



Grace  
Place

FOOD. FRIENDS. HOPE.



Stories  
from our  
Table

A Retrospective of Hope



# Table of Contents

The best conversations always happen at the dinner table.

Since June 2010, Grace Place has served more than 20,000 dinners, so we've heard a lot of stories. A lot. Juicy gossip, inappropriate (albeit funny) jokes, good news, tall tales, serious discussions, and heartbreaking truths—with over 1,700 youth joining us at our table since our first Youth Night, there is very little we haven't heard. Embracing every unique story, we have provided home insecure youth of all sexualities and genders with a safe place, the confidence to share themselves, and long-lasting healthy relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic threw everything off, creating a global narrative of lock downs, social distancing, anxiety, and loss. In an instant, everyone knew what it felt like to be disconnected from one another. Having endured Hurricane Harvey, we learned how disaster not only created more need, but more opportunities to help. Our services became all the more important to our youth, whose resilience we saw firsthand as they experienced the effects of the pandemic with even more challenges. Through the dedication of our staff, volunteers, and supporters, we were able to maintain operations in 2020 and 2021 through creative strategies, connecting our youth with more resources than ever before, and eventually bringing them back to our actual dinner table safely. Like any choose-your-own-adventure novel, what's happened from chapter to chapter has changed our story, but we've never ended—we just started a new chapter.

Every youth that comes to our table brings a story of their own. Through financial contributions, countless volunteer hours, and community support, we've been able to provide a space for youth to share themselves and their experiences for over 13 years. We are pleased to present the story of Grace Place and the many tales that have shared at our table over the past four years.

**04** Who We Are

**05** Prologue:  
*Where It All Started*

**06** How We've Grown

**08** The Importance of Community Support

**11** Empowering Our Youth:  
*Intersectionality and Grace Place*

**14** Why Grace Place Matters

**15** How to Get Involved







# Prologue: Where It All Started

## Who We Are

### OUR MISSION

To provide a safe, welcoming environment for vulnerable youth experiencing homelessness of all sexualities and genders, providing nourishment, healthy relationships, and hope for the future.

### OUR VISION

We envision a world where youth of all sexualities and genders have a safe space to exist and a future without judgment.

### ABOUT GRACE PLACE

A family-style dinner with loved ones is something nearly everyone can appreciate and too many of us take for granted. Every Monday and Thursday at 6:00 PM, we open our doors to youth and young adults between the ages of 13 and 24 years old experiencing homelessness for our Youth Nights where they can enjoy a sit down, family style meal with Direct Mentor volunteers and dedicated staff in an affirming, positive space. Sitting down at a table for dinner gives our youth a chance to not only relax and enjoy a hot meal, but also develop their relationships with others.

Along with providing dinner and a safe place to exist, home-insecure young people also build long-term healthy relationships with peers and caring adults. Our purpose is twofold: we meet immediate needs by providing a hot meal, clothing and toiletries, bus passes, laundry and more; and we meet more long-term needs of our youth through our Direct Mentorship program. Direct Mentor volunteers model healthy behaviors, creating and maintaining consistent, stable relationships with our youth, and ensure we're providing services in a safe space where youth feel free to be their authentic selves in a judgment-free zone.

Lastly, youth-led case management aids in obtaining identification, housing, job readiness, legal aid, and a variety of other community resources that can help young people exit homelessness and find long-term stability.

**“Grace Place helped emotionally and [allowed me] to really vent and get some things off [my chest] that I don't really talk about.”**  
— Youth (he/him), age 24

One of the first questions leadership and members of Grace Lutheran Church asked when they began developing a neighborhood service project in 2008 was, “Where are the places of hurt?” When Lura Groen joined as the congregation’s pastor, the Mission Discernment Team was already exploring the needs of the neighborhood, meeting with local human services organizations, residents around the church, and community leaders to identify groups or causes. They were considering a program serving people experiencing homelessness, but considered whether a certain group among them was slipping through the cracks. When a representative for Coalition for the Homeless told the team LGBTQ+ youth, especially transgender youth, were more likely to experience homelessness and home insecurity, their mission became clear.

**“[Our cause] immediately resonated with everybody,” Lura said. “It was something we understood and cared about.”**

After the congregation approved the program that would serve home insecure LGBTQ+ youth, the desire to immediately begin was tempered with caution and tact. Another team of parishioners, in collaboration with community leaders, began research, discussions, and planning to ensure the program met the needs of the community thoughtfully and with care within the scope of their resources. Operating within a church equipped with a kitchen and fellowship hall, and knowing most outreach services were only offered during the day, an evening dinner program was developed.

Over a year later, on June 10, 2010, Montrose Grace Place held its first Youth Night. While no youth showed up that evening, a few attended the one the following week. And then a few more. As youth began telling one another about the new program and bringing their friends, a second dinner table needed to be set, and then a third. After a few months, Montrose Grace Place was reaching capacity.

Having experienced homelessness herself as a teen, past Executive Director and Board President Barbara Carroll saw the impact of providing food, dignity, and positive adult interactions. Forgoing a cafeteria or soup kitchen styled program of handing out food, having volunteers eat dinner with youth made a distinct difference. “There’s something very sacred and affirming about sitting across the table from someone,” Barbara said. “I really think we helped these kids see themselves as part of society.” While providing overnight shelter services was not possible and sending youth back out into uncertainty was difficult, Barbara, the rest of the team, and volunteers knew what Montrose Grace Place was providing to the community was valuable and needed.

**“We meet youth where they're at. We don't deny them service because of their personal situations or struggles. It's not about an expectation of them being someone they don't have the capacity to be. That's the cornerstone of how we approach our work.”**  
— Hazard Buck,  
Former Grace Place Executive Director



# How We've Grown



## NEW NAME, SAME MISSION

Grace Lutheran was renamed Kindred Montrose, and the Montrose area has changed beyond what many of us remember. While our presence in and connection with the city's historic "gayborhood" is still very much a part of who we are, our reach has long extended throughout and beyond the Houston area. We've welcomed youth from Louisiana to Michigan, as well as many young immigrants searching for new opportunities in our country. Our leadership and volunteer family includes diverse experiences and affiliations from around the city.

Providing a "place of grace" still defines our purpose and reflects our origins. "We have

always been a secular organization," says Courtney Sellers, current Grace Place Executive Director. "We recognize LGBTQ+ youth and the trauma the church may have played in [their lives]. We appreciate that Kindred has always been an unwavering ally to them. Our partnership is valuable on so many levels."

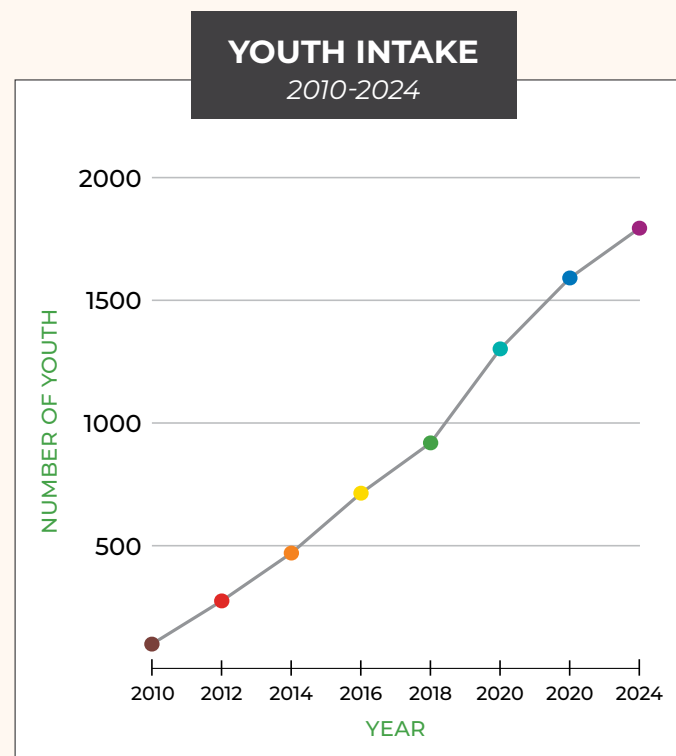
Read more about our relationship with Kindred Montrose on page 10.

Whether you call us Grace Place, MGP, or Montrose Grace Place, the core of our mission is and will always be the same: providing a safe and affirming space for Houston's most vulnerable youth.

## MORE YOUTH, MORE NEEDS

With so many incredible resources for home-insecure youth in Houston, it's always encouraging to see how Grace Place has grown. Since 2019, we've expanded our programming, added multiple new staff members, and most importantly, increased the number of youth we serve.

Seeing a steady increase in the number of youth visiting us and a retention of those that attended Youth Nights weekly, we heard the need loud and clear. In 2019, we added a second night of services, opening our doors on both Mondays and Thursdays. The additional day also allowed for more volunteer opportunities, increasing our volunteer base significantly. Our full-time staff of four, interns from University of Houston-Downtown and University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, and an Americorp Vista have brought fresh perspectives, new energy, and invaluable knowledge to Grace Place. Our staff are the most dedicated and vocal champions of our youth and mission.



## PRESERVING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Although COVID-19 could have upended our progress and left our growing group of youth without resources, we pivoted and met the moment. As much as it hurt to be unable to sit down and eat with our youth, we quickly adapted a "to-go" style of service that continually provided the food, aid, and friendly (if masked) faces they relied on. Not once did Grace Place shutter its doors during 2020 or 2021.

With the growth of global need came an outpouring of global support. As frightening as the pandemic was, it provided opportunities for us to do even more.

**Through the generous availability of grants awarded by the Simmons Foundation and the Greater Houston Community Foundation through United Way, we were able to hand out over \$128,000 in mutual aid to our youth.**

These unrestricted funds provided rent and utility assistance, compensated for lost wages, paid off bills, and so much more. Furthermore, we were able to launch an emergency housing initiative, providing hotel vouchers for temporary shelter. This attentive and quick adaptation of our programming showed us just how capable we are and that nothing can slow us down—not even a pandemic.

We saw tremendous growth in those first two years of the pandemic and learned so much in the process. In the face of loss and fear, we confidently stepped forward and up to do more. We are all the more confident that we have the team and systems in place to handle even more growth and look forward to what our next years have in store for us!



*Youth Night services pivoted to to-go style meals, with masked volunteers continuing to show up and support our youth.*



# The Importance of Community Support

Grace Place would not be able to do what we do without the ongoing and generous support of our community. Our holistic model of service relies on a rotating and consistent presence of supporters. From Youth Night volunteers who provide meals, mentorship, and engagement, to donors and funders who give financial aid throughout the year—all forms of support and stewardship allow us to continuously fulfill our mission and serve our youth. We are eternally grateful for how our community always shows up to help us.



## BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS: OUR DIRECT MENTORS

We want youth to see Grace Place as a safe, LGBTQ+ and culturally affirming space, and that starts with mentorship. Our Direct Mentors have committed to creating long-lasting, healthy relationships with our youth for at least a year. Their regular presence at Youth Nights, dedication to empowering and affirming our youth, and willingness to adapt to their needs are at the core of our vision of providing a safe space for our youth to exist without judgment. Through consistent connections, they foster a positive environment and encourage self advocacy and success-oriented thinking.

Direct Mentors who represent our youth's diversity and embody our mission are integral to building those strong relationships with them, showing support and care from their own communities. Most of our mentors have lived experience of homelessness, belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and/or are people of color. Regardless of personal background, all volunteers that interact with our youth contribute to showing them what supportive, healthy adult relationships look like.



**When I started volunteering, I didn't know what the youth were going to look like. Seeing that most of them were Black, I immediately learned it was really significant that I look like them. I look like somebody that they could be one day. I wish I had those kinds of community mentors that reflected me and I could relate to.**

— Marcus Handy,  
Former Direct Mentor & Board Member

## KEEPING US FED: OUR KITCHEN TEAMS

Gathering around a table and sharing food and conversation is what keeps our youth coming back each and every week. The Kitchen Teams that provide our meals are instrumental to creating that family-style space, and come from many different backgrounds: church groups, families, LGBTQ+ organizations, corporate clubs, and groups of friends and individuals who want to serve the community. BBQ potatoes, casseroles, pizza, fried chicken, fajitas, soups, and more—we've had a lot of great food over 14 years!

At the beginning of the pandemic, our Kitchen Teams quickly and willingly pivoted right along with us, adapting to a grab-and-go style of serving. It kept us connected to our youth, as well as provided a safe way for kitchen volunteers to continue supporting Grace Place. Their willingness to give their time, funds, and culinary skills humbles us each and every time.

We couldn't function without our dedicated Kitchen Teams. It's amazing to see how our supporters play pivotal roles in our success—not even a pandemic could keep them away!

## OUR PARTNERS

Meeting youth where they're at means having knowledge of and access to a variety of resources beyond the scope of what Grace Place can provide directly. As a small grassroots organization, we rely on tight relationships with other community groups to ensure our youth find a broader sense of community and have access to the tools they want and need for growth.

Partnerships that focus on the unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness—especially LGBTQ+ youth—help us provide direct services at our Youth Nights such as sexual health testing, official document assistance, access to free legal advice, housing assistance, and more. We also have the means to refer youth to a variety of programs that aid with long-term support to increase their income, find creative housing solutions, continue their education, or other goals they have. These partner programs often refer their own clients to Grace Place, creating a cycle of help and care for the communities we serve.



**“When we first started, it turned out there wasn't a lot of direct interaction with the youth. But I got the sense that the small amount we did talk to them was really important. That brief ‘Do you need some more food?’ meant a lot.**

— Rose Brewer,  
St. Mark's Kitchen Team Volunteer

**“The key is to create dialogue in a safe space. We don't use language that is above them or over their heads. We talk the way they talk. We engage in conversations they want to engage in and provide what they want, not what we think they need.**

— Joelle Bayaa-Uzuri Espeut,  
Volunteer, Director of Programming,  
The Normal Anomaly Initiative



## PROVIDING OUR PLACE: KINDRED MONTROSE

Through its own name change and new leadership, Kindred Montrose (once Grace Lutheran Church) has remained one of our oldest and first partners, generously providing our program and office space at an affordable cost.

“Kindred also serves as a Kitchen Team. They’re one of the volunteer groups that comes every other month like clockwork to make dinner,” shares Executive Director Courtney Sellers. “They are an active participant in our mission, and allow us the autonomy to do whatever we need for our youth. There’s simply no way we could exist in Montrose in a space other than this. It would be exorbitantly expensive and no one else would provide the affordable rent Kindred does. They really want their church, on this big city block, to make a difference in the community.”

To continually foster our close relationship with Kindred, a member of the church always holds a position on Grace Place’s board as a liaison. Like the church leaders who came before him, Kindred Montrose member and Grace Place board member Kinnon Falk embodies what it means to support unconditionally.

“Kindred and Grace Place not only share a building, but a common mission to remind individuals they are valued and worthy of love,” says Kinnon. “Many of the youth Grace Place serves have been neglected and abused under the guise of religion. As an affirming church, Kindred supports Grace Place’s mission and has a vested interest in their success. I am so proud to have been a part of that mission and serve as the Kindred liaison to the Grace Place Board. I look forward to what lies ahead for both of our organizations.”

We will always be grateful for our partnership and friendship with Kindred Montrose, and thank them for helping us create a space for the youth we serve.



An early watercolor painting of Grace Lutheran Church.

## Empowering Youth: Intersectionality & Grace Place

**Of the national homeless and home-insecure population, 22% are unaccompanied youth and young adults under the age of 24.\***

For every marginalized group a young person belongs to, they are more likely to experience home insecurity and the trauma and danger that can accompany it. LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to experience home insecurity. They are also more likely to avoid shelters or choose to live on the streets due to the discrimination and abuse they often face from their family, peers, and even service providers. Additionally, youth of color are disproportionately likely to experience home insecurity, with Black or African-American youth having an 83% higher risk for homelessness.\*\* 20% of transgender people under the age of 25 are experiencing home insecurity.

These terrible and disheartening statistics and truths are why Grace Place has always put the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, especially those of color, at the forefront of our services and language. We acknowledge intersectionality as an essential facet of our programming in addressing the unique needs of the community we serve. We want to show youth that because of who they are—not despite—they are all the more deserving of dignity, respect, pride, and love.

\* U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Fact Sheet: 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report

\*\* True Colors United





## BLACK HAIR CARE DRIVE

Because the majority of our youth are Black, we feel the resources we provide should reflect—and offer help for—needs that are unique to their experiences. While we often get donations of shampoos and conditioners, many of these products are not suitable for hair types common among our Black youth. Dignity is a right that should be afforded to everyone, regardless of their housing status, and that includes feeling clean, confident, and beautiful.

Every February, our Black Hair Care Drive collects donations of new hair care products and accessories specifically for Black hair types. Since the drive began in 2017, we have collected over \$20,000 in items through our online wishlist and community led service projects.



## AFFIRMATION & FASHION: TRACY'S CLOSET

Every Youth Night, youth are able to “shop” in Tracy’s Closet, our boutique-style space that provides clothes, hygiene items, backpacks, and more. Remodeled in 2022 by Houston-based clothing retailer Francesca’s, Tracy’s Closet is purposefully designed as a gender affirming space. Clothing is divided by size, and designated as feminine or masculine with a unisex section. Regardless of gender and personal style, all youth are able find clothing and shop in a way that affirms their identity and self expression.

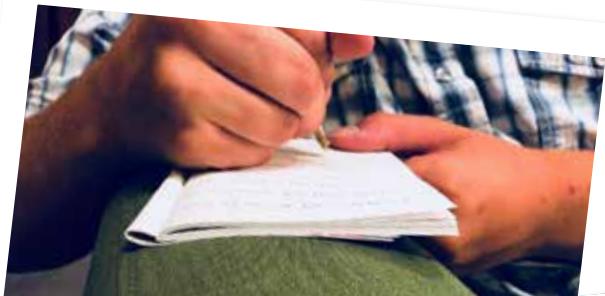
Named for Tracy, a transgender youth violently taken from us in 2019, Tracy’s Closet is sourced through generous donations of new and gently used clothing, accessories, shoes, and hygiene products.



## YOUTH VOICES EMPOWERED (YVE)

Youth Voices Empowered is a collective of Grace Place youth who are paid to participate in weekly meetings, trainings, and leadership development opportunities. YVE members participate in activities that allow them to express bad housing and/or homeless experiences, and transform them into advocacy. YVE was created to return youths’ power back to them after systems involvement had taken it away.

YVE is also a healing group. Members work to build public speaking, critical thinking, and problem solving skills. In their own words: “By showing up for the change we want to see in the world, we are showing up for ourselves, and once we transition out of YVE we will maintain our efforts as powerful advocates.”



**When I first visited Grace Place, I was scared, but it quickly became home, like a family. This is a nice, loving place and the volunteers and staff are great.**

— Youth (they/them), age 22

## ASIA'S FUND



Just a year after Tracy’s death, we lost another young, Black transgender woman to violence. Asia was a vibrant, outspoken young woman who was a budding activist in our community. Losing her and Tracy left us grieving, but all the more determined to intentionally support the transgender youth who came through our doors.

In the years since Tracy and Asia’s deaths, legislation in Texas has grown increasingly hostile and dangerous, specifically targeting transgender young people. We recognize the unique challenges and discrimination transgender youth face, especially if they are experiencing homelessness. In Asia’s honor—and to intentionally support trans youth—Asia’s Fund was launched to provide our transgender youth with opportunity, dignity, and pride in themselves. This includes access to gender affirming care, including binders, medication, and more. It also supports keeping the transgender experience central to our work by increasing economic opportunities for transgender youth and working towards better housing and health outcomes.

## IN MEMORIAM

The youth that walk through our doors every day are incredibly special to us in so many ways. We’d like to honor these four young people who have been taken from our community.

**Tracy Single**  
4/2/97 – 7/30/19  
Age 22



**Asia Foster**  
3/6/98 – 11/20/20  
Age 22



**Fred Harris**  
8/10/02 – 10/29/21  
Age 19



**Autumn “Biggie” Stephens**  
5/6/02 – 8/27/22  
Age 20





# Why Grace Place Matters

“My favorite part about Grace Place is hanging around people that have the same experience as me. We get along, sometimes we don't, and then at the end of the day we talk it out.”  
— Youth, she/her, age 20



“There's something very sacred and affirming about sitting across the table from someone and having a conversation with them over dinner. And I think that is a valuable thing that Grace Place is providing.”

— Barbara Carol,  
Grace Lutheran Church Member and  
Grace Place Founder



“The youth might go off of their medication or get kicked out [of residential programs]. We always talk with them about how important Grace Place is to be there as a constant. They rely on it, not only for the meal, but just for the space to be themselves. The youth are constantly saying how it's such a different vibe from everywhere else because they can just be there and socialize, and it gives them relief.”  
— Jennifer Jones, UTHhealth



“Grace Place is really about making connections. It's the basis of what we do. Even before we could offer housing assessments and mutual aid, the relationships with young people were built. So youth know we're always there for them and actually care.”

— Sarah,  
Volunteer & Past Board President



## How to Get Involved

We've shared some incredibly powerful, vulnerable, and life-changing stories at our table over the years. We've only just begun and we'd love for you to join us as a volunteer and help create even more remarkable stories with our youth. Grace Place has big dreams of growing and we need your help and support to make that happen!

### VOLUNTEER

Whether you'd like to provide a meal for a Youth Night or commit to a long-term mentorship, we want you to be a part of our family. MGP offers a variety of volunteer opportunities for any time commitment or skill.

### DONATE

Everything given in support of our mission, from gently used and new clothing to monetary donations, goes toward providing our youth with resources, opportunity, dignity, a new start, and more. No matter your own means, you can help.



To learn more about these opportunities, scan the QR code or visit our website at [montrosegaceplace.org](http://montrosegaceplace.org).

### CONNECT

Spread the word about Grace Place on social media! We'd love for you to follow along, share our posts with friends and family, and help tell our story.

- @montrosegaceplace
- @MGPHouston
- @montrosegaceplace
- @montrosegaceplacehtx

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