

## SPRINGFIELD

# Laptop donation helps guide student's drive for success

Heather Smith, a student at Holyoke Community College and a participant in the Mental Health Association's Safe Haven program, was the recipient of a brand-new laptop computer donated to her by Delcie Bean IV, CEO of Paragus Strategic and one of the creators of the Tech Foundry workforce training program in Springfield.

Smith, who was a featured speaker at the association's annual night of recognition last month, was both very surprised and extremely grateful for the donation.

"I can't thank Delcie Bean and Paragus enough for thinking of me," said Smith. "Earning my college degree is my goal and this laptop gives me an important tool to help with my education that I wouldn't have otherwise."

Smith, who has struggled with her mental health since her teens and is now in recovery from substance use, returned to college this fall as part of her long-term goal to

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Delcie Bean IV, CEO, Paragus Strategic

live her best life. Safe Haven is providing her a safe and supportive place to live and access to resources designed to help her become stable and confident with the ultimate goal of living independently.

"After hearing Heather's story and knowing that she was starting a renewed pursuit of a college degree, Paragus stepped in to be sure she had the equipment she needed to be successful," said Bean. "Paragus is committed to enhancing the role of IT

at all levels, including at the level of individual people."

Bean said his team was "inspired by Heather's personal strength and desire to overcome obstacles, so we wanted her to know her community has her back." He added, "As an organization, Paragus always looks for opportunities to do more and do better. Like Heather, we aren't afraid to do the hard work needed to get results. And like MHA, we understand the value of

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Heather Smith, right, a student at Holyoke Community College and a participant in the Mental Health Association's Safe Haven program, was the recipient of a laptop computer which was donated to her by Delcie Bean IV, left, CEO of Paragus Strategic IT of Hadley. (MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION PHOTO)

# Laptop

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sharing with those around us to help them achieve their full potential.”

Smith has been in and out of hospitalization for her mental health since she was 14, when she experienced her first symptoms.

“By the time I was 16, I dropped out of high school because everything was so overwhelming,” she explained. “I did get my GED because I’m smart, just not when I was doing the things I was doing then, like self-medicating with crack cocaine, heroin, or anything I could get my hands on. Then, my mother got cancer. I watched her fight it, which was terrible to witness. When I lost my mom to cancer, I lost myself, too.”

Soon after her mother died, Smith became homeless. She lived in her car until it got impounded because she didn’t have insurance, and then she lived outside. “On so many levels it was bad,” she recalled, sharing that attempted suicide and lost her brother to a heroin overdose within days. “You can imagine I had reached a low point in my life. But this was also when I met Samantha Gulsvig, who works for MHA Safe Haven.”

Started in 2016, MHA Safe Haven is a transitional homeless shelter where participants may reside for up to two years. Each individual enrolled has a mental health diagnosis and is chronically homeless. While participants reside at Safe Haven, staff connects them with community resources, such as medical, mental health and

money-related services. In addition, Safe Haven supports them in developing coping and symptom management skills so they can overcome barriers to housing, find a safe and affordable place to call their home, and build the life skills and confidence to live independently.

“I have been clean since March 28,” said Smith. “I don’t ever want to go back and with the help I’m getting through Safe Haven I don’t need to. I plan to be a psychology major, partly because of the amazing therapist I work with. I can relate to her because she has lived experience with many of the same challenges I have faced. I think the best therapists are the ones who get it because they lived it. They found a way to move forward and now are helping others, including me, to do the same.”