

Stacey “Sam” Picard

Charter Oak State College

Psychology

Graduate 2021

Appropriations Public Hearing-March 4, 2021

Higher Education Agencies

Good evening Representative Chafee, Senator Daugherty Abrams and Congresswoman DeLauro and members of the appropriations committee,

My name is Sam Picard. I am 48 years old and live in Middletown. I am a lifelong resident of Connecticut. In 1996, six years after graduating from high school and being quite aimless and confused about my life, I found my lighthouse. I use this metaphor for feeling like I found the start of my future because I grew up the daughter of a fisherman in Connecticut. The lighthouse is the symbol of finding one’s way home in the storm. My father was skilled at using nautical landmarks to make sure we arrived home safely after being out on the water after a day of fishing, crabbing, clamming or checking the lobster pots, in any type of weather. I remember being challenged during a post-high school training course in which there were kids from all over the country that Connecticut is not a boating state. I beg to differ, it was my whole upbringing. In 1996, the lighthouse that I found was Benhaven. Benhaven is a place where people with autism can learn and live. I started a one hour per week volunteer position in a group home with adults who have severe forms of autism with other related disorders. I loved it so much that when I was offered a part time job a few months later, I jumped at the chance to be a part of a team that was providing 24 hour care and support to these amazing individuals. The work invigorated me and gave me purpose. I knew nothing about the field or the diagnoses but I instantly fell in love with assisting these folks in their small victories!

Prior to finding Benhaven, I had managed to finish my associate’s degree, amidst the confusion of a divorce and my mother battling cancer. I took a few classes at a State University towards my

Bachelors, but I could not find a balance, and decided to just focus on work and survival. After achieving a part time job in direct care, I quickly made a reputation for myself as a hard worker and was offered a full time job in the group home. I worked for more than a decade with the same six residents, including the Ben of Benhaven, whose mother was our founder. I set myself apart from my colleague's by creating new opportunities for our adult learners and showing the kind of dedication that people would call the work of an angel. I worked tirelessly to provide our residents with rich experiences in the community, with their families and person centered vacations. All the while, I was mentoring and training new staff and sharing my energy and philosophy about the work. Essentially, converting myself into a leader among my peers. At one point I was singled out and asked to move on and run my own group home with four different autistic adults. This was my moment. I truly became a leader in every sense of the word. I loved the work of helping others find their path to the next levels of professional development. My pride and joy became helping and watching others succeed. I started to spread my wings around the agency and lead trainings and groups and truly enjoyed learning everything I could about the field. I became a certified Abuse and Neglect Investigator and Customized Employment specialist for people with disabilities. I made it my life's work to ensure the best possible outcomes for our residents. A life that includes independence, respect and happiness. My mission is to instill this in others and ask them to pass it on.

In 2018 I heard a rumor that my boss, who held the important position of Residential Director, might be thinking about retirement. In the end, he was the director for 47 years. I knew that if I were to attempt trying to fill his role, I might need to go back and finish that degree. I felt confident that I was qualified for the job because of my 23 years of experience, but shy about not having completed my degree.

I had heard about Charter Oak State College from a friend years before. I looked them up on line and found the information and process to be extremely straightforward and so I took the leap and applied. I started my courses at Charter Oak in the fall of 2018. On February 7, 2019, my boss called me and told

me that he just decided to retire and that I had been named his successor in the strategic planning sessions over the past few years under our new executive director. Nervous and excited I took over the directorship in July of 2019, overseeing 10 residential homes that serve 41 residents and 115 direct support and nursing staff. .

By the end of January of 2020, only 7 months into my new role, I was writing our continuity of operations plan preparing for a possible virus that might create a global pandemic. I took the spring semester off thinking something big was about to happen. It did. I can't tell you how challenging this time has been for our residents, staff, and families. I have never seen such hardship. This past year has been the greatest challenge of my life. After my break in the spring, I started classes again at Charter Oak. It is because of the support and professionalism of the faculty at Charter Oak that I have been able to endure this time and balance the challenges of my work and still achieve excellent grades and am set to graduate on June 6, 2021. My time at Charter Oak has been rich, challenging and fulfilling. I recommend this school to everyone. I intend to apply to the Organizational Leadership for non-profit master's degree program. I am asking that the needed funds continue to be appropriated to Charter Oak State College. I ask for myself and for others. Charter Oak provides professionals like me the opportunity to literally have it all.

Thank you!