

John Breunig: For CT nonprofit, work with neediest students during COVID became 'triage'



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1 of 3 Domus Knights and Domus Vikings staff packed more than 100 bags for their students in the summer of 2000 in Stamford, Connecticut. The bags included notebooks, hand sanitizer, headphones and masks. Photo: Contributed photo

2 of 3 Denise Thomas, director of Domus Vikings at Westhill High School in Stamford, Connecticut, works with one of her students during a goal-setting session. Photo: Contributed photo



3 of 3 Domus used its building on 83 Lockwood Ave. in Stamford, Connecticut, for a staging area to make food deliveries to more than 280 families from mid-March on. Photo: Contributed photo

The best journalists know that when reporting, the news often doesn't come until the end.

The closing minutes of a sleepy municipal meeting. The final words of an interview. The announcement a mayor emails late on a Friday hoping editors will be too busy to process that it's bad news.

The notion proves true once again as I wrap up a conversation with Domus Kids Chief Education Officer Craig Baker, who grew up in Greenwich.

A journalist's job is to take the most important news and put it at the beginning, not the end. But I'm not going to do that here, nor insert the overripe spoiler alert.

Baker efficiently covers a lot of ground as we retrace steps Domus has taken to serve Stamford's most at-risk youths through the pandemic. It's been almost two years since I last wrote about how the state put Domus' charter school, Stamford Academy, on probation. There was simultaneous pressure from Board of Education members who wanted to redirect financial support. Though Domus is privately funded, the contribution from Stamford Public Schools was trimmed.

Tensions simmered. For some, it was a question of educational philosophy. But never dismiss cash as a motivator. Domus eventually closed Stamford Academy and Trailblazers Academy, which served middle school students.

So Domus evolved, pairing adult family advocates with more than 300 students. The Domus mission remains admirable. Their clients are students who faced hardships no one should face at life's dawn: witnesses to violence, born addicted to drugs, parents in prison, homelessness. Often a mashup of several of them. For Baker and his colleagues, the work is also a matter of racial equity.

Baker says embedding his crew has "enhanced relationships with principals and social workers and teachers who appreciate our presence and our help." Domus staffers have the advantage of working with students and families after the bell rings.

Another obstacle arrived before the first school year under the new model was complete: the pandemic. Once the world pivoted to virtual learning, they were able to quickly identify which homes lacked computers, or even internet access. But other needs came first.

They distributed \$500 relief grants to help families struggling with the likes of utility bills. From March through summertime, they delivered "a ton of food," says Baker.

With three kids of his own, Baker knew how hard the transition could be on families. But COVID was a thunderbolt to "kids who were disconnected and disengaged in the best of circumstances."

Some adjusted. "Others were on a path to fall off the face of the Earth," Baker says.

It's not hyperbole. Agencies such as Domus serve as a compass for students who otherwise might never find their way back to school. The lost children.

Baker treats his charges with dignity, so our conversation never drifts into their personal lives. I can tell that while it is theoretical to me, he is conjuring faces. His pronouns change and he takes on the voice of the families.

“Forget shifting to online learning. We can’t keep the lights on, or we’re not able to feed ourselves. We have no PPE in the house.”

Baker says the mission became “triage.” It’s not a word you usually hear in the context of education. Aside from providing supplies and grants, Domus used the former Trailblazer site as a drop-in center so students had access to meals, staff, computers and peers their own age. The agency also re-purposed a former group home on Newfield Avenue for Stamford EMS staff so they could work safely away from their own families.

Two years ago, such stories of helping children through a pandemic would have sounded like a Stephen King plot. But now I talk to staff members at enough nonprofits that details are becoming repetitive.

That’s a problem. It’s easy to become numb to a crisis that thrives in crowds but causes unseen scars behind closed doors. But before the numbness sets in, Baker calmly reveals a detail as we conclude our conversation. This is why you have to pay attention at the end, where the real news sometimes lurks.

“What we’re finding now is it’s almost or just as bad as it was in the beginning,” Baker says.

Yes, we’re closing in on a grim anniversary that everybody shares: One year since the COVID stopwatch started ticking. We don’t think about it being as bad as a year ago because we are conditioned as a species to anticipate endings.

But don’t become numb; we are still a long way from the end.

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