



ODYSSEY HOUSE LOUISIANA
CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SERVICE

MEET MAGGIE PIKE: OHL'S FOUNDER & FIRST EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Odyssey House Louisiana has certainly come a long way in the 50 years it's been in business. The true judge of just how far Odyssey has truly come is **Maggie Pike**, the Founder and first Executive Director of the program who helped start everything in 1973. Maggie says that her memories of her time here are countless.

Maggie first got involved in Odyssey House New Hampshire in 1970 as a volunteer and was eventually asked to interview for the Registered Nurse position. At her interview was Dr. Judianne Denson-Gerber, who founded the original Odyssey House in New York. "I didn't know a thing about drugs," says Maggie. "But it sounded like a wonderful opportunity and adventure so I said 'sure!'" Maggie quickly learned the structure and practices of the Odyssey House treatment philosophy.

In spring of 1973, Dr. Denson-Gerber approached Maggie with an opportunity: Congressman Lindy Boggs had obtained funds to start an Odyssey House in New Orleans and asked if Maggie wanted to be part of the core group to help start the program. "Judy just had this ability to drag people in," Maggie recalls. "And, again, we looked at this as a huge adventure and thought 'why not?'"

A few days before Thanksgiving in 1973, Maggie, her family, and the rest of the core group moved to New Orleans and into the huge 100-year-old building on N. Tonti Street. "I almost had a heart attack when I saw it," she says. "Here is this old building with 33 empty rooms; we had water running only in the front of the building and power on only in the back. Those were interesting times."

In the beginning, Odyssey House relied very heavily on the kindness of those in the New Orleans community who believed in our mission. While the program certainly had its share of struggles as any fledgling organization does, Maggie remembers those as simpler times. "You do these sort of things when you're young and have no sense. We just had a commitment to helping people get better." And helping people is exactly what they did. Eventually, the program grew and offered expanded services like an onsite school, the upholstery program and services for women with children.

Odyssey House is their home

For many abusers, drugs and alcohol provide an escape from pain. The Odyssey program forces its participants to confront the causes of their pain.

By **WILLIE HALL**
Staff writer

It's a massive three-story antique building with thrift-shop furniture and 1950s linoleum patterns that never have matched. Residents sleep in large dormitory rooms, on military spaced cots covered with faded spreads. There are high ceilings and breezes from open windows and electric fans that also circulate aromas of simmering stews and frying chicken. "Everyone talks and speaks. Working man."

took drugs to feel high and have a good time," says Maggie Pike, executive director of the non-profit Odyssey program in Louisiana. "But the point is, for most people, it's an escape from pain." Odyssey forces them to face the causes of their pain. It attempts to replace street values with something more akin to middle-class morality. Those few who don't opt move from being people whom Odyssey estimates cost the rest of us more than \$35,000 a year each, in stolen property and drugs and arrests and prosecution and jail expense, to drug-free taxpayers with jobs.



Pictured left: A newspaper article introducing Odyssey House Louisiana

1973- 2023: CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SERVICE

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In 1994, Maggie accepted a position to open an Adolescent program for Odyssey House New Hampshire “It was time,” Maggie said, to leave New Orleans. “But it was so hard leaving the residents. They truly were my family.”

Maggie continued to work for Odyssey House New Hampshire until 2003 when, after almost 32 years in the substance use disorder field, she semi-retired and went back into nursing part time. However, Maggie still couldn’t stay away from New Orleans and, it turned out, Odyssey House Louisiana. In 2016, Maggie began spending her winters in New Orleans and started working part-time for OHL as a Nurse in our Detox, where she remains today! We are truly so blessed to have our founder and first Executive Director on staff 50 years later!

Commenting on OHL’s 50th Anniversary, Maggie says, “It’s remarkable to me the ability we have had to reach out to new and different populations, including the ability to run two Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC). That’s something that we never could have even conceptualized in the beginning and it’s so visionary in serving both our client population and the community.”

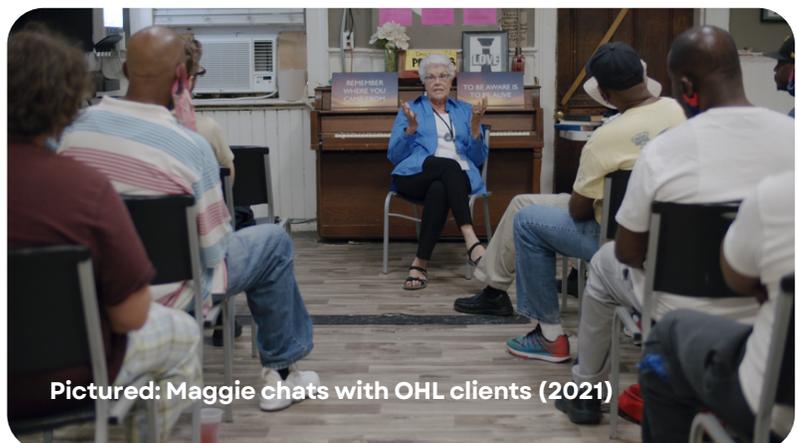
Maggie notes that she’s pleased to see that over the past 50 years the field has caught up to the science behind addiction and that this learned science and evidence is shaping the way that the government is investing in treatment, especially through including substance use disorders (SUDs) in Medicaid coverage, which has revolutionized access to treatment.

While the field has modernized, Maggie notes that the enduring nature of the Odyssey concepts remains intact. The programs have had to evolve due to funding streams, licensing shifts, changes in the field, etc., but the fundamentals remain the same. Says Maggie, “This also includes the Odyssey Houses in other cities and countries; they are all different from when they started, but they are all still the same origin. And it always feels like coming home.”

Odyssey House Louisiana truly would not be where it is today if it weren’t for Maggie. We are grateful for her leadership and continued dedication to our field, programs, and clients.

“To think that this program is not only still around, but the breadth of services and the scope of clients we can still reach, I never would have imaged. It has succeeded my expectations and I’m thrilled to still be a part of it all.”

- Maggie Pike



Pictured: Maggie chats with OHL clients (2021)