

# Journey from Homeless Person to Homeless Advocate

*TRAVELED BY TOURO MSW ALUMNUS*

When Joan Edwards, a recent graduate of Touro College's Graduate School of Social Work, was in her early 20s, married and the mother of two young daughters, she suddenly found herself homeless after a fire completely destroyed her Harlem apartment.

The experience remained with Ms. Edwards for the next two decades as she worked in the insurance industry, for U.S. Customs, and started her own business helping clients settle insurance claims and prepare tax returns. The feeling of being demoralized by a social services system that was meant to help Ms. Edwards and her family through such a difficult time inspired her to return to school first to become a mental health counselor and then to fulfill her dream of becoming a social worker.

Ms. Edwards realized that dream last June at the age of 54 when she graduated from Touro College's Graduate School of Social Work with honors. She received the Social Work Student Award from the National Association of Social Workers-NYC Chapter and was selected as the one student from the school to speak at the commencement ceremonies for Touro's Division of Graduate Studies.

"We are on the front line in the battle against poverty and oppression," she told her fellow graduates at Madison Square Garden's WaMu Theater last June. "Don't be defeated by adversity. Every defeat, every heartbreak, every loss contains its own seeds; its own lesson on how to improve your performance. So I challenge you today, master's of social work graduating class of 2009, let us go out together and let us make change come about."

That passion to help people and effect change inspired Ms. Edwards to help the Graduate School of Social Work organize about a dozen students and professors to join forces with some 3,000 other volunteers to help count the number of homeless people living in New York City. After Ms. Edwards and her peers braved sub-zero temperatures in January 2009 to canvass parks, subways and other public spaces as part of the New York City Department of Homeless Services' Homeless Outreach Population Estimate, she wrote about the experience and the plight of the homeless in an op-ed piece published in the *New York Daily News*.



"I was homeless at one time, so I know from experience the struggle it is to pick oneself up from despair and become a contributing member of society," Ms. Edwards wrote. "There are no easy answers to the problem of homelessness, as every case has its own set of problems. But studies have consistently shown empowerment and support systems are crucial in getting someone off the streets and into stable affordable housing. Now more than ever, with the worst economy in decades, attention must be focused on the problem of homelessness in our city."

It was her own experience of feeling powerless and demoralized as a homeless person for two years that made Ms. Edwards want to help others in need. "I felt like I was just another number. I didn't feel like people were treating me as a person. The substandard conditions they kept putting us in were very demoralizing. It made me feel like people shouldn't suffer through that and gave me a desire to help people."

Ms. Edwards and her family were sent to homeless hotels all over Manhattan for about eight months, where she and her husband had to share a room with her daughters, who were 6 and 7 at the time, and a bathroom with five other families living on the same floor. They were then placed in a substandard apartment in a drug-infested area.

"It wasn't like I set out to be homeless," said Ms. Edwards, who later had two sons. "There was a fire but that didn't seem to matter. It just seemed like I was caught in this web of the system. There was nobody who seemed to understand that. We didn't have any choice as to where they sent us. I was afraid for my kids so I stopped working. The places were horrible and seemed very dangerous. People were using drugs. It was just very scary and demoralizing."

"I became very depressed. I didn't want people to feel that way. I felt they should have had a better system or at least somebody who seemed like they cared about what was happening to you; somebody to help you get through it emotionally. I was lucky that I had family for emotional support. My father was very supportive and encouraged me to hold my head up."

Before heading back to school to change her career path, Ms. Edwards worked for a number of different companies in various

# Joan Edwards Honored with Social Work Student Award

Touro Graduate School of Social Work alumnus Joan Edwards received the Social Work Student Award from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)-NYC Chapter last June. It was the first time that an MSW student from Touro College, which launched its graduate program in social work just three-and-a-half years ago, received the prestigious award.

“Joan Edwards, a formerly homeless person, has made a difference as a strong advocate for the most vulnerable populations in New York City,” said Dr. Steven Huberman, dean of the Graduate School of Social Work. “She is a brilliant student, has overcome many obstacles in her life, and stands as an example for others to do the same.”

Ms. Edwards was presented with the award by Patricia Brownell, president of the NASW-NYC Chapter, at commencement ceremonies for Touro’s Division of Graduate Studies held in Madison Square Garden in June 2009. “She (Joan) exemplifies the very best of social work practice and excellence,” Ms. Brownell said.

The National Association of Social Workers-NYC Chapter also acknowledged Ms. Edwards as a recipient of the award at its annual meeting held at the headquarters of the United Federation of Teachers in Manhattan last May. The organization honored Ms. Edwards for her outstand-

ing dedication to social work values and her remarkable leadership in organizing social work students around an important issue for the social work profession—homelessness.

In early 2009, Ms. Edwards wrote an op-ed piece about the problem of homelessness after she joined a team of students and professors from the Graduate School of Social Work that assisted the New York City Department of Homeless Services with its annual Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE).

“It’s a very humbling experience to get this award but I really wish all of my colleagues could also be recognized in this way because I know everybody worked very hard in getting their degrees,” Ms. Edwards said at graduation.

With 153,000 members, the NASW is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the country. NASW-NYC represents the collective expertise and experience of more than 10,000 members in New York City. The

organization promotes, develops and protects the practice of social work and social workers, and also seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families and communities through its policy work and advocacy.

*This article was written by Barbara Franklin with contributions from Gail Schiller*



positions and started her own business as an insurance and tax return consultant.

After a series of difficult personal losses—Ms. Edwards’ husband, mother and father passed away—she returned to school at Argus Community in 2000 for training to become a certified alcohol and substance abuse counselor. She did an internship at Pibly Residential Programs in the Bronx and was hired as a mental health rehabilitative counselor. For about three years, she worked with people who were severely mentally ill and had substance abuse problems. It was while Ms. Edwards was working at Pibly that she decided she would finally fulfill her dream of becoming a social worker.

In 2003, Ms. Edwards went back to school at Metropolitan College in the Bronx to earn her bachelor’s degree in the school’s accelerated program. While at Metropolitan, she did an internship at Women in Need’s Center for Substance Abuse & Wellness at Casa Rita in the Bronx and was hired as an addictions counselor.

“After completing my bachelor’s degree, I took a year off; that turned into two. Then I thought I better get back to school for my master’s in social work, so in 2007, I came to Touro College.”

Ms. Edwards said her experience at Touro was “very enlight-

ening” because of the diversity of students from so many different cultural backgrounds that she never had the opportunity to interact with before. She said she and her classmates at Touro always tried to help one another like the time they all brought in information to help one student get health insurance or the time one student accompanied another who was having chest pains during class to the hospital. It turned out that student was having a heart attack, she said.

Two years ago, Ms. Edwards was promoted to program liaison at Women in Need, a position that sends her out into the community to develop resources for clients and to make sure women suffering from substance abuse know about the social services available to them and how to access them. She still also serves as a counselor to several very troubled women.

Now with her new master’s degree in social work, Ms. Edwards is hoping to eventually open her own program for women and families in need. “Now I’m qualified to do a lot more. I know that the sky’s the limit for me. My dream is to inspire and empower women and families to become self-sufficient, achieve their dreams like I did and to learn how to dream and hope again.” ■