“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.” —1 Peter 5:2

Nicole* is a teenager who faced serious issues including addiction, suicidal thoughts, and emotions that had a destructive impact on her life. She is one of many youth who find sobriety and healthier coping methods through Choices, an inpatient residential program for youth (ages 12-17) struggling with alcohol/substance use disorders.

The path to sobriety can be intense. “I surrender,” Nicole said to Aleisha Cole, Choices Unit Supervisor. “Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. I don’t want to live like this anymore.”

“We help clients deal with their baggage,” Cole said. “Often they come in with family or relationship issues, and we help them work through things—to actually feel rather than to rely on drugs.”

Choices provides schooling as well as 25 hours per week of counseling, and group therapy that address topics such as anger management, coping skills, and

*Name changed to protect confidentiality
Behind every strong Lutheran organization or church are volunteers like Eric and Jodie Draut who commit their time and generosity. The Drauts will be honored with the “True Friend” Award by Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) at its 38th Annual Amicus Certus Celebration on Saturday, Oct. 12, 2019.

“We have been truly blessed in life,” said Jodie Draut. “It is important to give back to others using our time and talents.”

“We concentrate our volunteer efforts supporting the ministries of both our home church (Our Saviour’s, Arlington Heights) and those of the greater church,” Eric added. “We find great joy in answering God’s call.”

Eric has served on the LSSI Board of Directors since 2006, including Board chairman from 2008 to 2010, 2012-2013, and 2014-2017; Executive Chairman 2013-2014; and Emeritus Chairman 2017-2018. Eric was nominated by the LSSI staff and received the President of the United States’ Council on Service and Civic Participation Call to Service Award in 2014.

Jodie, an attorney, is a member of Our Saviour’s POWER (Policy beyond Our Walls: Education and Response) Ministry whose members participated in Lutheran Day. She is a past member of the Statewide Advisory Council of Lutheran Advocacy-Illinois. They are members of LSSI’s Cornerstone Society.

The Drauts have seen first-hand the impact of LSSI’s work, and those experiences have inspired their volunteer time and charitable contributions.

“Simply put LSSI is Christ in a broken world,” said Eric. “There is no better example of ‘God’s Work Our Hands’ than the work done at LSSI.”

As the school year begins, many youth will be negatively impacted by bullying and violence. To address this problem, LSSI launched its Youth WORKS (Wellness, Opportunity, and Resources for Key Services) program two years ago, with the goal of reducing violence among youth in Ogle and Lee counties. Since then, Youth WORKS has expanded its impact in the communities it serves, and recently launched programs in Whiteside and Carrol Counties.

“One of our biggest successes is that we’re growing,” said Kelsey Kant, Youth WORKS Prevention Specialist. “Schools are getting more involved. They’ve started to look to us for violence prevention.”

Youth WORKS programs target community engagement, youth involvement, wellness, family functioning, skills development/education, goal setting, linkage, and safety. Kant says that they work toward these goals visiting schools and teaching curriculums about violence, facilitating parent forums, attending community meetings, and more.

“I recently taught a violence prevention course,” said Kant. “ Afterwards, a student wrote me that her self-esteem and relationships had improved when she applied what we’d taught. Hearing the appreciation from the kids means the most to me.”

A culminating project at the end of the 2018-19 school year was the creation of “Buddy Benches” at Amboy Central Elementary School. Created by students involved with Youth WORKS, the special benches on the school playground encourages building friendships, and combats loneliness and bullying.
As a new school year begins, we are ever mindful of the example we as parents, teachers, and mentors set for our children. It’s a reflection of our Lutheran faith that calls us to be shepherds of God’s flock.

LSSI’s mission of responding to the Gospel to bring healing, justice, and wholeness to people and communities is borne out through our many programs for children, adults, and seniors at more than 50 sites across Illinois. In this way, we are the shepherds of God’s flock—our neighbors in Illinois.

Our Choices program in Nachusa is a source of healing and recovery for teens struggling with alcohol and substance use. The most fulfilling part of Choices Unit Supervisor Aleisha Cole’s job is planting the seed that helps youth begin life anew.

Eric and Jodie Draut, longtime donors and volunteers to LSSI, exemplify the commitment and generosity of those who support our programs, and we will honor them with LSSI’s True Friend award on October 12 at our Amicus Certus Celebration. Their steadfast support helps us live out our mission. Speaking for both himself and Jodie, Eric says, “We find great joy in answering God’s call.”

Whether it is our talented staff, committed volunteers, generous donors, or faithful congregations, we all are shepherds of God’s flock. We are grateful for your ongoing support that is integral in helping us care for one out of every 300 people in Illinois.

Peace and Prayers,

David P. Novak, JD
Vice President, Advancement
Executive Director, Cornerstone Foundation

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Decades of Support for LSSI

Luther Memorial Church, Chicago, has been committed to LSSI’s mission since their pastor was named to the LSSI Board of Directors in 1967. In the decades that followed, the congregants of Luther Memorial have given steadfastly of their time and treasure to support LSSI’s programs.

Church member Dixie Downes was a longtime employee at LSSI, from 1975 through her retirement in 2015. During her 40 years at LSSI, and even after she retired, she cared deeply about the organization and has been very active in connecting her church with LSSI’s mission. Congregation members have visited various LSSI program sites that serve the church’s community, including LSSI’s Addiction Treatment Center. Over the years, congregation members have donated baby bibs, children’s books for the Storybook Project prison ministry, and items for welcome kits for children in foster care. They also have been steadfast in their philanthropic support of LSSI.

Downes said that the most meaningful part of her involvement with LSSI has been seeing Luther Memorial congregation members join in her efforts to support LSSI. When the state of Illinois experienced a budget impasse that affected LSSI, Luther Memorial advocated on LSSI’s behalf. “I urged people to contact their legislators, and people responded,” she said. Luther Memorial’s group effort made to support LSSI, on the part of the congregation and the Women of the ELCA, was truly inspiring.

“LSSI is an integral part of the Lutheran church in Illinois,” Downes said. “It’s our duty to support their work.”

Pictured above: Luther Memorial congregations members (from left) Vicki Thoms, Dixie Downes, and Linda Miranda, collect books for LSSI’s Storybook Project.
Join LSSI’s Associate Board

LSSI’s Associate Board will launch this year and comprise an enthusiastic group of young professionals to promote and further LSSI’s mission and help make a difference in the lives of people across Illinois. Associate Board members will be responsible for spreading the word about LSSI to their networks, helping to plan and fundraise for LSSI’s annual events, and be committed to a $1,000 give/get fundraising goal. Apply to become a member at www.lssi.org/forms/associate-board or contact Jillian Madden, Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations, at jillian.madden@lssi.org or 847.635.4589 for more information.

relapse prevention. Choices also helps many youth to improve their academic performance, as students who were struggling academically have taken GED courses and graduated.

In the past many of the youth came into the program with the same addictions, frequently alcohol or marijuana, but recent years have seen a dramatic increase in varied other drugs that cause youth to seek help. All the while, successful stories of healing continue to unfold.

Cole shared that former clients often call her, saying things like, “It’s been a year and I’m still sober,” “Remember when you taught me to pray to my Higher Power every morning? I still do that,” and even, “You made me make my bed every day—I still make it the same way.” The calls are an incredible testament to young people who are being positively impacted by the program.

“We plant the seed,” Cole said. “Watching a client walk in the doors and knowing nothing about them, but not being judgmental...then watching them walk out with the tools they need to water that seed and watch it grow—that’s the most meaningful part of my job.”

Veronica Campbell, a 2019 Valparaiso University Calling and Purpose in Society (CAPS) Fellow, wrote this and several articles in this issue of Inspired.