

## **The Retreat: Falling Down—and Going On**

It has been a week since the annual Health Care for the Homeless staff retreat. Each year, all staff take the day off work, come together and celebrate what it is to work at such a strange, unique and wonderful place. Many companies have retreats, they make acknowledgement, and then go back to the day-to-day. But I would argue that we are something different. And we are like no place I have ever been. We are built more like an odd family than a company. We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, like anywhere else, but we also do more. We weather tragedies and celebrate victories, we carry each other and allow ourselves to be carried when needed. We are something distinctive, altogether.

This year at the retreat, while our CEO was making introductions and sharing anecdotes, we settled into chairs clearly not designed for the frequent standing and sitting that comes with a Health Care for the Homeless retreat. When we stood, the chairs sinisterly lifted up into a folding position. The first person to make the mistake of not looking behind them came crashing to the floor in embarrassment. There was a small chuckle through the crowd, but an immediate response of others helping that person up, encouraging her to brush it off, and the meeting continued. Then another fall, another chuckle and more help and encouragement. It went on like this throughout the day. People falling and being helped, as each speaker went on.

This made me think of when I first came to Health Care for the Homeless. I remember it taking months for me to understand and accept that the kindness and genuine nature of my colleagues was not a veneer. I had come from an organization where I sometimes wondered if my boss knew my name, and where I was written up for taking more than two sick days in a year. Going from that to our all staff meetings at Health Care for the Homeless, I felt almost uncomfortable with the level of comradery. I told friends it couldn't be real, and I waited for the other shoe to drop. Only with time did it become normal. Now, four years later, I have difficulty imagining it any other way.

We are not perfect as an organization: We have times we fail, and moments of doubt. But we are strong together. I have faced tragedies here, questioned my efficacy, come close to burning out and felt the helplessness that sometimes comes with what we do. But here, I have had something many in my field do not. I have had support, and I have had understanding and kindness from each individual with whom I work. There will always be moments when we fall—whether out of chairs, emotionally or from exhaustion. But as was reaffirmed at the retreat this year, we will always pick each other up with a helping hand and encouraging words. That is what makes us what we are. It is what makes us Health Care for the Homeless.

—Sean Berry, behavioral health therapist