

## Turning Struggles into Blessings: Catholic Multicultural Center staff uses past experience with homelessness, alcoholism to help others



Isaac Shuler is a custodial staff member of the Catholic Multicultural Center (CMC) through the Wisconsin Senior Employment (WISE) Program. He can be found any given weekday afternoon cleaning the second floor of the Center, taking care of the classrooms, or pausing to say a friendly word to a co-worker or CMC guest. While this may seem like nothing out of the ordinary, Isaac's story is anything but average. His journey at the CMC has come full circle, and he offers CMC guests much more than his cleaning services.

Six years ago, Isaac was not a CMC worker, but a guest in need of the Center's services. He was living on the streets and drinking too much, a struggle he had been dealing with off and on for the past 20 years. "It's never good sleeping outside," he said, talking about his experience being homeless. "It's cold in the winter, and the mosquitos get you in the summer."

Isaac first starting coming to the CMC when he, his wife and kids were living in the same neighborhood as the Center and they would all come together to partake in the free meal. Later on when Isaac was struggling with homelessness, he came more often to the Center, using the shower and laundry facilities, visiting the food pantry, and continuing to come for the meals, not only for the food but to socialize too. At that time he was also struggling with alcohol use, and he said he would often show up to the meal "a sloppy drunk."

During these homeless periods, Isaac would couch surf at friends' places or camp out under park shelters. One time he was camped out in a park shelter bathroom, having a drink, when he heard the lock click on the door to the bathroom. He got up, discovered he was locked in, and desperately banged on the door to get out. A Parks Department staff person came and opened the door saying, "You almost spent the winter in there," explaining that they were going around locking buildings up for the winter. This was a frightening experience for Isaac, who could have been left there to die over the winter had no one come and unlocked the door.

In 2011, Isaac began the journey of turning his life around, after so many years of drinking off and on and dealing with being homeless. That year, he had been put out of his apartment and was facing homelessness once more. So, he put in an application at a local agency that provides shelter, housing, and extensive support services to homeless individuals. Four months later, he was accepted. "It was good for me to be there; I started new. You couldn't go in with alcohol on your breath, so that motivated me."

The homelessness support agency helped him set goals for his future, from simple steps like getting new glasses and going to church again, to greater accomplishments like getting his HSED (High School Equivalency Diploma), which Isaac went on to achieve in June 2016. Being in transitional housing gave him much-needed structure and support. He got connected to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and also successfully completed

an alcohol and drug abuse program. Isaac could not offer enough praise for the homelessness support agency that helped him.

“It was something positive to do. It kept me busy, and there were people like me there. It felt good knowing that I was doing something with my life, and knowing that people cared about me,” he said, emphasizing that just knowing that someone cared, receiving kindness, and simply being treated like a human being gave him the confidence he needed to build a better life. On the streets, he rarely received this kind of treatment but rather was often made to feel insignificant or just in the way.

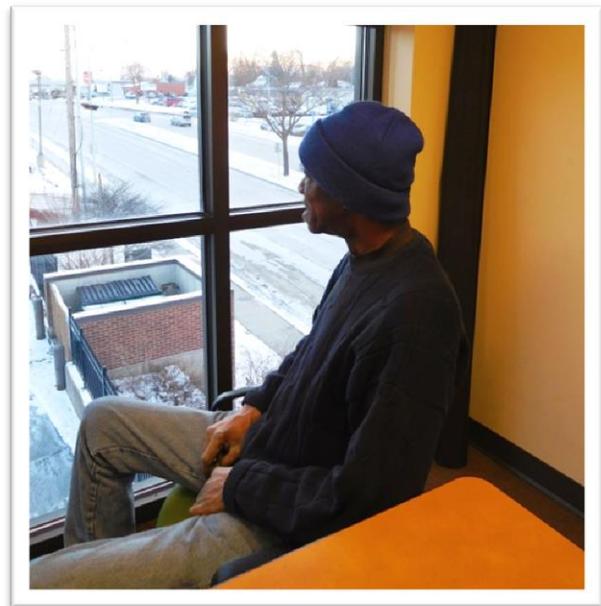
Isaac excelled so much in the transitional housing, that staff there asked him to become a mentor to fellow residents. He accepted the challenge and ended up really enjoying this role, saying that everyone in the group of five people that he was in charge of leading became friends and appreciated socializing with one another. Mentorship was a good role for him, according to Isaac, because he loves talking to people and wants to use his experience to reach others in similar situations.

After his time in transitional housing, Isaac was able to get back on his feet again and stay sober, for good this time. Over a year ago, Isaac returned to the CMC, not as a guest in need of services, but as a worker offering services. He was placed at the Center for employment by the WISE program. Steve Maurice,

CMC Assistant Director, had to approve the placement of Isaac at the CMC. Steve and Isaac already knew each other from the days that Isaac was coming to the CMC for the meals and often under the influence. During his placement interview, Isaac explained that he had changed his life since he had last been to the CMC and asked for a chance to work there. Steve said yes, and now Isaac has been a proud member of the CMC staff for over a year.

“I might be slow but I get things done right,” said Isaac with a smile, explaining how he takes pride in his work. He likes to keep busy, so if he finishes his general cleaning tasks for the day, he’ll find something else that needs doing. He is never too busy to take a break to have a meaningful chat with a fellow staff member or guest, offering insight to the day’s challenges, sharing words of encouragement, or sharing a piece of his story.

Since his time mentoring at the homelessness support agency, Isaac has not stopped mentoring. “I like trying to help people; it makes me feel so good,” he said, smiling. Anywhere he goes, he takes any opportunity he sees to offer guidance, encouragement, or a listening ear to anyone going through what he once went through. On the job at the CMC, he’ll take time to chat with individuals there for services and offer his support. He tells people struggling with addiction and/or homelessness that he’s been there too. He says he tries to instill in them the idea that they can do anything they want to do, though he lets them know recovery isn’t going to be easy and it isn’t going to be fast. He says it’s not good to push people, but rather sharing your experience and offering them a bit of inspiration is the best way to reach someone.



In his day to day interactions at the CMC, Isaac's friendly, listening ear and kind words give encouragement to people who need it most, not only those struggling with addiction. For example, a guest who had been out of work for a long time recently came to Isaac to tell him she had a new job, and Isaac replied to her, "I'm proud of you," in the most genuine sort of way. The drive to help others through mentorship is something Isaac always carries with him, wherever he goes. Isaac is currently on the waiting list to participate in a 60-day training to become a peer specialist, which will allow him to further develop his mentorship skills and offer his guidance to even more people in need.

Isaac has now been sober for five and a half years. He said that the job at the CMC is the longest job he's held in his whole life. At over age 60, he said he waited too long to come to this point, but he's glad he got there. Isaac has three more years to work through the WISE program and he wants to spend them all at the CMC. After that, he says, he wants to retire from working, though offering guidance and words of encouragement to those struggling with what he once went through, is something he will never retire from.

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