Housing for People With Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders

The Spectrum of Healing: Housing, Recovery, Learning, Working

By Jon Curtis, Communications Specialist, Community Access, Inc.

First and foremost, Community Access is an organization that provides safe, stable housing for individuals with psychiatric disabilities and working families. We’ve always recognized the fundamental importance of putting roofs over heads, and of giving people the chance—for many, for the first time—to build their lives upon solid foundations.

In our line of work, the twin cornerstones of well-being are good health and a decent home to call your own, and it’s no coincidence that these two things are inextricably linked. As we help mental health consumers along the path to recovery, again and again we see how Community Access homes have a transformational effect on our tenants.

Just the same, however, it’s been our long experience that housing on its own is no silver bullet. Instead, its positive impact is multiplied by a host of other factors that, taken together, demonstrate the tremendous added value of education and social services—without which Community Access would be unrecognizably different.

Our 21 housing programs around New York City can rightly claim to be the lifeblood of our organization, and yet it is our investment in learning opportunities that bind everything we do together—by fostering a greater sense of community and offering a context for tenants and other people in recovery to tap into their innate abilities and grow alongside one another. In this vein, our education programs are robust and include: the Howie the Harp Peer Advocacy and Training Center (HPTH) in Harlem—a job training program, which has garnered national and international recognition as the go-to program for employers seeking to hire trained mental health consumers; East Village Access, a classroom-based health, wellness and recovery program in the Lower East Side; a Pet Therapy program that promotes the holistic benefits of pet ownership; and, a flourishing art program, which provides a full series of workshops for artists with mental illness.

We continue to discover the positive impact of these services every day. And nowhere are they more readily apparent than in the countless examples of former tenants and participants who sometimes leave the physical structures of Community Access behind but who retain important friendships, life lessons learned, and the skills to establish meaningful careers.

Take the example of Myung Park, who was living in supportive housing when he first enrolled in our HPTH class back in 1998, graduating later that same year. Now a professional peer specialist, counselor and mentor at the Institute for Community Living, Myung says he relies on all the skills he learned at Community Access to help the mental health participants he works with. “We talk about open and honest communication, empathy, how we need to be willing to learn from mistakes, and the importance of setting goals—all things that Myung had to work hard to learn for himself.”

“Survival” is the word Myung would use to characterize much of his life. Shortly after joining high school, he began to experience long spells of depression, caused by a severe bipolar disorder and eventually culminating in hospitalization. From early adolescence and into adulthood, he endured verbal and physical abuse from family members and teachers alike—a long spell of years during which Myung now regards in hindsight as tarnished by feelings of self-loathing and isolation. “I felt like my brain was breaking down piece by piece,” he says, “and the sensation was made worse by a Korean culture in which there is often stigma about mental illness that can be very harsh. After my psychiatric inpatient treatment, everyone was so ashamed that they didn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

“We immigrated to the United States in 1981; my father died that year, and even though my mother and brothers were close by, I still had to cope with my psychiatric disability on my own.” Without a support system or family to lean upon, Myung continued to face multiple hospitalizations—the last of which dealt the heaviest blow: “I lost my home. The landlord pushed me out because of my disability and there was nothing I could do. It took me a long time to have the ability to recover.”

Connecting with Community Access, and HPTH, was a key turning point. “It was the beginning of real healing for me,” he reflects, “and suddenly it was like a rainbow had appeared: at every step of the way I started discovering a new color—something new about myself. The program really helped me understand how important it is for us to be united as one in order to not be against each other.”

Moreover, for Myung, learning and healing were never just job-related but also a family matter too: “I’m closer to my mother, and even my younger brothers respect me now. Most of my life, they were never understanding of my illness, but now I am able to speak candidly about what was happening in my life—my situation and environment. Howie the Harp helped me to have these types of conversations, and opened a door to the future.”

Myung now lives independently in his own home, and continues to be an active member of HPTH’s alumni group. “Helping to support others ended up being an amazing support for me,” he concludes, “and I appreciate everything that Community Access has done for me—for helping add color to my life, and courage.”