

At Fairway, a Job and a Second Chance

By Elizabeth Kim

STAMFORD -- As one of the first group of employees who worked to get Fairway ready for its opening in the South End last November, Kevin Scalise lays claim to a certain milestone.

"Nobody has been in this store longer than I have," said the 52-year-old during a break from setting steel patio tables outside the supermarket's cafe.

To know Scalise's past is to appreciate why the distinction is worth calling out. Prior to working at Fairway, he spent two years living at a homeless shelter at St. Luke's Lifeworks, a social service agency based in Stamford.

During that time, Scalise, a former Marine who trained as a carpenter, battled drug addiction, a chronic health problem and a history of incarceration, all of which led to unemployment and a feeling he best described as "that impending sense of doom."

Yet as part of a dramatic turnaround, he found himself last month adamantly trying to put an end to his supply of food stamps, even sending them back. Having been promoted at Fairway from a porter to maintenance supervisor, he now earns \$12.50 an hour, lives in his own apartment, and has even started paying off some of his debts. "I'm pretty much self-sufficient now," he said. Far from being an anomaly, Scalise is one of about 30 former clients at St. Luke's Lifeworks employed at Fairway, which has a total of about 400 employees in Stamford.

After recognizing that the supermarket chain had a track record of being a good employer and a desire to collaborate with community organizations, the nonprofit agency last year approached Fairway's executives seeking a way to partner.



Fairway employee Kevin Scalise puts together outdoor seating at the Stamford, Conn. store on Thursday April 14, 2011, he is one of the people hired as part of a program with St. Luke's that seeks to help clients who have struggled with joblessness and homelessness.

The result has been an unique and ongoing relationship. In addition to providing job training and employment opportunities, the two organizations in February launched a week-long fundraising initiative in which a portion of the store's proceeds will go toward St. Luke's programs as well as supplying its former residents with Fairway gift cards.

There will be seven additional such campaigns later this year. Fairway is also planning to accept special shopping cards distributed to St. Luke's supporters, whereby one percent of total purchases will be donated.

"It's not just about giving money to an organization," said Randi Glickberg, Fairway's vice president of customer and community relations, adding that the company was trying to lend itself as both an employer and resource. "It reflect Fairway's focus. We want to enhance our local communities."

By working with St. Luke's, the company has chosen a nonprofit agency which is arguably charged with assisting those who are the most troubled and least employable. It serves between 500 to 600 people, most with little education and work experience. Many have the added burden of substance abuse, mental health issues as well as criminal backgrounds.

"For them to get a job is really, really tough," said Jason Shaplen, the chief executive officer of St. Luke's.

Taking into account the area's high unemployment rate, he added, "Any job is a great job at this point."

The process typically takes time. Aside from becoming sober, Scalise worked on reversing his outlook on life.

"I was always a pessimist," he said. "I realize now that a lot of it is up to me."

According to Shaplen, Scalise's case demonstrates the reasons for homelessness are complex and integrated. "If you want to break the cycle, you have to address all those reasons," he said. The same is true for those with less severe problems, but are more the victims of bad luck or circumstance.

Up until she was laid off two years ago, Laurie Spregue had made a good living working at upscale clothing stores. But after an accident left her disabled, she found herself evicted from her apartment and sleeping on her mother's couch.

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She eventually went to St. Luke's, where she stayed for roughly nine months and was treated at the F.S. Dubois Center, a mental health facility, for an anxiety disorder that had worsened from the stress of being homeless and poor. "They said, 'Don't worry. Do what you need to get well,'" she said, about the counselors at St. Luke's.

Last September, the 54-year-old became a greeter at Fairway. In addition to helping customers find products, she also makes recommendations for food pairings. Repeat visitors will often seek her out. "I have a following," she joked.

Similarly, Valletta Ryan, 54, was accustomed to making more than \$70,000 working in broadcast television before finding herself out of job and homeless and staying at St. Luke's last summer.

She got the job as a greeter at Fairway after begging the person interviewing her to hire her. Like many before, he initially dismissed her as being overqualified.

"I almost had tears in my eyes," she recalled. "That's what I ran into left and right."

Robert Reinisch, the store's general manager, noted those who come from St. Luke's are often especially motivated to succeed. "They come here already with a desire to make it work," he said. "They really have the heart to do it right. They are not here just to collect a paycheck."

On their part, Scalise, Spregue and Ryan each made a point of praising Fairway's management as being understanding and compassionate to their difficulties. Scalise has been frank about his past. "Nobody has shunned me," he said.

Their experiences, though different, seem to have instilled a sense of humility in them. Ryan spoke about coming to appreciating a sparser lifestyle. The woman who once drove a new car every three years now owns a '99 Saturn that perpetually breaks down, as it did during her commute last Thursday. "But no car payments," she said, with a wry smile. She is aiming to become a manager at Fairway.

"You go down fast," she wistfully reflected. "Coming back up takes forever."

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