

After losing their jobs during the pandemic, Melissa and her boyfriend were living in her car, anxious for their survival. The car battery would die and fuel tank drain as the couple attempted to keep cold winter days and nights at bay. To add to their worries, Melissa anticipated surgery to replace her fourth pacemaker.

One call to 211 brought what they described, “An angel from heaven.” Rick Povalaitis, who had carried on the work Brian Gibbons started to help those without shelter, brought food and gas cards to the couple. He would check on them every day, the first step toward a better life.

Because people rarely suffer one problem at a time, United Way’s help line, staffed 24/7 by trained, empathetic contact specialists who take the time to listen in multiple languages, had recommended other resources from the thousands of programs in the 211 database. They provided Melissa with the helpful, even life-saving tools, that every 211 caller can access.

The team at Brian Gibbons Homeless Outreach coordinated with other providers and programs that had been identified by 211 to address Melissa’s challenges.

In her case, since Melissa had been born with two holes in her heart, she would require surgery to implant a fifth pacemaker. She’d already beaten the odds by living past her life expectancy of 16 but substance abuse issues further threatened her life.

While successfully completing a rehabilitation program, Melissa discovered something about herself: she enjoyed painting and had a real talent for producing beautiful images. Her own paintings cover the walls of the apartment she now has, thanks to those coordinated 211 resources and her own determination.

Several of her paintings hang in homes and offices outside of Waterbury. When Ash’s Art Prints coordinated with Brian Gibbons Homeless Outreach to bring art supplies to those who were living rough, outreach employees organized a showing of these expressive pieces at the Mattatuck Museum in downtown Waterbury. Melissa’s art sold, including a commission by United Way of Greater Waterbury.

United Way of Greater Waterbury creates a New Year’s card every year, featuring an illustration of its community work. The previous year’s card was drawn by a student participating in the United Way youth UPSTARTERS® program.

Depicting a winter scene for United Way, Melissa captured the feeling of warmth that had eluded her in her car. A sunny orange sky over a snow-covered countryside is appropriately called, “Ambers Dawn.”

One phone call to 211 created a new day for Melissa. She can now count on herself thanks to support from others, including donors who she may never meet. With the basic needs of health and housing settled, she can make room for art. “I finally have hope.”