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ESSENCE OF HUMANITY AWARD WINNER

LANCASTER, PA- Jim Bender, a group facilitator with the Council on Drug and Alcohol Abuse, was recognized with the Essence of Humanity Award at the recent United Way of Lancaster County Thank You Celebration. Jim facilitates the Life Skills/Youth Alcohol Education and Intervention Program, and he received the award not only for overcoming personal adversity, but for the work he does every day to make a difference in the lives of youth in Lancaster County.

The Essence of Humanity Award recognizes individuals who demonstrate remarkable courage, strength, persistence, and determination when dealing with adversity, as well as those who demonstrate the spirit of caring, encouragement, and love to such individuals on a daily basis. The intent of the Award is to elevate these stories of triumph as inspirational role models for the community.

Jim Bender's story is one of a life devastated by drug abuse. By the age of 19, he had been arrested three times and had sold his car for drug money. He entered treatment in the early 1970s, but found himself actively in addiction again, and in the late 1980s, he "crashed and burned", and wound up homeless and unemployed in Lancaster. It was faith in a higher power that brought him to Lancaster, as he recognized that he needed to change people and places in his life if he was going to return to active recovery. Jim's desire to piece his life back together in a

positive way led him to seek employment with the Council on Drug and Alcohol Abuse as an assessment specialist. Jim spends much of his time there as a group facilitator helping abusers and those who are substance abuse dependent identify their own level of problems by sharing his own story and demonstrating to teenagers where their own behavior may lead if they continue down the same path.

Jim shares the story of how one evening, there was a knock at his door and one of the biggest, toughest kids in his class came into his office and started to cry. He said he wanted to talk about the real reason that he was drinking – his girlfriend of many years had just died of cancer. The drinking was a response to his grief and loss. Jim’s willingness to share his own story and be vulnerable with this young man broke down the “tough guy” barriers and helped a young person take his first steps away from substance abuse.

About five years ago, and many years into recovery, Jim faced another huge challenge in his life when he was diagnosed with Hepatitis C, a chronic and potentially life-threatening illness that resulted from his years of substance abuse. While his diagnosis was a grim one, his quest for health and his desire to fight the disease took him through an experimental treatment program at Hershey Medical Center. The treatment induces an anemic state as it fights the disease, and the toll it took on Jim’s body was severe. He lost 25 pounds and found himself exhausted most of the time. Depression and isolationism are frequent side effects of the treatment, and so doctors recommended continuing to work in order to have a consistent routine and daily interaction with the outside world. Jim has completed this course of treatment, and currently, the Hepatitis C is “undetectable” in his system.

Business and community leaders in south-central Pennsylvania established the Essence of Humanity Award in 2001. The Award is presented by participating organizations in collaboration with a steering committee, which evaluates nominations for meeting the “exceptional” standard. For more information, contact Robin Stauffer, Executive Director, at 717-293-4498, or visit the website at [“essenceofhumanity.org”](http://essenceofhumanity.org).

For more information about the Council on Drug & Alcohol Abuse, please contact Kathleen Herr, Director of Education and Training, at 717-299-2831, or kherr@dehelp.org. Media outlets wishing to schedule an interview can contact Stephanie Gingrich, Community Outreach Coordinator, at 717-299-2831, or sgingrich@dehelp.org.

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