

## A New Life

**H**e makes friends easily and his quick smile can put anyone at ease because of his infectious laugh. But it wasn't always like this.

As he prepared to leave his family for a better life, his mother reminded him of his duty. "Do not forget us," she whispered to him. When he arrived in the U.S. he wore those words like weights.

Since moving from Laos 10 years ago, Souk Souriyamath has tried desperately to maintain consistent employment. He worked as a cook, janitor, etc. But within a few weeks of working, a stressful situation would arise and he would feel the paranoia creep into his head. "They will come and take you away," the voices would tell him. The fear that he grew up with overwhelmed him and he started to hide in his apartment paralyzed by the paranoia.

One day, concerned neighbors called the police and he ended up at St. Peter Hospital. For the next eight years, Souk found himself teetering between hope and despair with nothing to do. The better life that he and his family hoped for was all but a distant memory.

Growing up in a refugee camp in Laos, violence, poverty, and starvation were common. The fear that constantly surrounded him took its toll and Souk found himself unable to control the racing thoughts and anxiety. But as a refugee, there was no medical help available but he always dreamed of a better life. A life where he could work and take care of his family. A life where he would have friends and be happy.



Souk on a walk with his friends.

Souk moved into the training facility on March 12, 2007, and slowly began to feel excited about his future. Training was difficult because he had to get used to scheduled work and activities. After a few weeks, however, Souk was enjoying his new found life and the ability to take care of himself. After a year, he graduated and moved into a lodge. He still struggles with fears of going back to the hospital but during those days, he can count on his lodge mates to support him.

Life has changed since he first walked into training in 2007. He enjoys traveling and taking vacations with his friends and life is, well, normal. The best part is that he can now take care of his family in Laos. The American dream is alive again in Souk and he is determined never to let it go. "I can rest more peacefully knowing that I am helping my family," he says with his signature smile. Never forgetting his mother's words, Souk is not only making a better life for himself but for his family as well.

# Real People Real Change

Founded in 1970, Tasks Unlimited was created around the evidence-based model of recovery. Clients, who had been in long-term care, now, wanted to live a normal life; go to work, have a nice home. It was the tenacity of the clients and the dedication of the staff that made it possible. The tenacity of the clients and the dedication of the staff have been the

## A New Beginning

*commentary by Karen Johnston*



**S**hortly after beginning my work at Tasks Unlimited I moved into an apartment while searching for more permanent housing. This was a new experience for me and little did I realize, I was entering a microcosm of the larger city. Like many people in a new place, I became very aware of my surroundings.

One of the things I noticed was the large number of out of state license plates in the apartment building's garage. I wondered why so many people would move to Minnesota and surmised it was because, like me, they were starting new jobs or looking for a better opportunity. My suspicion was confirmed when I talked to my new neighbors. Unlike me, they felt they had no choice. They had lost their jobs, lost their homes and had moved far from family and friends to support themselves. The economy was frightening. They had moved to take whatever job they could find, even if it was only part time work. They spoke about the loss of jobs, loss of home and loss of security and stability.

I'm reluctant to admit that the issues with our economy hadn't sunk in for me until then. This experience put faces to the casualties of the shrinking job market and housing crisis for me.

During this same time I was touring Tasks' programs, seeing lodges, going to jobsites, and getting to know our clients. It struck me that unlike many of my new neighbors, Tasks' clients had stable living situations and stable jobs.

In this day and age of buyouts, downsizing, layoffs and reduced hours, Tasks clients didn't need to worry. They told me about having the same job and housing situation for 35 years and counting. I found it truly remarkable and I am so proud to be working for an organization that brings such stability and security to people's lives.

I have a picture hanging in my office that best reflects my closing thoughts: It says, "We cannot go back and make a new start, but we can start now to make a new ending." I think this encapsulates both my hopes for my apartment neighbors and our clients at Tasks Unlimited. I'm finding what many here already knew; that working for Tasks is like being a part of something larger than yourself, that we're making a contribution, however small, toward people's security and stability — something everyone strives for — something everyone deserves.

## John Trepp's Retirement Gala

On November 18, over 200 people came together to honor the work of John Trepp who has dedicated 31 years to empowering people with mental illness to reclaim their lives. "What will I miss most about John? His belief that people like me, with mental illness, can contribute to society. Thanks John," said a client speaker. Yes, thank you so much John.



sed Fairweather model which was designed to provide on-going support for those with mental illnesses. The clients then, just as a simple dream. Through the years, we have seen what people with serious mental illness and accomplish with adequate support. e foundation of this organization and we look forward to helping more people reclaim their lives from mental illness.

## Tasks Wins Big

**A**t the 2009 conference of lodge programs, sponsored by the Coalition of Community Living, held this year in Pennsylvania, Tasks won an unprecedented number of awards. Tasks programs and staff brought home 3 of the 4 competitive awards presented annually, and retiring Executive Director **John Trepp** was given the prestigious Billie Larch Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Spotless Lodge Coordinator **Kassia Janezich** won the David Sanders, Lodge Coordinator of the Year Award for her success in spurring improvement in the Lodge's peer-supervised self-administration of medications, and assisting the Lodge's transition to a challenging new worksite.

**Tasks Unlimited Building Services** won the George W. Fairweather Innovation Award for working in cooperation with its customers to implement green-cleaning technologies.

**Oakwood** won the 2009 Dorothy Berger Outcomes Award. All four moms are working and have stayed out of the hospital, two drive the lodge van, one makes sure the house stays clean, one is good at comforting the kids when things go wrong, and one is good at helping with homework – even algebra! As the lodge members grow into management roles, outside staff time has been cut in half.

Congratulations to everyone. It is because of your hard work and dedication that people can have hope. We are incredibly proud of you.



John Trepp accepting the Billie Larch Award



Kassia Janezich (middle) with her Spotless Lodge guys



## Legislative Update

As we approach 2010 we anticipate that the state and counties will continue to reduce funding for mental health and other social service programs. Hennepin County has advised us that they intend to reduce funding for Oakwood Residence by 12%, and for our case management program by 25%, in 2010. They've also advised us of their intent to eliminate all funding for Oakwood by 2014. Oakwood serves families - women with serious mental illness and their children, the only mental health program in MN specifically serving that population. We were very surprised at their recommendation to discontinue funding such a highly successful program.

We have been able to replace some of the funding lost earlier this year in Anoka County but we have to continue to seek additional funds for that program. However, we are definitely feeling the effects of these funding cuts, and additional losses could result in having to make some very difficult decisions about the services we currently provide.

We need your help to preserve the remaining services to people with serious mental illness. And you can help! More than ever before, our elected officials need to hear that making cuts to healthcare and services for people with mental illness is not acceptable in Minnesota. Please call, write, or email your county commissioner and state elected officials. And feel free to call Paula Childers at 612.767.2055 for any help you need in order to make those contacts.



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Tables for Tasks

On October 13, 2009, Tasks Unlimited hosted our Ninth Annual Tables for Tasks event at the Golden Valley Country Club. Volunteers came together to help raise funds so that more people can reclaim their lives from mental illness.

With 25 different tables with themes ranging from elegant to outlandish, Tables was a spectacular affair of art and whimsy. "Every year, the tables get more interesting, more beautiful, more to see and do," said Committee Chair, Andrea West.

Three Tasks clients shared their stories about their struggle with mental illness and how they have reclaimed their lives with the

support of Tasks. "The speakers were so moving and gave me an understanding of how mental illness is real and that hope for recovery is also real," said one attendee. Tasks thanks everyone who volunteered their time and effort to make this event such a success. To view pictures from the event, go to our website at www.tasksunlimited.org or become a fan of our Facebook page.

The 10th Annual Tables for Tasks is scheduled for October 12, 2010. If you're interested in being involved, please contact Andrea West at 612.871.3320.

