupinan stepped up.

What finally worked was calling on COTS' track record and relationship with an onsite property manager in a Santa Rosa apartment complex. "She knew us and how we operate," Pamela says. "That, together with Ardell's professionalism, made the difference."

Pamela will continue to visit Ardell and help as-needed.



## relationships in action



### Relationships save lives

"I woke up one day and Pam and Silvia were at the foot of my bed at the Mary Isaak Center. They told me it was time to go to treatment. I would do anything for those two, and I didn't want to embarrass them, so I went. I've been clean and sober for six months now. I'm in a house now through a veterans' program, but Pam is still my case manager."—James.

You can read more about James on our blog: [cots.org/blog](https://cots.org/blog)



### Relationships strengthen families and communities

"We have regular activities for the families—gardening, family matinees, art. It's a way for people to get to know one another and to relax together."—Melissa Salini, COTS Case Manager



### Relationships help people stay focused on their finances

"My number one job is to help people stay housed. That can be a tightrope walk every month because most of our clients are single moms who are working low wage jobs. Often times, there's not a guarantee of hours or sometimes a childcare situation falls through and the mom can't work. My job is to help with budgeting, to help with payment plans, to help make housing sustainable."—Melissa Salini, COTS Case Manager.

## services are about relationships

Angela and her 8-year-old daughter and their tiny dog live in an affordable housing complex where COTS provides supportive services designed to help residents overcome any obstacles that might jeopardize their housing.

For our funders, we tend to describe those services as "referrals-made," "budgets-created," "letters-written," "discussions-had," and so on. But for Angela our services are about relationships. Meaningful relationships helped her build her confidence and self-knowledge, allowed her to hear hard truths, and helped her make life-saving changes for herself and her daughter.

Jim, a case manager who worked with her while she still lived in COTS transitional housing, encouraged her to apply for her apartment in the first place. With his help, she overcame a paralyzing depression and applied. "He pushed me. I wasn't feeling confident and he was determined for me. I needed that push."

Once in her apartment, Angela worked with Copper, another COTS case manager. "She taught me to be gentle with myself," Angela says. Copper shared research on how difficult childhood experiences often correlate with risky behaviors in adulthood. "She helped me make sense of my past. Things started clicking."

Copper relocated to the Great Lakes region, and Angela next worked with Tisha. Tisha was there when Angela suffered set-backs and frustrations and returned to

drug use. "Tisha knew something was wrong, and she kept asking me to come see her." When things fell apart, Tisha helped Angela put it back together, coordinating treatment, making arrangements with apartment management.

As anyone in recovery can tell you, Angela's relationship with herself ensures her success: her own honesty, determination and humility make the difference. "I live in transparency now," she says. "That was what I finally wanted."

Melissa, who succeeded Tisha, helped Angela take her next career steps—working in a treatment center. "Melissa suggested I do an informational interview with a treatment facility. Now, I'm working there." Two years sober herself, Angela helps people navigate the enrollment process and has also taken on some counseling work. She prides herself on giving each person her full and compassionate attention, even when things get difficult.

"I used to be really reactive. I hated to feel judged or insulted," Angela says. "Now, I hear myself on the phone being so patient and polite, and I'm, like, 'Who's talking now?'" she laughs. "I never thought much about my potential. Now, I'm interested!"

You can read more about Angela on our blog: [cots.org/blog](https://cots.org/blog)



### Relationships help people get ahead

"I wanted to ask for a raise, and my case manager met with me twice to practice what I was going to say. It worked!"—Permanent Supportive Housing resident.



### Relationships keep people stable

"I help interpret letters that folks get in the mail. I can often translate some of that complicated stuff that can be scary if you need to understand it. Sometimes, I take participants grocery shopping and assist them with choosing healthy food options. If they don't know how to cook, or clean house, I demonstrate ways to do that."—Kathleen Sinnott, case manager for COTS Permanent Supportive Housing program for people dealing with disabling conditions.





## homework club

"The lady's here," a little boy announces as he plops his big backpack down on a table and pulls out a handful of slightly crumpled worksheets.

The "lady" is Marie Schmittroth, and she's at our Kids First Family Shelter for Homework Club. "Every Tuesday from 3 to 5," Marie says, "I'm there. And every Tuesday is different." Last week was heavy on adding and subtracting fractions. This week may bring California history, vocabulary words, spelling drills, times tables or an art project.

"They just need to hear 'You can do it,' most of the time" Marie says. "I can help them feel capable. And when you feel capable, then you want to do your homework."

A highlight for her from her time at COTS is her relationship with a little 8-year-old boy we'll call "Benjamin." Benjamin is non-verbal and highly sensitive. For his mom to attend a class, she needed a one-on-one companion for him—someone who could take him out of the childcare room if things got too raucous or overwhelming.

Marie and Benjamin spent two-and-a-half hours every Monday night just wandering around the San Antonio High School campus, with Benjamin pulling Marie by the hand and stopping every now and then to examine something: a section of chain link fence, a soda can, a leaf, a plastic toy. He frequently waited for Marie's reaction before moving on or taking another look at something.

"It's important for everybody to know they're worth somebody's time and that they're valued."

"That was fast," she tells a fifth-grader who's just completed a long word problem. "And that's right. You figured out that they just threw those extra numbers in to keep things interesting."

"You've got that decimal in the right place," she tells another. "Now, how much money does that make?"

"Good, good, good." That's the constant refrain from Marie, and it's the refrain that keeps kids focused on their work, confident that they can do it.

Marie's been a fixture of our children's program for years, providing tutoring and childcare. Her first day with us was "overwhelmingly toddlers," she says. "It was the most stunning thing to see little kids who are so alive and open and coming into who they are. I fell in love with toddler care."

"To slow down and be able to quietly connect with him was lovely," Marie says. She stays in touch with Benjamin and his mom, who have been in their own rental housing for years.

Marie also treasures the relationships she's made with other kids—especially the kids who challenge her or are hard to reach. "As a person who had a childhood with a lot of upheaval, I don't come to this thinking that the kids are going to be all light and sunshine and laughter," Marie says. "I like building relationships and trust."

"It's important for everybody to know they're worth somebody's time and that they're valued. It's a gift to me that I can help someone know they have worth and value."



For Ken Boeri, retirement doesn't mean slowing down. "I don't have to work for a paycheck anymore," he says. "Now, I need to work to help people. That's what gives me joy."

And while a check is no longer his object, money is still his subject—and it's one that our clients are eager to tackle.

Ken comes to the Mary Isaak Center every Friday afternoon. One week, he'll lead a small group on a topic like credit repair or budgeting. The next week, he'll meet one-on-one with clients to help them troubleshoot their individual financial problems. A former retirement counselor for Prudential Financial, Ken arrived at his financial know-how through study in his field and in the school of hard knocks.

"I was never in a position like they [COTS clients] are, but having gone through hard times gives me some insight into what they're going through," Ken says.

Ken loves when people can come up with a workable plan to save for a security deposit or to demolish their debts.

"What I like about COTS is their mission of ending homelessness in Sonoma County. I want to be part of that—giving people the skills that will help them put this behind them."

Another plus to the work? "I started to realize, I'm working with some interesting people," Ken says. "There are artists and writers. And I was surprised by how many of the homeless are doing volunteer work. It's really the opposite of all the stereotypes."

My life lesson is you never know who your next teacher will be. **It is with gratitude I serve our community**, cherishing the opportunity to witness transformation, improve my understanding of the inequities in life, and grow in spirit from lessons shared by those we serve.  
-Annie Nicol

Mayra and family



COTS is a heart-driven organization that supplies immediate shelter as well as a path to permanent housing.  
-Chip Atkins

COTS is a channel through which all of us can help our fellow human beings.  
-Brad Bollinger



Betty and son

COTS is one of the only places I know where adults can get support and learn important life-skills in a **respectful and loving environment**.  
-Doris Nelson



Milizza and her son

I just love coming over and helping people.  
-Peggy Iacopi

## why we give

Though never homeless, I was a struggling single mom for many years. I place my hand in theirs.  
-Clarice Stasz



art night at KFFS

The work of COTS is integral to Petaluma's safety net. We cannot imagine our town without you.  
-Margie Helm

In hearing the voice of the needy in our community, **COTS provides us with an opportunity to answer**.  
-Derek & Ann Lee



kitchen volunteers Marge and Edgar taking a break

We are proud to be affiliated with COTS, not only for all they do in our community, but for the **model they provide for other communities**.  
-Corey & Tim Benjamin

COTS is a grassroots organization where you can make a change and see the change.  
-Ellen Hathaway

Inspired by the quilts created for our clients by the Quilters for COTS

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