



The adolescent years are usually spent hanging out with friends, not worrying about being homeless or where your next meal is coming from. Unfortunately for some youth in our community, that is not the case. One local agency is working hard to change that.

The Mental Illness Recovery Center (MIRCI) has been providing assistance to mentally ill and homeless adults in the Midlands for more than 50 years. It was not until a few years ago that the agency saw the need for a youth program.

In 2014, the United Way of the Midlands, in cooperation with MIRCI and the University of South Carolina, created the “youth in transition” committee to examine the needs of underserved youth in our area.

Although many young people find the drop-in center through MIRCI’s outreach workers and referrals, President & Executive Director Julie Ann Avin says those they’ve already helped are their best advocates. “The homeless youth travel in packs, just like regular adolescents,” Avin said. “They look out for each other and help each other.”

A little over a year later, the center has served more than 168 youth in our community. Here are just a few of their stories.

## Youth In Transition: In Their Own Words

Together, the groups recognized that young adults ages 17-24 transitioning from children’s homes and foster care are at greatest risk for becoming homeless. One missing component was a place where young people could get resources to help them survive in the adult world.

In January 2017, through the help of a federal grant, MIRCI opened the doors to the Youth Drop-In Center in downtown Columbia. The center provides basic needs like showers, meals and transportation. Youths accessing the center will get counseling from a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist, a psychiatric nurse, three licensed clinicians and several other health care professionals. Young people also attend a series of skill-building classes on careers and independent living. Computers and Wi-Fi are available to use for job searches and resume-building.

**I am Moriah.** My experience at MIRCI has been an experience of a lifetime. When I came to MIRCI, I was a homeless 21-year-old with no job experience, a need for improvement of independent living skills and no permanent residence. In September of 2017, I stepped through MIRCI’s doors and was introduced to resources for everything from food, clothes and jobs. Through MIRCI I went from homelessness to having my own home, from not knowing where to eat, to knowing it so well that I can help other youth. I have found independence, stability and a chance to be something great. Thanks to MIRCI the doors are now open. MIRCI has faith in me that I can be something. Because of you I am great.



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“The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But ... the good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” — Martin Luther King Jr.



**My name is Kelsey.** I got in trouble a lot as a kid. I came to Columbia and stayed at a few shelters. I didn't do good there and got kicked out. I had anger issues. When I came to MIRCI, I wasn't in a good place. MIRCI helped me. They listened to me and gave me a safe place to myself. MIRCI helped me move

into an apartment. Now I have a job. I'm doing good now. I'm not angry anymore. I'm proud of what I'm doing. I couldn't do it without MIRCI.

**My name is Atlantis.** I was born and raised in Columbia. We moved to Charleston when I was 9. We moved around a lot because stuff happened to me when I was little and we moved to protect me.

We came back to Columbia in 2012. I went to Richland Northeast. I finished 11th grade but stuff

hit the bottom of the ground and I got expelled. I was able to get my GED. When I came to MIRCI, I was a closed shell. MIRCI showed me how to open up just a little. MIRCI gives me a safe place to talk about things and express my emotions. I've

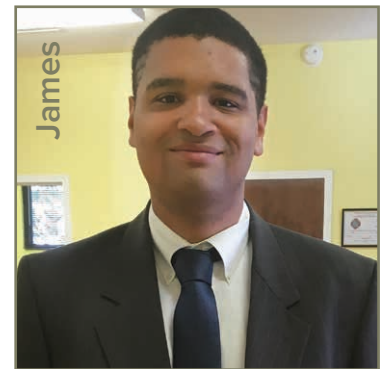


learned to have fun. I love pool. I have a part-time job at Big Lots and I've applied for a job at the zoo. MIRCI is a starting point for people trying to get jobs and find housing.

**Hello, my name is James.** I was 17 years old living on the streets from the time I was out of DSS care. I was living with friends or family.

They took my money and used it for whatever; they never gave me any of it. I came to MIRCI and I was able to take a shower, eat and look at TV. I get to do a lot more with my life. I got a job at a diner. I see the doctor and get my meds. I get my money now. I love the staff at MIRCI cause

if I lose them I would lose my mind. They help me with all my needs. I am happy that I have them on my side. They will always have my back. They make me feel safe. They show me a better way to do things. They are my new family.



According to Avin, “The drop-in center’s success has helped us recognize the need for more transitional housing for the youth.”

MIRCI is currently constructing a 10-bedroom home for young men. The expected completion date is in late July 2018. Thanks in part to support from BlueCross, MIRCI is helping youth in transition find their place. ■

## Interested in donating to the MIRCI Youth Drop-In Center? Here are some of the items on its wish list:

**Laundry & Bath:** Gently used scrubs, towels, washcloths, bathmats, lotion, facial moisturizer, toothbrushes, toothpaste, travel-size deodorant, shower shoes, socks

**Recreation:** Corn hole set, playing cards, gently used books, gaming systems and games, streaming movie player, movies

**School Supplies:** Notebooks, notebook paper, pens, pencils, highlighters, folders, backpacks

**Housing:** Bed linens, televisions, cleaning supplies, cooking utensils, pots and pans, dining set

Donations can be dropped off at the drop-in center (1433 Gregg Street) or administration building (1408 Gregg Street), 8:30 a.m. — 5 p.m., Monday – Friday.