

Skidmore students RISE to meet a need

The partnership between Skidmore’s Social Work Department and the long-running Saratoga nonprofit has a powerful impact on the students and the struggling populations they’re serving.

By Angela Valden



Sybil Newell '00 at the helm

The nonprofit organization is led by a Skidmore alumna, Executive Director Sybil Newell '00.

“We are just recently becoming better known as an agency, but we’ve been in the community for 45 years and we’ve been the primary provider of housing and support for individuals with severe mental illness that entire time,” Newell says. “At any given time, we have over 200 people under RISE roofs through various programs, and last year we served well over 500 people in our care management program as well.”

“There’s a big need out there, and RISE has a big impact.”

One of Newell’s first jobs after graduating from Skidmore with a bachelor’s degree in psychology was at Four Winds Hospital in Saratoga Springs, supporting inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment for children, adolescents, and adults. From there she joined Transitional Services Association, today known as RISE, and started out doing the type of frontline work that current Skidmore students are doing with the organization now.

“I came from a family with a lot of mental illness, lots of addictions, and I wanted to work in the field and help people,” she says of her chosen career path. Realizing that she would need a master’s degree in social work, psychology, mental health, or a related area to further advance in the field, she balanced career and family to pursue her master’s in community psychology, completing the program while on maternity leave with her second son.

“Over the past 20 years, I just worked really hard and decided that what I was really passionate about is community mental health — helping people in the community rather than a hospital setting. I think you can have a huge impact on people’s lives if you put supports around them and allow them to be part of the community rather than be separate from it.”

As RISE’s executive director, Newell spends much of her time focusing on public relations, fundraising, grant writing, developing new programs, and meeting with various members of the community to assess needs and ways that RISE can accommodate them, either through existing programs or new programs. “One day is never like the other,” she says.

For two years and counting, more than a dozen Skidmore College students have worked closely with a Saratoga County organization that has been helping individuals and families impacted by homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, and other life challenges since 1978.

Through Social Work Department field placements, internships, independent study, and full- and part-time positions, Skidmore students have become deeply invested in the people, programs, and communities they have come to know through RISE Housing and Support Services.

“RISE is extremely engaged, and they do an amazing job of meeting the clients where they are and being very client-centered, which is one of the things that we stress in our program here at Skidmore,” says Peter McCarthy, senior teaching professor and director of field education in the Social Work Department. “They have been an exceptional partner to us. They provide amazing opportunities for our students, and we provide them with the resource of people hours.”

Above: Sybil Newell '00, executive director of RISE Housing and Support Services in Saratoga Springs, works alongside Skidmore students and alumni in addressing the needs of Saratoga County citizens impacted by homelessness, mental illness, and substance abuse.



Left: Skidmore students played an important role alongside RISE staff and volunteers in preparing the new 24/7, low-barrier homeless shelter on Adelphi Street in Saratoga Springs, helping to assemble beds, paint walls, and create welcoming, functional spaces for guests.

Rethinking justice and offering second chances

Mia Cohen '25, also now a part-time relief staff member, joined RISE as a second-session summer program intern last July, three weeks after the Adelphi Street shelter opened. In her roles, she has been helping to support shelter operations and assist full-time staff with the day-to-day.

A highlight of her summer internship, she says, was attending Saratoga Springs' Community Outreach Court — a highly impactful service that helps members of the county's homeless population get back on their feet.

Initiated in October 2020, the collaboration between RISE, Saratoga Springs City Court Judge Francine Vero, and local law enforcement assists individuals who are experiencing homelessness and are charged with non-violent offenses. Orders handed down by the court are intended to address underlying issues, such as mental illness and substance abuse, that often drive recidivism. Individuals are referred to RISE Community Outreach Court coordinators upon arraignment, and those who meet the orders and remain arrest- and conviction-free have their arrest records expunged.

Since it began in 2020, about 80% of the individuals the court has worked with have appeared at all their court dates, and about 70% have had their records cleared. Saratoga Springs' new mayor, John Safford, has publicly stated his intent to expand the successful program even further.

"I had never been to court of any kind, so just to witness it was really interesting," says social work major Cohen.

Before working with RISE, Cohen had no prior experience in the field or with the homeless population. "I went in with no expectations, and everyone has been so kind. Hearing their stories has changed my perspective on the housing crisis and the homeless population — not just in Saratoga but in the States overall."

The experience has made her more appreciative of being involved in the local community and even more invested in the work she does as a peer health educator on the Skidmore campus, she says. "Now I tell other students who are nervous about working with the homeless that they have to do it. It's so rewarding."

Providing a safe place to stay and hope for better days

As RISE worked to open its new 24/7, low-barrier homeless shelter on Adelphi Street in Saratoga Springs last year, Newell lent a hand alongside staff, volunteers, and Skidmore students in preparing the space and caring for guests. The new shelter offers 36 beds, a congregate area with a television and couches, a dining area, access to warm showers, laundry facilities, lockers, a counseling office for staff, and a yard with picnic tables and a basketball court.

Led by Victoria Furfaro, RISE's director of advocacy and outreach, Skidmore interns played a critical role in the setup and operations of the new shelter, from conducting research to painting walls, assembling beds, and serving meals.

Social work major Amber Hardy '24, now a full-time shelter advocate for RISE, was among those interns. At the end of her summer placement, she was offered a part-time relief staff position, then promoted to full-time support staff in early fall, then promoted again to her current position, all while attending Skidmore full time.

"It's the best job in the world. I feel very comfortable here," Hardy said one Monday morning in late November after leading a house meeting for shelter guests and then dishing out warm food. "This place feels like my baby."

Talia Remba '24, now a part-time relief staff member, was also introduced to RISE through her Social Work Department field placement and worked with Furfaro, Hardy, Jack Egan '24, Audrey Rudd '23, shelter advocate Marco Amantini '22, and others to get the Adelphi Street shelter up and running by June.

"I've learned so much about the unhoused in Saratoga," Remba says. "We started off reading files and attending meetings regarding the clients RISE works with. Then we phased into the creation of the shelter. We researched how other shelters operated and what rules a low-barrier facility would need to implement, which required calling other shelters across New York state and asking them about their protocol."

When the shelter opened in June, the interns and staff began forming bonds with many of its residents, who ranged in age from 22 to 75.

"I was so grateful to be a part of something so valuable to the community," Remba says.

Witnessing that very real impact on people's lives is the most rewarding part of the work, Newell says. "I have loved opening this new shelter with the interns because it gave me the opportunity to get out of my office and out of my administrative role and jump back into direct care for a while, and to really get to know some folks who are in a really bad situation and see them already making positive changes in their lives."



From left: RISE Executive Director Sybil Newell '00, former intern Jack Egan '24, and full-time shelter advocates Amber Hardy '24 and Marco Amantini '22 stand outside RISE's new low-barrier homeless shelter in Saratoga Springs.

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Talia Remba '24

“There are just endless opportunities here. Everything that matters in social work you can find here.”

Amber Hardy '24

‘Showing that you care ... no matter what’

In addition to Community Outreach Court and the new low-barrier shelter, RISE offers a number of other community residences and affordable housing programs throughout the area; care management for families and individuals to coordinate services with local healthcare resources; advocacy and outreach to proactively address homelessness; and a variety of recovery services.

“There are just endless opportunities here,” Hardy '24 says. “Everything that matters in social work you can find here.”

When Marco Amantini '22 was hoping to start his career in the Saratoga area after earning his bachelor's degree in social work at Skidmore, his advisor, Senior Teaching Professor Peter McCarthy, recommended he look into a role with RISE. Amantini took a position as shelter support staff after graduation and then quickly moved up to a full-time shelter advocate position.

“I am now involved in making sure respect is maintained and rules are followed in the Adelphi Street shelter, connecting guests to all kinds of resources, and striving to help them grow, move on, and into the appropriate level of care housing needed. I think a big part of the job is showing that you care about them and are there for them no matter what.”

Just being able to make the slightest difference in a person's life for the better makes the work incredibly meaningful, he says.

“I have learned so much about myself and about how to approach a conversation with another human being who is just like me but also very different from me because of the experiences they've had. I am now able to really look past the superficial and initial information I receive by engaging with someone, and ask myself, ‘Why might they be behaving the way they do? What might have brought them to where they are now? How might they be able to change?’”

Communities working together to change lives

McCarthy and the Social Work Department are looking forward to further developing the partnership — which has been so beneficial for both Skidmore students and RISE — into the future. “We're very happy with the relationship,” he says.

Many of the current students who have made a deep connection to the work they do at RISE are planning to continue on with the organization as well, either through the end of their time at Skidmore or, in some cases, beyond. Most plan to also pursue advanced degrees in the field.

“This has been genuinely life-changing,” Remba '24 says of her time at RISE. “I would have never learned this much about case management, shelter creation, or the unhoused population if it weren't for Skidmore's phenomenal social work program. This professional experience has shaped what I want to do for the rest of my life, and I am overwhelmingly thankful for the opportunity.”

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