

## **Having an Address: the Importance of Clubhouse Housing**

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I am 37 years old, single, and a college graduate. My illness first started to surface at the end of my high school years, but I was able to function with it enough to go to college for a few years before I had to drop out. I then worked for a few years, before being hurt pretty seriously in a sports accident. At that time, I became so depressed and suicidal that I had to seek help.

My family life was horrendous. I was living at home. After I recovered from the accident, I went back to school and was working and commuting. My home life was truly bad and my illness became rampant, but I had started going to counseling and I struggled my way through college and graduated. Things were so bad at home that my family (except for my dad) didn't come to see me graduate; this was driving me more and more toward the point of extinction. I had to get out of my family's home.

I began to live in my car, as I looked for a job that would support me so that I could have a place to live and be.

Previous to graduating I had never been hospitalized, but I had been to a place called Respite, which was a little supervised apartment. You couldn't stay there long, and I really didn't want to. So I would work, go to the mental health day programs I was eligible for during the day, look for more work, eat where I could, sneak into my mother's house when I could to take a shower, and maybe get a few hours of sleep.

But basically I was making do, living in the car. On the nights I lived in my car, I would park on a beach in Fairfield where there was a small bridge. I would go the end of the bridge and ponder the worth of living a life like this, and of going on another day. I spent six months living in my car. I finally got found out by my therapist at the Mental Health Center and was put in the Mental Health Center Transitional Residential Center, which was a hospital floor that was staffed and where meds were monitored. You had to be in and out by a certain time, and they had something called 'status' which meant that they determined whether you could leave the floor by yourself or not. It was like hell the first two weeks. I would go there after work and be locked in.

I had always been free: what a price to pay to have somewhere to put my body to rest. While I was there I had my first major break and had to be hospitalized. I bounced between the hospital and the Transitional Residential (TR) Center. My family didn't want to really have anything to do with me while I was there. My parents wouldn't come past the front door. There had to be something better. As you know, one of man's five basic needs is shelter. Without shelter we wither and die eventually. ...some sooner than others. But shelter...at what price and what really is shelter? I spent almost a year living

on that TR floor, and in and out of hospitals. I lost my job and all sense of security. I had a roof over me, but I would not call this a home.

Then my therapist heard that Bridge House, a “clubhouse,” had a residential program and that if I became a member I might be able to get into one of their apartments . Well, I didn’t know about this club thing. I thought it was a place that you just sat around and smoked and were with people who did nothing all day. But it was coming to a point where I might have to go live in a shelter or back in my car, so I decided “what the hell, what do I have to lose,” and the answer, of course, was nothing.

The first time I walked into Bridge House I didn’t know what to expect. I went through intake and became a member. I remember thinking - a member? What is this, a cult or something? Oh well, what the hell, if they can get me an apartment, they might just be worth it. So I walked through the front door and all these people come over to me to say hello, introduce themselves, and tell me to sit down and join in on Morning Meeting. I never knew that so many people could introduce themselves and say hello, as if they were your best friends, as these clubhouse people did. What was up with these people? Well, anyway, they put me to work all day and by the end of the day I felt as if I had been there forever.

I decided that since it wasn’t awful and the people were friendly, I’d go back and try it again the next day. In a few days I felt like this was finally a place I could really belong. After a couple of days I met the residential director. I talked to him and found out that Bridge House had an opening at one of their apartments, and they might be willing to give me a try in their program.

This was a really troubled part of my life. I was running wild and nobody else was willing to take a chance on me. Bridge House did. They were also willing to take me with only city benefits, which I had spent many hours in line trying to get, and which in no way cover food and rent. Bridge House knew all that went with me, yet they took me. They set up crisis supports for me, providing a system of people to call when I needed it (the beeper line), and a weekly residential counselor for all of us.

This was the first time I was living in any apartment in the real world, with others besides my family. It was really hard but they were willing to help me every step of the way. They set me up on my first TEP to help me get some money. They helped me complete my paperwork for SSDI. They were there the night I flipped out because I was denied SSDI, and faced having to go back to work when I was in no way ready, and I was on my way to Harlem on a train at night. My roommates, my best friend, and a clubhouse housing staff came to the station and talked some sense into me. The next day we filed an appeal and six months later, I won my appeal with their help. I paid all my back rent and was officially a true rent paying tenant.

Bridge House supported me through many downs. But they also taught me about celebrating the good things about being in an apartment: the safety of not having to live

in a street or a car, the companionship of a roommate, learning to trust myself and others once again. I lived in that apartment for four years.

After four years I felt ready to move on into my own apartment. I had some of the same problems, but thanks to the Bridge House residential program and Bridge House itself, I had grown enough to be on my own with support. I lived for four years at my first apartment where I had a wonderful housing staff worker who taught me that it was OK to be me, but to grow, too. I went to Food Bank at Bridge House for support with groceries.

I was able to work a few TEs and even a couple of independent jobs, because I was finally feeling safer about my living situation and better about myself emotionally. I suffered ups and downs, but because of the Bridge House residential program and staff and members, and the fact that no matter where I went, Bridge House would help me to pay bills and stuff while I was hospitalized, I knew that my pillow would always be foam and not rock and dirt or car again.

I moved from there and lived at another house for two years, and Bridge House moved with me. They told me that I could have housing through the clubhouse as long as I needed it; it was up to me. I was afraid to let them go. I remember the little things, like calling the residential director at the time (whose name was Lili Aalto), hysterical, to come and get a rat out of my garbage because it was jumping up and down. She told me to put a box over it and she'd come get it in the morning. Sure enough, the next day all five foot nothing of her came and got that rat. Then there were times that Leslie, a housing staff worker, took me and my roommates out to coffee because we were all having a 'bad' girls night and we were bummed.

Finally I moved into the house I live in now. I've lived here now for five years, the first two years with support from the Bridge House residential program. I finally 'graduated' and now live completely on my own. I work at a TE, am an active member at Bridge House, and deal with my mental illness and an array of physical illnesses that I've acquired. But I've grown, and haven't hurt myself in six years. I've attended and presented at three international conferences (workshops), attended a three week clubhouse training and haven't been on that TR floor (the original hospital floor I was on) for eight years.

I would never have had a chance at any of this without having therapy, of course, but most importantly a sense of safety in having a place to call my own and the support of my Bridge House family. If you look at life and the way other people view you, where you live is always front and center. The first two questions on any application are your name, and then your address. So in essence, your address is a big part of your identity.

In closing, I would like to say that I'm very grateful to have been granted the chance to have an address -- and the many chances to make mistakes and to try again.

Finally, I wish that we all may always have a good address and a peaceful pillow to lay our head upon.