

Companis Story

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Companis Sunday at Seattle First Baptist Church
October 15, 2017

Just a few years ago, one might find me on the streets of Salem or in a women's homeless shelter in Eugene, Oregon. And, then there was the time during those years, when I was hospitalized with mental health issues. All this, after I walked into an emergency room 15 times asking for help and never receiving it. During those desperate times, I knew I was not alone and the grace of God kept me alive even when I thought I would not wake up the next day. Those were the days when a local bakery would set out a plate of cut-up sweet rolls and offer me a small cup of coffee, or when Starbucks had those free sample cups of coffee they would give to most anyone who came in off the streets. It's funny how those small acts of kindness stay with you.

I'm still on that road of recovery. But life is a whole lot better. Were it not for Companis, I would most likely not have meaningful work to rely on and meaningful relationships to enjoy. You see, most of the mental health programs we have today still rely on the more traditional approaches for recovery from the devastation of mental illness. Day programs in clinical settings are fine but not for me. I did not want to sit inside a mental health program to be reminded of my illness. What I needed was immersive reengagement in the work I once knew in policy and advocacy. I wanted to get back on the bike quickly having fallen very hard.

For nearly 30 years I had been involved with mental health and health care policy at high levels, working for state government and national organizations. I was an activist and I was also a policy analyst. I wrote a chapter for the U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health and I

created and researched innovative programs. My work back East was exciting and change-making – my mentors are top-notch leaders who had made names for themselves in the upper echelons of health care policy. But that was all I did back then – work. I would not have considered my life to have been well-rounded.

Today I have role models in Companis – people who see the whole picture and the whole person. Companis is a network of giving volunteers, many with professional credentials and backgrounds who have decided to “gift” their skills to organizations in need of program support and leadership. The workers come from all walks of life and with a common agenda to support the bigger picture.

My placement is at Seattle Area Support Groups, also known as SASG. Founded to support and address the needs of dying AIDS patients in the mid-1980’s, SASG has morphed into a model service program for people who identify as LGBTQ and who have substance use or mental health disorders. SASG also provides support and alternatives for people who are HIV-positive. I serve as Special Projects Coordinator and write grants to foundations and others and I provide program support.

When I arrived in Seattle I was unsteady on my feet. Transitioning from homelessness to “real life” brought new challenges. Companis referred me to a kind and generous support worker who helped me get reoriented to Seattle, taking very basic steps. His name is Tim Dean. I can’t thank him and Companis enough for that early support. It helped me to take the next steps to join SASG.

Companis sees the full, rich picture in everyone and they encourage people to bring their skills to their placements, but they also actively engage and nurture workers to find more of themselves, besides “the work.” My worker role, for example, has opened doors to new areas for involvement in the community. I’m learning more about the LGBTQ experience, but I am curious about climate change and have joined Interfaith Climate Action – First Hill. The historic spiritual connection between SFBC and Companis provided a platform for me to explore SFBC as my spiritual home and then to become a member. In seeking to get in touch with the concept of joy through music, I have joined the church choir. Companis is a catalyst for involvement. It opens doors to possibilities that were once unimaginable.

SFBC’s ongoing commitment to Companis bridges service work from inside the walls of this congregation to far-reaching corners of the Seattle community. Companis expands non-profit capabilities and by doing so it nurtures individual workers. That combination cannot be matched.

Thank you, Companis Staff and the SFBC Congregation!