

Paying it Forward: Chris Kafcas' Full Circle Story

If you've spent any time at The Welcome Back Lounge, you've probably seen Chris Kafcas in motion. He's the guy buzzing around the room, checking on staff, making sure the food is on point, the drinks are flowing, and every detail is ready for guests to have a great time. It's a hands-on approach that reflects who Chris is and how he shows up for his business, his team, and his community.

As a partner of The Welcome Back Lounge, located at 2423 N. Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood, Chris has helped create a place that feels like a second home. Since opening in 2020, the 70's-and-80's-themed bar and restaurant has become a neighborhood favorite, known for its welcoming atmosphere, nostalgic charm, great food, and strong sense of community. Guests walk through the door feeling like friends, and they leave knowing they'll always have a place to return to.

"The best compliment we can receive is when someone tells us they feel comfortable here," Chris says. "Whether it's your first visit or your hundredth, we want everyone to know there's always a place for them at Welcome Back."

The lounge's commitment to community extends beyond its walls. Every summer on Monday nights in August, The Welcome Back Lounge hosts its popular Charity Bingo, bringing together neighbors, regulars, and local organizations for an evening of fun and fundraising. Through this ongoing effort, the bar has supported numerous nonprofit organizations, including The Night Ministry.

The Night Ministry holds a special place in Chris's heart because, years ago, during a difficult period in his life, he relied on the organization's services.

"There was a time when I needed help, and The Night Ministry was there for me," Chris says. "I never forgot that. Supporting their mission today is my way of honoring the people who showed compassion when I needed it most."

For Chris, giving back isn't simply a charitable act. It's part of the responsibility that comes with being a neighborhood business owner.

"When a community supports you, you have to find ways to support it right back," he says. "If we can raise money, bring people together, and make a difference while having a little fun, that's a win for everyone."

At The Welcome Back Lounge, the mission is simple: good food, good people, good causes, and the promise that you'll always be welcome back. That's not just the name on the sign. It's the spirit behind everything Chris does.



Chris Kafcas, owner and partner of Welcome Back Lounge poses in front of the beloved Logan Square bar and restaurant.

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30 Years of Powering Possibility with ComEd

Strong partnerships drive lasting change, exemplified by The Night Ministry's relationship with ComEd. For three decades, ComEd has been a steadfast partner in our mission, investing in our community through program funding, event sponsorships, employee volunteerism, and unwavering advocacy for our work.

As we celebrate this remarkable milestone, we are especially honored to be among the organizations supported through ComEd's Cause of the Year initiative focused on homelessness. This recognition reflects not only ComEd's generosity, but also a shared commitment to building a future where everyone has access to safe, stable housing.

Together, we have made a meaningful difference, and we look forward to continuing this journey, drawing strength from our shared commitment to power positive change and expand opportunities for those who need them most.



Santa and his helpers from The Night Ministry delivered more than holiday gifts, they brought joy, connection, and unforgettable smiles to our unhoused neighbors.

Share Hope and Warmth This Holiday Season

Our Holiday Celebration is right around the corner, and we need your help to ensure our unhoused neighbors can experience the comfort, care, and generosity that this special time of year has to offer.

Last year, thanks to the incredible support of our community, The Night Ministry distributed **1,500 drawstring backpacks** filled with essential items and small gifts that brought hope and warmth to those we serve. This year, we're aiming to make an even greater impact, and we need your help.

Give the gift of hope and warmth this holiday season by donating a filled drawstring backpack. Distribution begins the week of December 15.

Backpack Guidelines

- Drawstring backpacks should be approximately **14" x 16"**
- Simple nylon backpacks are preferred
- Most clients prefer **dark-colored backpacks**
- **All items must be new**
- Please be respectful of our diverse client base by keeping backpacks **secular**
- Do not include notes, cards, or other personal messages

Drop-Off Information

Please schedule your donation drop-off between **Monday, November 23, and Wednesday, December 9** by scanning the QR code.



Questions?

Contact our Resource Coordinator: Maya Crawl-Kinney at maya@thenightministry.org

Each Backpack Should Include:

- A winter hat
- Pair of warm gloves
- Pair of adult socks
- Keychain flashlight
- Hand and toe warmers
- Fun-size assorted candy
- Full-size deodorant
- Travel-size lotion
- Lip balm
- Packet of bath/body wipes
- Toothbrush
- Travel-size toothpaste

In addition to a filled backpack, please consider donating:

- \$15 gift cards to Dunkin' or McDonald's
- A deck of playing cards
- A travel chess set

Thank you for helping The Night Ministry bring hope, warmth, and dignity to our neighbors this holiday season. Your generosity makes a meaningful difference.



Join Us For Night Lights!

Join The Night Ministry's Associate Board for an inspiring evening of community, connection and compassion at **Night Lights**, on **Thursday, October 22** at **Marshall's Landing, 222 W. Merchandise Mart Plaza** from **5:30 - 9:00 p.m.** This year's theme, *Celebrating 50 Years of Care*, honors a meaningful milestone and reflects on our enduring commitment to caring for those most in need.

In its 12th year, Night Lights has raised more than **\$1.2 million** in support of The Night Ministry's mission. Proceeds from this year's event will directly benefit the Street Medicine Program, which provides free, life-changing healthcare to individuals experiencing homelessness and others with limited access to care.

Early bird tickets are available until Wednesday, September 30! For more information, contact Malina Masur, Director of Development, at malina@thenightministry.org.



Scan the QR Code
and get your
tickets today!

A Summer to Remember

We had a wonderful summer celebrating our 50th Anniversary with communities across Chicago through a series of parades, culminating in the historic Bud Billiken Parade on the South Side in August.

The fun is not over yet! We're excited to participate in Chicago's Thanksgiving Day Parade on Thursday, November 26. It's sure to be a great experience for the entire family.

Thank you to Board Member Joyce Chacko and Forvis Mazars for helping make our Thanksgiving Day Parade participation possible.



Walk with us in
the Thanksgiving
Day Parade.
Scan the QR
code to register.



A Legacy of Gratitude and Giving



Mary Kathryn Black (left) and her sister Joan.

Mary Kathryn Black, a retired educator and widow committed to helping young people succeed, sees her support for The Night Ministry as a natural extension of the values she learned growing up.

She remembers watching her parents give their time and talents to support people facing difficult circumstances.

“Both of my parents were helpful, kind, wonderful people,” she said. “My parents were a major influence in my life, modeling kindness and generosity.”

Her connection to The Night Ministry began in 2012 through her close friend, Bonnie Keplinger, a dedicated volunteer who conducted cooking classes at The Crib, introduced her to the organization’s work with young people experiencing homelessness.

“I was struck by how these young women, many of them mothers, were homeless and vulnerable and in need,” Mary Kathryn recalled. “I was so impressed with Bonnie’s ability to work with them and really connect with them.”

Inspired by her friend, Mary Kathryn became a donor. She later informed her older sister, Joan Sextro, about the organization,

who also became a donor and bequeathed funds to The Night Ministry upon her passing in 2024.

Today, she is carrying that family tradition forward through her membership in The Addington Heritage Society, which honors individuals who have included The Night Ministry in their will, trust, donor-advised fund, or other charitable planned gift.

“I thought about my life, and I’m so grateful,” she said. “Why shouldn’t every single one of us give back? I want to pay it forward and pass it on.”

She wants to ensure that The Night Ministry remains a resource for generations to come. “I hope The Night Ministry becomes as strong and as comprehensive an institution as it can,” Black said. “The stronger it is, the better it’s able to help people.”

As she reflects on the legacy she hopes to leave alongside her parents, her late husband, and her late sister Joan, Mary Kathryn returns to the values that have guided her throughout her life.

“Be reflective, look at your advantages, and be as generous as you can,” she said.

To learn more about The Addington Heritage Society, contact the Planned Gift Office at 773-506-3123 or email donations@thenightministry.org.

Welcoming New Leadership and Board Members

The Night Ministry is thrilled to announce new Board Leadership, welcome two new board members, and recognize longtime leaders whose service has advanced its mission across Chicago and Illinois. These changes took effect July 1.

Bennett Applegate, Jr., an attorney and former Northwestern Kellogg Fellow at The Night Ministry, will serve as Chairman of the Board of Directors. He leads a new slate of officers: Dana Ringer, Vice Chair; Dave Berger, Secretary; and Ralitza Todorova, Treasurer.

Joining the board this year are Joyce Chacko and Marybeth Kravetz, whose diverse backgrounds and dedication to community service will strengthen the organization’s governance and strategic priorities.

“As we welcome new board leadership and members, we also



Ben Applegate, Jr.



Dana Ringer



Dave Berger



Ralitza Todorova



Joyce Chacko



Marybeth Kravetz

celebrate the remarkable contributions of those who have guided our organization for many years,” said Carol J. Sharp, President and CEO. “Their collective leadership positions us to remain bold and innovative in addressing the increasing needs of our unhoused neighbors.”

The Night Ministry also recognizes Michael V. Borromeo, who concludes three years as Board Chairman after guiding the organization through strategic growth and 50th Anniversary initiatives, and honors W. Gordon Addington, named Director Emeritus after more than 25 years of distinguished service.

These transitions continue to shape The Night Ministry’s legacy as it builds on 50 years of service to Chicago’s most vulnerable communities.

Join us for a Program Tour!

Experience our mission in motion during a special Program Tour at our headquarters located at 1735 N. Ashland Avenue in the Wicker Park neighborhood. Visit The Crib, our emergency youth shelter, and step aboard our iconic Outreach Bus to learn about how we care for people in our community, and meet the dedicated teams working to transform lives every day.

Scan the QR code to register for one of the following dates:

Thursday, November 12, 5–7 p.m.
Saturday, February 27, 2027, 12–2 p.m.

For more information, contact MaCheaux Ransom, macheaux@thenightministry.org.



No Place to Go But Up



Justin smiles proudly in front of the apartment that he is now living in on the South Side of Chicago.

Justin is a tall, soft-spoken 20-year-old from Detroit, where he became homeless in late 2025. After couch-surfing and living outside, he came to Chicago to stay with his sister, but when her landlord discovered he wasn't on the lease, Justin was asked to leave, rendering him homeless again in an unfamiliar city.

Through an online search, Justin connected with The Night Ministry and secured a spot at West Town, the organization's interim housing program for youth and young adults aged 14-21. With the support of Norma Nance, TNM's Interim Program Specialist, and Corey Hogan, his Case Manager, Justin found space to regroup. In October 2025, he transitioned to the Pathways Program, moving into a shared apartment (with a roommate) on Chicago's South Side, and by January 2026 he had secured a job working in the kitchen at Panera Bread on the North Side — a single ride away on the Red Line.

Justin is one of 569 youth The Night Ministry served last year through its youth housing programs and services. A key component of the continuum is the Pathways Program, which offers young adults experiencing homelessness up to two years of supportive housing and life skills coaching as they work towards a better future.

He credits The Night Ministry for giving him something not often found in the shelter system: grace and room to breathe. "It's a place where you can think freely, where you're allowed to be sad, and you're given the time to make your own change." He advises others in his situation not to run from those feelings, but to have patience with themselves.

For the first time, Justin feels he can think about his future, applying to study psychology or philosophy, saving money for tuition, and one day traveling abroad. Tokyo is on the list. He stays grounded through nature, the gym, and video games, but it's the possibility of what lies ahead that drives him most.

"Being homeless can make you feel the worst, but it is possible to work on making things better for yourself — the only way you can go is up."

GIVING TUESDAY

Save the Date
Giving Tuesday, December 1

Mark your calendar for Giving Tuesday and join The Night Ministry in bringing hope, housing, and health care to neighbors experiencing homelessness and poverty. Your generosity helps create brighter futures across our community. Watch for more details and opportunities to make an impact this holiday season.



A Little Fun Goes a Long Way

To close out the summer, The Night Ministry hosted a staff event at Whirlyball to celebrate the incredible work accomplished throughout the season and give team members an opportunity to come together. Staff from every department enjoyed fun, laughter, and friendly competition while reconnecting with colleagues. Caring for others requires energy and resilience, and moments like these help our team recharge, strengthen relationships, and return ready to continue serving our community.

The Night Ministry: On the Front Lines

Episode 2

In the second installment of The Night Ministry: On the Front Lines, viewers are invited to witness the extraordinary work of our staff through the lens of talented Chicago filmmaker Jean Lamont. Created to inspire and uplift, the docuseries offers an intimate look at the people who bring our mission to life each day. This episode spotlights Ridley Holmes, Youth Outreach Case Manager, and the meaningful impact of their work with young people.



Scan the QR code
to watch the video.



The Night Ministry is a Chicago-based organization whose mission is to provide human connection, housing support, and health care to members of our community who are unhoused or experiencing poverty.

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