

Sawbones 562: The True Meaning of Candlenights

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["Medicines" by The Taxpayers plays]

Justin: Hello, everybody! And welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And we have a very special, what would you say, a very special holiday? Holiday episode, Syd.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: 'Tis the season!

Sydnee: Yeah, well, a very special holiday episode, but not any of the holidays you might

Justin: Mm-hm. Well, I don't know, as listener of this podcast, it may not be the ones you think.

Sydnee: Yeah, well, were you thinking about a holiday that we made up? Not me. I can't take credit. I didn't help make it up.

Justin: Thank you. Yeah, I made it up. My brothers were there, and I made it up.

Sydnee: You made it up?

Justin: I feel like I made it up.

Sydnee: Is that—is that canon, that you made it up? I don't know, I actually don't know.

Justin: No, we all came up with it together, I think. But like, yeah, it's a made-up holiday, but aren't they all?

Sydnee: Well, I did not make up Candlenights. I take no credit for that, certainly. I feel like I've at least played like a strong role in developing the lore, you know?

Justin: Absolutely! You've had a handle on the ball since the word go.

Sydnee: Well, I liked the idea that—

Justin: Can't spell Candlenights without Sydnee Ann, that's what I say.

Sydnee: Yeah, well...

Justin: It's the 'Ann' part, mainly. [chuckles]

Sydnee: No, E, though.

Justin: No E.

Sydnee: No E on that Ann. And it's gone, I lost it when I married you.

Justin: Cool. Yeah. But gained so—but gained so much.

Sydnee: Put Smirl in there, in the middle.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And added McElroy in the end. Anyway, I feel like I've contributed a lot of the extra stuff—the stuffing around Candlenights.

Justin: The Candlenights stuffing.

Sydnee: That we've put in the Candlenights turkey.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: I have contributed that, at least.

Justin: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Sydnee: I like that I can just make anything up, and it becomes part of Candlenights now, and you have to deal with it.

Justin: That's the thrill of it. Yeah, I feel that kind of power every day, Syd. It is really—being a religious figure is intoxicating, I agree.

Sydnee: And Candlenights is coming up!

Justin: True.

Sydnee: Very soon.

Justin: The goose is coming. No, sorry, the goose is getting fat.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Well, I mean—

Justin: The goose is not coming.

Sydnee: The goose might also be coming. Maybe the goose—

Justin: There will not be any goose!

Sydnee: Maybe the goose is on its way here, getting fatter on the way.

Justin: En route, the goose is getting fatter. No, Candlenights—well, this is the thing about Candlenights, it may already be here. Because canonically, Candlenights can begin at any time, and you don't know when it's gonna happen. And if you say it's happening, it's happening.

Sydnee: Well, but it's... it's going to happen on the 6th. December 6th, this Saturday.

Justin: Because we scheduled a live event.

Sydnee: Yes. [chuckles]

Justin: To celebrate Candlenights. But Candlenights itself happens whenever. It's hard to say.

Sydnee: Well, but don't you think that by celebrating it on December 6th, we will manifest it?

Justin: It will be a beautiful celebration of Candlenights.

Sydnee: And we will manifest it. It will happen.

Justin: A beautiful celebration of Candlenights. For a lot of those people, Candlenights is gonna come that evening. And it will definitely be Candlenights for a lot of people there.

Sydnee: Candlenights is... is a live—can we talk about the live show?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Let's talk about the live show.

Justin: A live celebration of Candlenights.

Sydnee: We don't need to get deeper into—Justin and his brothers made up a holiday, it's called Candlenights.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: We don't need to know more about that.

Justin: But today, we're gonna talk about the true meaning of Candlenights.

Sydnee: Yes. Yes. So, for this coming celebration of Candlenights that may or may not be on the day of Candlenights, we cannot know, this is ineffable. [chuckles]

Justin: Right. Just like the Jellicle cats themselves.

Sydnee: [laughs] We cannot know. But we will be doing our live presentation, and all proceeds will go to Harmony House. So, that's why it's a very special holiday to me. Maybe my favorite?

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Really? No, no, Halloween.

Sydnee: Yeah, but on Halloween, we don't do anything that raises money for the nonprofit that I care so deeply about.

Justin: This is true. That's true.

Sydnee: Now, if you want—if we—

Justin: We used to do the—I mean, the March of Dimes is out there, that's the problem. UNICEF, they're out there with those little boxes. You know, little boxes, people come around and collect your change.

Sydnee: Mm-hm, yeah. Yeah!

Justin: I feel like kids don't do that anymore.

Sydnee: I feel like I was sent home with one of those in school more than once.

Justin: And I was like, "Absolutely not. I'm gonna be getting candy, thank you so much. Thank you for your offer, but no, I won't be collecting change for UNICEF."

Sydnee: Were we supposed to do that instead?

Justin: We were supposed to do—I—or like—

Sydnee: Or alongside? Like, "Give me some candy, and also a quarter."

Justin: So, my understanding with the UNICEF boxes—

Sydnee: Or a dime. [chuckles]

Justin: Was like, they were gonna—March of Dimes is an Easter thing. My understanding with the little UNICEF boxes, the times that happened to me, it was like, hey, these kids are going door to door anyway. They should be going and asking for—like, why can't they also ask for loose change for UNICEF?

Sydnee: Why can't they ask for money?

Justin: They're going door to door anyway!

Sydnee: Well, we're already asking for candy? That would be—that would—I would be hard-pressed if that was still a thing. Maybe that's why they don't do it. I never have change. We never have change.

Justin: It's true.

Sydnee: And it's hard because kids go on field trips, and they're asked to bring random amounts of cash.

Justin: Seven dollars. Bring seven dollars.

Sydnee: And it should be cash. And it is, it's like—and it's always something like that, it's not a five, it's not a 10, it's nothing you might have on you.

Justin: "Bring \$12 for our farm field trip."

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Like, what do you want \$12 for? I don't have \$12!

Sydnee: And don't try to send extra, don't—if they're like, "We need \$9," and you're like, "All I got is a 10." If you send a 10—

Justin: No, kids don't want that.

Sydnee: Well, no, the—they don't—they don't want to deal with that at the school. Even if you write like, "Keep the one."

Justin: Hey, sorry.

Sydnee: Sorry.

Justin: I think our teachers go through enough without having to make change. Physicians sometimes forget that a lot—

Sydnee: [chuckles] Don't even!

Justin: My heart is with our teachers.

Sydnee: I want them to keep—I tried to say keep the change.

Justin: My heart is with our teachers.

Sydnee: Of course!

Justin: Here's what I say to our teachers, be the change. Do you know what I'm saying? Thank you so much.

Sydnee: Well, they are the change. I don't think they need to—

Justin: Thank you for being the change.

Sydnee: I wouldn't tell them to be the change, I would thank them for already—

Justin: I believe teachers are—I believe teachers are our future.

Sydnee: We love teachers here at Sawbones. I think—I think we—I think our pro-teacher position is pretty clear.

Justin: We're pretty adamantly pro-teacher. But anyhow.

Sydnee: I was an assistant professor for a while.

Justin: Oh. [chuckles] Oh, my.

Sydnee: [chuckles] That makes it sound like I was stripped of my title.

Justin: I want to—I went—

Sydnee: I just went to a different job, and I don't—

Justin: "I went to college for five years. My dad was an adjunct professor." Like, what are we doing? Like, we can all throw out our bona fides, you know? I tried unsucces— "I've tried for years unsuccessfully to get an honorary doctorate." Like, we all have our... our bona fides.

Sydnee: Don't give up.

Justin: [chuckles] I can't!

Sydnee: Don't give up. Should we talk about Harmony House first?

Justin: Yeah, I would love to.

Sydnee: Okay. And then we can—and then you can tell everybody about the great show we have planned.

Justin: Yeah, absolutely.

Sydnee: Yeah. Okay, so, Harmony House is a nonprofit here in Huntington, West Virginia, that has been around since 1987.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: So, as long as Griffin.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: That's the way I remember it.

Sydnee: Exactly. That's how I think everyone in Huntington remembers it.

Justin: Yeah, I think so too.

Sydnee: Mm-hm. At the time, homelessness was not an issue that was on, I think, everyone's minds. As much as I feel like it is today, I feel like the conversation around homelessness is much more present, because we have so many more people visibly experiencing homelessness than I think in 1987 they necessarily did in Huntington. But because it was not as visible, there also weren't a lot of resources for people experiencing homelessness.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: You know, if a problem only affects a small number of people, sometimes, unfortunately, it can get ignored or neglected. We see that on Sawbones a lot, talking about various diseases that don't get the kind of attention and research that they need, because it just doesn't affect as many people, so you don't get the dollars. So, at the time, there weren't a lot of resources in Huntington, or any at all, for people experiencing homelessness. And so, a group of mainly women, including two of our still to this day board members, Betty and Sydney, not me—

Justin: A different Sydney.

Sydnee: The original Sydney. The OG Sydney. I'm the new Sydnee.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: They staged a camp out on the courthouse steps to call attention to homelessness. And I mean, really cool, by the way.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Very cool. To call attention to this issue and to demand action be taken. And from that very public protest that drew a ton of media attention and a lot of support from the community, Harmony House was formed, the original Capitol Huntington Coalition for the Homeless. If you work in this space, you may be familiar with the concepts of continuums of care, or CoCs.

Which are basically a way that the government eventually came together to fund programs that help with homelessness—by saying, "Hey, if all you different organizations in a community work together, kind of under one governing entity, and pool resources and try to complement each other along the continuum of care, as opposed to duplicating resources or duplicating services, if you do that all together, we'll give you federal money to do it." And—

Justin: The federal government doesn't want to duplicate efforts, they want a—

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: A one—so the CoC is sort of like an organizing body to make sure that the funds get distributed properly.

Sydnee: Mm-hm. So, Harmony House was the CoC. Harmony House and the CoC were created together. Harmony House now is a member of our CoC. We have an independent CoC that, you know, kind of an umbrella over all of our organizations in the community. Places like branches—the domestic violence shelter, the City Mission.

Pretera is a behavioral healthcare organization. So, a lot of groups that come together and address homelessness collectively, and tons of other smaller entities that might not receive funding through the CoC, but also

work on these efforts. So, I give you that history to say that like Harmony House has been doing this great work in our community since 1987.

And has—really has seen sort of the nature of homelessness, what leads to people experiencing homelessness and what is needed to address those barriers to housing and to other quality of life, you know, issues, we have watched it change, and it has changed dramatically.

Justin: Mm-hm. How so?

Sydnee: I would say, well, one, it is important to remember that the leading cause of homelessness is a lack of housing, housing prices, poverty in general. I think it's really important to always stress that. We are in a housing crisis across the nation, it is not just here in Huntington, but certainly we are being hit just as hard as everywhere else.

We do not have enough apartments to put people experiencing homelessness in, even after they have a voucher through HUD where they can pay their rent. Even after they have that—like, it's not cash in hand, but you get—so to speak.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: Even after the money's there, we don't have apartments to rent people. There's no available housing. We don't have enough affordable public housing in this country, period.

Justin: Now, what about, Sydnee, the Romance of the Rails? Because a lot of people point to that as one of the causes of—homelessness is just—in our society, things are so bound up, you feel so chained in. And the Romance of the Rails calls to you, and you decide to live your life on the rails. What about that sort of is one of the causes?

Sydnee: Justin, I'm really glad that you brought this up.

Justin: Brought what up?

Sydnee: The idea that—

Justin: Sorry, if you could use—we try to use proper terminology on Sawbones.

Sydnee: I'm really glad you brought up the concept of the Romance of the Rails.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Because I think what you're speaking to—

Justin: [chuckles] The way you said it.

Sydnee: What you're speaking to is a pervasive myth.

Justin: Ah, dang it! [chuckles] Not again!

Sydnee: Well, no—

Justin: A classic Justin McElroy whoopsie.

Sydnee: It's important to call attention to this. People do not choose to be homeless. To this day, I have to speak with people outside of this work, some of them well-intentioned, not all of them, who will suggest that, well, we offer all these resources, but you can't make people take 'em. And a lot of these people just, they want to live outside.

They want to live in a tent down on the river bank. They want to have more of a transient existence and not have, you know, a sort of permanent place to lay their head. That this is a desirable state for the majority of people experiencing homelessness. That is untrue. That is untrue. People do not want to be experiencing homelessness.

Justin: I got a—I had a guy here doing some work on the house, and he was talking about this week, and he said, "This weekend I might go out camping, I haven't decided yet." That's a choice, right? That's somebody who wants to maybe go live outside for a weekend, and wants to have that

option. But if he chooses to not do that, he definitely is going to be happy he has a home to go to.

Sydnee: Well, and generally speaking, people who are choosing to go camping for a weekend are demonstrably better-resourced than somebody who's experiencing homelessness, so that they can bring all the things you need to comfortably survive outside for a weekend. The people I take care of do not readily have access to all those things, they're lucky if they have a tent to begin with. And many of the other things you would take camping, they don't have.

So, people do not choose to be homeless. There are a lot of barriers that exist, especially if somebody has been experiencing homelessness chronically. To start to kind of reintroduce that person to being housed and what all that entails to, you know, have a place of your own and keep it furnished and clean, and you know, cook meals and pay your bills and all of that, that sometimes there is a process. And there are tons of barriers there that aren't just money and availability of an apartment, right?

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: There's more to it than that, certainly. But to say that people want to be homeless is—it's not true. That is a myth. People do not want to be experiencing homelessness.

Justin: Think about how hard you have to work to keep on top of like your everyday bills. Like, where is your—like, I know right now, I could tell you where our kids' birth certificates are. I could tell you where our insurance policies are. I know where our family photos are.

I know where the bills that we need to pay are. I know like—but that—even with all that, I still fall behind. You know, there's still things that like I forget or lose—imagine trying to keep track of all that and like having a life, and rebuild an existence, when you can't even keep your documents dry. Like, it's—there's so many factors you don't consider—

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: When it just comes to like rebuilding.

Sydnee: That's exactly—that is exactly—I think, unless you've experienced it, it can be hard to comprehend how difficult—it's always so much easier—if we can prevent someone from losing housing, if we can help with a rent or a utility bill, or whatever is necessary, negotiate with a landlord, do something to try to prevent that person from falling into homelessness, that is always so much easier than trying to get somebody housed again once they've lost housing.

It's an incredibly difficult process. And things like that are exactly what people take for granted. I think about when I—when I changed my name, after we got married, that's a pretty codified process. I was prepared for it. I read about what I was supposed to do. We were resourced enough to get to the places I needed to get to and to pay the fee I needed to pay, all that stuff. And if you remember, they still sent us to the wrong place twice.

Justin: Yeah, it's true.

Sydnee: "No, you have to get this before you can get that. Oh, no, you have to get that before we can get this." I mean, so it's an incredibly complex process. And then if you're starting from scratch, and if you don't have—it costs five dollars to get a birth certificate at the Cabell County Courthouse, at least most recent I checked. It could be more, I don't have information—

Justin: I don't think anybody's gonna check you.

Sydnee: My point is, if you don't have five dollars, or if you only have five dollars, is that what you're going to spend it on? Probably not, especially if you're hungry. So, how in the world can you begin that process? So, I think—I think it's really important to highlight that. The situation with homelessness, so again, poverty, housing crisis, lack of availability, these are all the underlying factors that everyone across the country is experiencing to some degree.

Well, not everyone, but most people are experiencing to some degree. And that is definitely what leads most people to experiencing homelessness and

making it difficult to leave it. However, here in West Virginia and in many parts of Appalachia, I think we have a couple other factors that have contributed to... I hate to—I always hate using the word "epidemic" in these contexts, because it's a very stigmatizing thing.

When we talk about opioids, that's when it always comes up, the "opioid epidemic." And in some ways, it was. We had just the right, or wrong, as you may look at it, series of factors that led to the situation we have now, what opioids did to our community. But I think that, I don't know, I always hate to say "epidemic."

Justin: I think we have—

Sydnee: It can be a dismissive way of just saying, "Oh, it was an epidemic. It just like caught us all off guard."

Justin: I think we have—I think we have an income inequality epidemic.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: And until that epidemic is solved, then there's a lot of other systemic things that will not be fixed.

Sydnee: Yes, yes. And I think—I think that needs to underlie everything. Everyone needs to have access to housing, to food, to education, to health care, to safety. Until all of those needs are being met for everyone in our society, in an equitable fashion, we can't get to addressing these other things that people I think want to focus on a lot more when it comes to homelessness. I think people like to reach for these other issues as the real culprit, the real problem and the things that we can fix.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: Because these other issues feel so... insurmountable.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And they're not, it's willingness to surmount them. So, I want to talk about those other factors that I think are unique in this area, and how you all attending Candelights and—or streaming or contributing or helping out in some way, why it is so important and meaningful to our community. But first, we have to go to the Billing Department.

Justin: Let's go!

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: So, we have a big picture of homelessness, but let's talk about our area specifically, because I bet our area mirrors a lot of towns of our size.

Sydnee: Absolutely. I think the thing that a lot of—that gets a lot of play in the press, and I think when you—if you're familiar with the Trump administration's executive order on homelessness, or if you've read—and I don't know—if you don't work in this space, I can't imagine you've read the new Notice of Funding Opportunity that's come out for CoCs, for these groups that address homelessness, that we talked about.

Justin: Well, Syd, a Notice of Funding Opportunity? Funding and opportunity are two really good things, so I'm pretty excited to hear about it.

Sydnee: I doubt a lot of people were reading these HUD grants at length, but if you were, you know what I'm talking about. A lot of the focus is moving towards, how do we address substance use disorder? How do we address mental illness? And then there's always the focus on law and order, and partnering with law enforcement, and putting criminals behind bars that kind of underlies all of that rhetoric, right?

Justin: Yeah. The things people want to do to feel like they're addressing the problem, without actually doing anything about it.

Sydnee: Exactly, exactly. So, in a lot of the language from the executive order and from this new stuff that's coming down from HUD—which has been challenged, by the way, by the California Attorney General, and

hopefully that will be a successful challenge, but we'll see—focuses on we—if you are living outside, and we can't just—let's say you need anything other than just to have a home.

You know, you're—the issue is pretty straightforward. You lost your job, the rent got raised and you couldn't pay it, something very like—we just need to give you a little bit of money, get you back into housing, and then you're probably not going to need a lot of support after that. So, those people were still fine with housing under these new executive orders.

However, if you have other needs that should be met, like treatment for substance use disorder or mental illness, basically, they want us to do that first. This completely undermines what we call the housing-first philosophy, which is how we have addressed homelessness for a long time. What that means is, until we get you somewhere housed and kind of meet those basic needs, if you think of like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you need somewhere safe.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: You need to be somewhere where you are not constantly under threat of harm. Until we can meet that need, it's really hard for you to be able to do the work to meet these other more complex needs.

Justin: Remember earlier, when we were talking about me keeping my documents safe? Imagine like if you get a job—let's say you get a job like cleaning up at a restaurant afterwards. Like, you have—you need a uniform, you're gonna have to have a place to store your stuff. Like, where—did you have your ID and your paperwork that you needed to like get the job in the first place? Like, how did you get there on time? You know what I mean? Like it's just like, all those things that should be, that are so much easier once you just have a base of operations.

Sydnee: And you know how hard it is to navigate the American healthcare system.

Justin: Forget about it.

Sydnee: Even if—I mean, and we're—I'm saying generally, for everyone, if you have insurance and you have a car, and you have a home, and you can get an appointment with the kind of provider you need, it still can be months before you can get care. It still can be a pain to be able to pay co-pays, to be able to pay whatever, maybe the medication you need isn't covered. I mean, there's still so many barriers. Now, take all that, and you're experiencing homelessness. The shelter that we run in town has one shower, and one washer and one dryer. So, if we have—and we do many days, have a couple 100 people or more walking through our doors, it is logistically impossible that everybody has access to washing their clothes or taking a shower.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: How easy is it to maintain a job if you don't have regular access to those things? How easy is it to get a job if you don't have regular access to those things? How easy is it to get to a doctor's appointment, to do the kind of intensive work that it can take to treat something like substance use disorder, where you need to go to multiple appointments, maybe do some, you know, an inpatient treatment program first, and then go to counseling sessions.

And on top of all that, if you have ever experienced homelessness, if you've ever lived outside, you know that your nervous system is constantly in that fight or flight response. You are always on guard, worried about your things being stolen or being assaulted. And so, you can't even get to that point where you can think about that next level of needs, because your brain is in survive the next minute, survive the next minute.

And that's how we all would be. Every one of us is wired to respond that way to that situation. You or I would be the same if we were experiencing homelessness today. We wouldn't be able to think long-term planning, "How can I, you know, get these needs met in six months?" It would be, "How do I keep our family alive until tomorrow?"

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, because of these new mandates from HUD, because of these new exec—because of the Trump administration, the focus is going to be on trying to force people experiencing homelessness into treatment for whatever... whatever other issues may be contributing to their current condition. And I mean, in that way, again, let me underline poverty and the housing crisis, these are the issues. But certainly, it is hard to go through the process of getting housing and maintaining housing if you're also experiencing substance use disorder or severe mental illness that's untreated.

Justin: Right. I feel like the question that underlies a lot is, do you have—do people have value when they're not making money? And I feel like if you believe that people do have value when they're not making money, then the process of like getting people's life back together makes a lot of sense. Because you gotta start with things that we all need and, you know, you have to decide that even if they don't get to a point where they're generating profits, it's still worth them having a good life. And I feel like that's really the question.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Because otherwise it's like people are saying, well, if they're—we have to get them into treatment programs. Why? So they can work. Why? So they can generate value.

Sydnee: Well, they intrinsically have value.

Justin: Right, exactly.

Sydnee: Yeah. I'm glad you said that, because that is exactly the question that I've asked elected officials and people who run other major organizations in our community I won't name. I have—I have asked this question, do you believe people have base value, even if they are not contributing to your tax base? And I mean, if the answer is no, there's probably not much I can do to convince you to help us out. But I think that most people who listen to our show would agree that the answer is yes.

Justin: Yeah. If you're looking at it like, how do I get my investment? When do I get my ROI? You know, when do I get my return on investments? Like, it's not an investment.

Sydnee: There is—there is an argument to be made for the health of a community.

Justin: For sure.

Sydnee: A healthy community is one that does provide for all members, regardless of their inability to, you know, give back to that community monetarily.

Justin: Yes, 100%.

Sydnee: That is a healthy community, it makes life better for all of us.

Justin: Systemically, there's also value in—and that's what's so frustrating, is I think one of the big voices that you hear is like business owners, especially for us downtown, who don't want to, I mean, to put it bluntly, don't want to see homeless people around their businesses.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: And it's like, you want to move the people. They're people. Like, let's solve the problem and then there aren't homeless people. Like, they want to get rid of the homeless people, we'd like to put them in homes. [laughs] Like it's like—I mean, it's not...

Sydnee: I mean, yes, I would also like if the—if the people that I take care of didn't have to be out on the sidewalk, because they had an apartment to live in. Then I—I mean, we—yes. [chuckles]

Justin: Homelessness solved! People have houses, give 'em houses.

Sydnee: You know what? People experiencing homelessness, again, also don't want to be out on the sidewalk when it's cold.

Justin: Love a house.

Sydnee: Yes, they would love a place to go. I think though that specifically in this area, a lot of the focus turns to opioids. So, it is not—I'm not the first person to call attention to this, there are endless movies, documentaries, TV series, books, written about the opioid crisis here in Appalachia. I think, and again, there's so much more to be said about this, so I'm just giving you sort of like the cliff notes, how did we get here?

We had the, sort of the, again, the perfect conditions for something like this to take hold. We are in an area where a lot of people do live in poverty, where they work hard labor jobs that are—you're not meant to work for your entire life. They destroy your joints and they hurt your back, and sometimes your lungs. And we had a predatory pharmaceutical community that came in and said, "We have a solution for your problems." They lied and said that oxycontin wasn't addictive, when it was.

Justin: This isn't political, by the way.

Sydnee: No, this is all well-known—

Justin: This is in court documents—

Sydnee: I mean, this has been litigated. This has—

Justin: Like it's—

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Settled law.

Sydnee: Yes, many settlements for this. And again, so many movies and dramatizations and documentaries you can watch about this. The result is that a lot of people became addicted to opioids. As the pill mills got shut down and doctors stopped overprescribing, and state legislation tightened the way that you can prescribe these medications, the pills left.

And what replaced them were things like heroin and fentanyl. And now, we're three or four generations into this. So, I think it's really important to understand that the—in some cases, people that I take care of at Harmony House—because in case I haven't mentioned this before, I have a clinic there at Harmony House, where I take care of people's acute medical needs, kind of like a walk-in clinic.

And I also help to provide some chronic care for some of their conditions that are going unmanaged. And then just try to, I don't know, destigmatize the whole health care process for people experiencing homelessness, people with substance use disorder, people with HIV, people with serious mental illness. They feel so alienated from health care, I want to make—I want to make them feel like they deserve it.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: And make them feel safe with a healthcare provider again. But for a lot of the people I take care of, they have—opioids have been a part of their life since they were little children.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: Their first experience with drug use was it eight or nine, 10 years old. The average... the average first injection drug use in this area, age of injection drug use, is 12. And so, if that has been your experience and you have been exposed to these substances for that long, and you've been exposed to everything that comes with that because they are illegal, you've probably been exposed to incarceration.

You've been exposed to the loss of a family member or friend from an overdose. You've been exposed to trauma or abuse, more than likely. Because of all of that, I am taking care of people who have never really had the opportunity to feel safe—

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: To have their sort of nervous systems brought down from that, you know, sympathetic, nervous, fight or flight, constant response, who have

never been able to develop sort of like coping skills or life skills. Or just like basic how do you manage your own place? They've never had their own place.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And so that's really where we're starting from. And so, these are individuals who need a ton of support and need a ton of help and care from not just myself, but from everyone in this community, and need a lot more resources than we have to provide.

Justin: And that's what a place like Harmony House does, right? It steps in to provide those resources.

Sydnee: That's exactly our job. So, I am just the medical clinic.

Justin: Just the medical clinic!

Sydnee: [chuckles] I am—that is the little part that—through Valley Health, which is a federally qualified health center in our area, provides the clinic, and then I get to do my care there. But we also, of course, at Harmony House, provide access to housing resources. So, we will help walk you through the process of doing coordinated entry, doing an intake, where we can start to figure out what kind of housing program might be best for you.

We have—there are different ones across our CoC that we can help connect you with, help connect you with case managers or navigators. Certainly, as part of that process, a lot of people do take advantage of our mental health services we provide.

We have a counselor at Harmony House, we have a psychologist that comes once a week to Harmony House, we have psychiatrist that comes every other week to Harmony House. And then myself! I'm a family doctor, and that means we can do anything. As long as we've done the CME, we know, we can do it! [chuckles] And so, we provide a lot of behavioral health care and counseling at Harmony House.

We also help a lot of people access substance use disorder treatment, if that is what they want. It is never a prerequisite to accessing resources at Harmony House, we do not put that mandate on people when they walk in the door. But it's right there, and we're ready to offer it to every single individual who says, "You know what? I want to talk about starting Suboxone.

I want to talk about going to an inpatient treatment plan." We offer all of that right on site. And then in addition to all that, I am also able to, as I mentioned, offer care for things like HIV and hepatitis C, that a lot of people experiencing homelessness just don't have access to.

So, I manage a lot of those patients as well. We've cured hepatitis C for multiple clients. We have a lot of patients who have—we have like long-acting HIV meds and HIV prevention meds that a lot of our patients would like to access, so that they can help keep themselves safe.

Obviously, we hand out Narcan, naloxone for overdose prevention. And we have a lot of wonderful staff who are—have been clients in the past, who have lots of lived experience, who are in chronic recovery at times, and who can help people feel safe and comfortable in taking that next step in their journey.

In addition, of course, we have food, we have hygiene supplies, we have clothes that have been donated, so—tents, when we have them, all those other things, the basic needs that we can meet while helping access—people access these greater resources.

Justin: Excellent. Well, Sydnee, there's a really fun way that people can get involved with this effort if they wanted to. And I don't want to lose focus on that.

Sydnee: Yes, let's talk about the fun—the fun—I've taken us through the serious part. This is who we are, and this is why I think harmony House is so important.

Justin: And here's how you can do something about it, bit.ly/candlenights2025. That is the link to get both tickets for this year's live

celebration, that's on December 6th, 7PM, at the beautiful Keith Albee Performing Arts Center. It's gonna—newly renovated. It's gonna knock your socks off. That's at 7PM. But you can also watch the virtual version of that show, December 19th, at 9PM.

We will be in the chat, watching along, so that's going to be a lot of fun. And you can—that ticket is included if you get a live ticket. But anything you can give to either one of those, like you can give additional to that, it is so hugely helpful for all the reasons that Sydnee has been outlining here and so essential. It is, I think, by far, Harmony House's biggest fundraiser of the year, and I think it's a really important way that they can offer their services.

Sydnee: Absolutely, we absolutely need as much help as we can get. This has always been true, but especially as we look towards these funding cuts that we anticipated were likely to happen under the Trump administration. And we also see an increase in homelessness in general because of all the other policies of the Trump administration.

Justin: Mm-hm.

Sydnee: Unfortunately, I think a lot of experts have been warning lawmakers that this was going to happen for a long time, and...

Justin: Here we are.

Sydnee: And here we are. And so, we need your help!

Justin: Yeah. And you're gonna get a great show in exchange. We got lots of skits and games and videos and songs and jokes and interactivity, interactive elements. And it's gonna be a hoot! A hoot and a half, maybe? I think so.

Sydnee: And can I—is it okay if I go ahead and say we are—we are, of course, continuing—

Justin: Our medicine called Christmas franchise, now in its however... however 'nunth year. 'Nth year of existence.

Sydnee: I don't even know what year it is, but yes, the story of Tabitha Big City and Chris Evergreen will continue.

Justin: Yeah. It's exciting.

Sydnee: This Saturday and—

Justin: Live in a—in a live radio play that Sydnee has scripted.

Sydnee: And if you—if you can—if you can come to Huntington—

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: There are a lot of other activities.

Justin: There's a scavenger hunt.

Sydnee: There's a scavenger hunt being organized. I believe my mom and Cooper are finishing decorating the Star King tomorrow.

Justin: Yes. Yes.

Sydnee: And so, that will be fun. And a lot of local businesses have reached out to—they want to have special drinks or, you know, treats or things that you might enjoy, that are McElroy themed.

Justin: Yeah. You can check that out if you go to the—that same link underneath the ticket link, you can find where all the local businesses are getting involved. You know, Jolly Pirate, Nomada, The Grill on Third, Jockey Club, Backyard Pizza. A lot of places are doing stuff for Candlenights. There's also a scavenger hunt for the Star King. It's a—I can't believe it!

Sydnee: The first clue is already up!

Justin: Yeah, the first clue is out.

Sydnee: I didn't even know that the clue is already out.

Justin: You can get a hot cuppa from Pete and Vicky, and not be too far from your final destination. I'll give you a hint. That's about... I'll just say it's about a coffee shop downtown.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: That's it.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: That's the only thing I'll give you

Sydnee: I will also say—

Justin: Sawbones bonus.

Sydnee: If you're interested in learning more about Harmony House, or if you do want to donate, harmonyhousewv.com is our website, so you can check out—if you just want to learn more about what we do and see nice pictures of the wonderful people I get to work with.

Justin: That is going to do it for us, folks. That link, one more time, last time, bit.ly/candlenights2025. We want to come back and tell you what a big success this was next time we record. So, please, please, please help us out. That will do it for us for this week. Oh, thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. And thanks to you for listening. That's gonna do it for us, until next time. My name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

["Medicines" by The Taxpayers plays]

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