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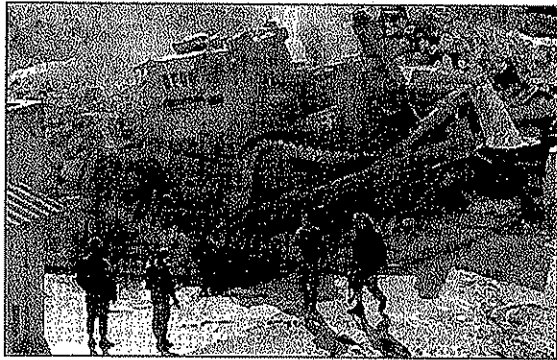
vol. X / no. 1
may / june 2003

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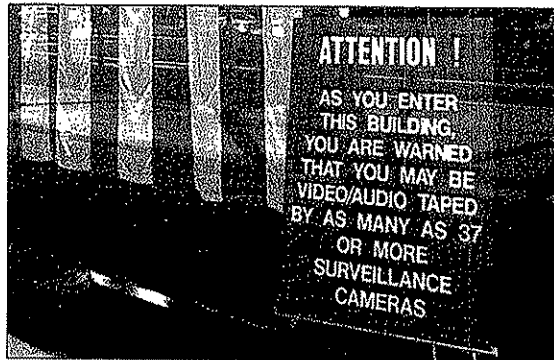
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Publisher: KINGSLY HAMMETT
Editor: JERILOU HAMMETT
Copy Editors: GILLIAN ASHLEY / CRISTINA OPDAIL
Design: PETER SCHOLZ
Printing: UNIVERSAL PRINTING AND PUBLISHING, INC.

For advertising information and rates, call 303-471-4549.
DESIGNER/builder is published twelve times a year by Fine Additions, Inc.,
2405 Macdova Lane, Santa Fe, NM 87505 • Tel/fax 303-471-4549.
SUBSCRIPTIONS: \$28 for one year; \$48 for two years.

WWW.DESIGNERBUILDERMAGAZINE.COM

Cover Photo: Ishshab Palace, Tarim, Yemen. (Photo by Pamela Jerome)

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THE CURE FOR HOMELESSNESS IS HOUSING

BY KINGSLEY HAMMETT

The industry that has sprung up to deal with people who are homeless and mentally ill commands ever-increasing amounts of public resources yet delivers few substantive changes in the condition of homelessness. In most instances the prevailing system is highly regimented, gives its clients few options, and is little more than a revolving door between the institution and the street.

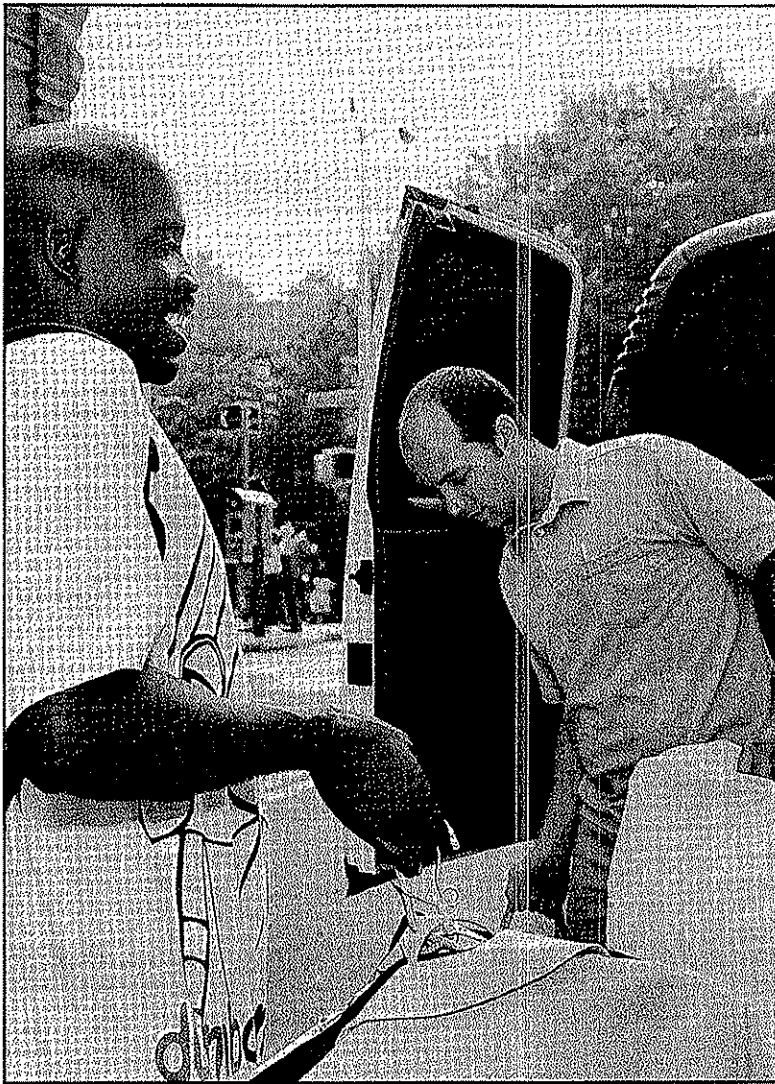
The traditional system forces the homeless mentally ill into hospitals, shelters, or congregate-living programs where they are required to eat, sleep, and wake when told, watch preselected television channels, observe curfews, and restrict guests, all while being forced to earn privileges by proving they are sober, taking prescribed medication, and staying fully under control.

There is one program in New York City, however, that gives the homeless mentally ill the one thing

they crave most: a home of their own. Pathways to Housing has taken the path less traveled and reversed the order of priorities typically practiced by those trying to help the homeless. It recognizes the fundamental fact that many of the homeless mentally ill are fully capable of taking care of themselves most of the time, and that they would rather see a landlord to discuss ways to alleviate their housing crisis than see a psychiatrist for their long-standing mental illness.

"One of the hallmarks of mental illness is denial," says Pathways founder and director Sam Temberis. "People often behave as if there's nothing wrong with them – and for the most part, this is actually true. They can learn to live their lives and cope. Symptoms come and go, and none of us are in a distressed state all the time, and certainly not forever."

Few know that better than Pam Parlapano, a



Bradley Jacobs, East Harlem team leader helping new client James Fatal move in. (Photo courtesy Margaret Morton)

photographer who teaches the gift of the camera to Pathways clients. The first recipient of the Gordon Parks Humanitarian Photography Award, she has been with Pathways from the beginning.

"What I love about Pathways is that from the very moment people have an encounter with Pathways, they start being talked to like individual human beings," she says. "That's what's so different from other programs. There's much more asking, 'Who are you? What are you looking for? Do you like this apartment? Do you like this neighborhood?' It's not, 'Here's your apartment. Here's your key.'"

That difference allows people to see the homeless mentally ill as individuals and not as a category, she says. And from that very first moment, Pathways clients start guiding their own destinies.

"They don't have to be drug compliant if they don't want to be," she says. "They don't have to be in a drug program if they don't want to. Sam's concept

is that people have the right to direct their lives. The more you have, the more you're going to do the right thing to keep it."

Certainly there are those who fall and lose what they have gained, she says. Drug addiction has an irresistible pull for many people, and it can take many tries to beat it. But if they don't lose their homes, don't wind up in jail, and don't get into big trouble, they can turn things around quicker.

"To get off drugs can take several attempts," she says. "But because people have their apartment and are working with their service coordinators, they have someone to go to. They're no longer alone and they know it."

And that's enough for Pathways clients to keep coming back, even if they've fallen off the wagon, stopped taking their medications, or lost their apartment and want their money to go out and buy drugs. "They come back because Pathways becomes their family and their lifeline," she says. "Sam is totally nonjudgemental."

Tsemberis recognizes that in many cases the homeless mentally ill had, somewhere along the line, been evicted from housing they'd once enjoyed, often through no fault of their own. He believes that the major reason for the rising rates of homelessness in the last twenty-five years is the elimination of federally subsidized housing. The federal government reduced construction of subsidized housing units in the latter part of the 1970s and virtually eliminated them when Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, after which the number of new units of subsidized housing went from approximately 350,000 per year to less than 50,000 per year. In the early 1980s, this loss was coupled with a very strong real estate market that was busy converting affordable housing units into co-ops and condominiums for affluent buyers. The poor were left homeless when relatives could no longer support them. For those with the least support, especially the mentally ill, America's streets became their home at alarming rates.

"There is a certain degree of sympathy for the mentally ill because people can recognize they didn't choose it for themselves," Tsemberis says. "However, when homelessness and mental illness are coupled with substance abuse, the public's perception shifts to believing that the person is primarily an alcoholic or a drug addict and is homeless because of weak character or bad choices."

The result is a system that blames the victim and demands clients be clean and sober before obtaining what they most need: housing. Consequently, those who are homeless and have both psychiatric and substance-abuse problems are the least likely to get into existing housing programs and most likely to get evicted and end up on the streets.

Tsemberis's attitude is a sharp departure from the more familiar approach. Pathways provides clients with immediate access to independent apartments, moving them directly from the streets into homes of their own, and, wherever possible, ones located in the neighborhood of their choice. Apartments are furnished with the essentials and the client is accompanied to shop for the amenities.

"People are overjoyed to have a place of their own," Tsemberis says. "They love having a key to open and close their own door, deciding when to sleep and when to wake up, choosing which channel to watch, or using the phone when they like and being able to leave a call-back number. People personalize their places beautifully. They are very resourceful with very little money. Once people are off the streets and safe and secure, they can relax and begin to consider their next step."

Pathways is funded by government contracts and pays most of the rent on the apartments. Clients, in turn, must meet two program requirements: (1) contribute 30 percent of their income (usually a Social Security Disability check) toward the cost of rent, and (2) meet with their service coordinator twice a month. Pathways is the representative payee for most clients, and service coordinators have monthly budget meetings to help clients pay their bills. Whatever money is left over is the client's to keep, and he's free to live his life as he sees fit. Furthermore, about 30 percent of the Pathways staff are in recovery from homelessness, mental illness, or substance abuse, and they speak to clients from a place of experience.

"People would tell me, 'I want a place of my own and I want beer in the fridge and when you come over I don't want to have to hide the beer,'" Tsemberis says. "How could you not listen to that?"

He and Parlapiano listen to it all the time and they are continually astounded at what they hear. Peter Price, one of Parlapiano's photography students, had been homeless for twenty years, had a severe drinking problem, and was highly manic and fairly volatile. But he was very quiet when he first came into the program and one day he and Parlapiano started talking about Federico Fellini.

"He not only knew about Fellini," she says with amazement, "he knew everything about him – every film he ever made, everyone in the cast. And when I asked him to explain film development he explained emulsion and how it's mixed. He knew all about the architecture in New York and he was an amazing mathematician. Every time it came to the science section of *The New York Times* on Tuesday I called up Peter to cipher it out for me. Everybody in Barnes & Noble knew Peter, who would sit on this one couch with a gigantic math book checking the problems



just to see if they had done it right."

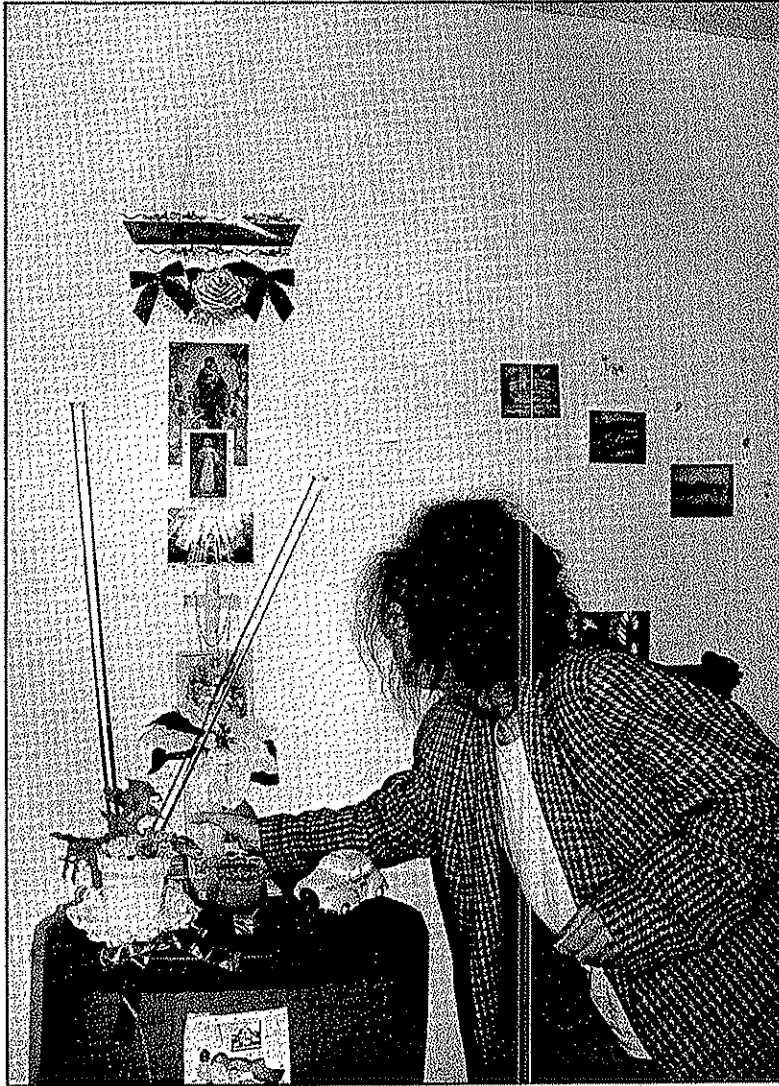
One day Peter lost control and Parlapiano convinced him to check into the hospital for a few days. The doctor asked if interns could sit in on the intake. Peter agreed, and the doctor started by asking him if he knew who the president was.

"He not only knew who the president was," she remembers, "he knew every president and what years they served!"

When the doctor asked if Peter could count from 100 to 1 backwards, he responded, "In increments of seven?" When he asked if Peter recognized the saying, "Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," Peter told them not only what it meant but where in the Bible it came from.

"It was a humbling experience for everyone," she says. "The interns could have learned that even if people have extreme emotions it has nothing to do with them being smart or not. But the interns didn't

Jose Rosado tries to recreate everything. In his apartment in the Bronx he painted bricks in his hallway. He has spent hours staring at the Brooklyn Bridge just to create this miniature version. (Photo courtesy Pam Parlapiano)



Teresa DiTerlizzi decorated her apartment with cutouts from magazines and fresh things from the street. (Photo courtesy Pam Parlapiano)

get it. Peter died in his late seventies of a heart attack in his home, in his apartment, in the program, with people who cared about him and he knew it. I don't think Peter missed having a full life."

Parlapiano has always loved teaching photography to people who might have a special need, she says. She's comfortable in that role and knows that people who have special situations also have special creativity. She has traveled the world photographing leprosy victims and is the author of *Quest for Dignity: Personal Victories Over Leprosy/Hansen's Disease*, which formed the core of a major photographic exhibition at the United Nations in 1997. She also teaches photography at Empire State College in Manhattan, where much of the time she is encouraging people to discover their creativity, to find out what they feel about things. But her students from Pathways are people who are already dealing with extreme emotions and their feelings are right on the

surface, requiring little coaxing.

"We all know art is in the extreme," she says. "I know if someone has that particular talent, they have that other component – they are out of the norm, they have that extreme emotion. If I can direct them into photography I'm going to see some great stuff. I also have an opportunity to give them a chance to see what they're able to do after living by themselves as 'unable' for years."

And by putting a Nikon around someone's neck, she says, even if the people they encounter recognize that they're a little different, they have a common denominator – a camera – if a stranger wants to strike up a conversation.

"Then they would find out how brilliant Peter was because he could tell them everything about the mechanism of the camera," she says. "So you have this equal thing everybody can talk about with respect. What you are now is something other than a category. And if you are a category, you're a photographer, not someone who was homeless."

While working at Pathways, Parlapiano has met any number of gems of human beings, like Bruce, a brilliant artist who knows all about Michaelangelo and every other Renaissance artist. "He should be teaching at a university," she says.

Jerome is a Pathways client who, when he's not on drugs, is brilliant. When he is on drugs, he's one of those tenants who gets his apartment, loses his apartment, gets his apartment, loses his apartment. And every time he gets a new apartment he puts down new tile and installs wild lighting himself.

"Every time he loses an apartment he creates a new one," Parlapiano says, "He's a different kind of success story. He's not in jail, he's not on the street, and he never quite lets go completely. Sam just went to give a talk about housing. Who did he take? Not the angel. He took Jerome."

Jose is an artist who is very precise. His apartment in the Bronx was not in great shape, so he painted the bricks on his wall. He sits in front of the Brooklyn Bridge for days and days at a time and recreates it in miniature form out of anything he has. "Everything about him is meticulous," she says. "He's immaculate in a starched shirt."

What people have to know is that behind the category are a lot of individuals with amazing stories and a lot of gifts to give because of what they've been through, she says. They involuntarily became different, and in doing that they lost some things and gained some things.

"What I want to see is not the story of their loss, but the story of the gains," she says. "Behind these faceless statistics we're always talking about is the perception that mental illness is bigger than the person. It's not. Human individuality usurps everything."

Tsemberis's thinking about how to help the homeless mentally ill began to evolve after he completed a doctoral program in psychology at New York University in 1983. Well-intentioned professors had taught him how to identify, classify, categorize, and diagnose people with stigmatizing labels as a prelude to delivering treatment. Upon graduation, Tsemberis worked in New York City's psychiatric hospitals. Then he ran an outreach program designed to treat people who were homeless, living on the streets, mentally ill, and possibly posing a danger to themselves and others. He and his colleagues could assess up to thirty people a day, and those who met the clinical and legal criteria were taken to Bellevue Hospital – involuntarily, if necessary. Some of the people they got to the hospital were in bad shape, with severe medical problems such as infections, frostbite, and pneumonia. If they received the necessary medical treatment, Tsemberis felt he had done them a useful service.

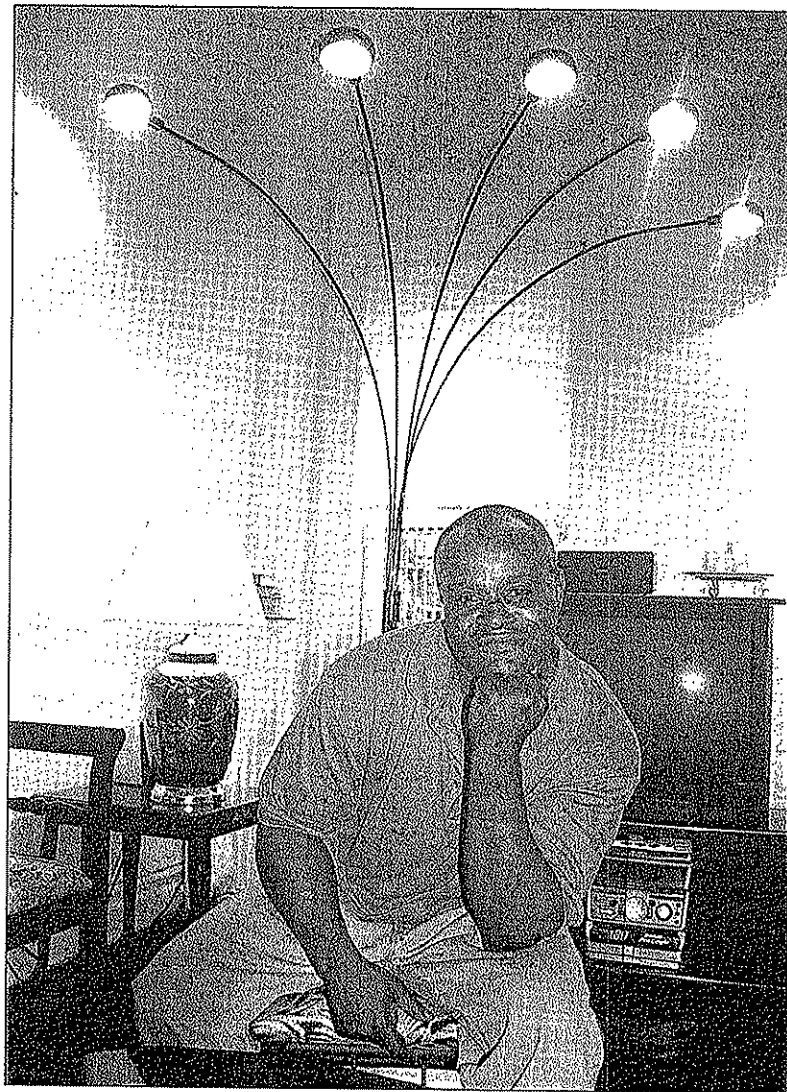
"Ultimately, however, this program was very disappointing," he admits. "People we had anguished about taking to the hospital with the hope that they would get treatment and be discharged to a decent place to live would, within a very short time, be right back on the street."

Many people they reached out to would say, "Leave me alone. I don't need to see a psychiatrist; I need to see a landlord. The problem is obvious: I'm homeless." His efforts probably saved a few lives and amputations, but the experience primarily taught him how to listen to people and understand their problems. Nevertheless, he remained frustrated that he couldn't get people off the streets and into permanent housing.

By the late 1980s the agenda concerning the homeless mentally ill shifted from clinical needs to housing. But the official focus was trained on creating more places of congregate housing – forty to sixty residents, single rooms, common kitchen and dining room with treatment services on-site. Each facility was essentially a mini institution, but many of those assigned there couldn't take the regimentation and found themselves back out on the street.

People felt their program routines were demeaning, that they were being treated very poorly and were forced to compromise their dignity, autonomy, and self-determination. Many people found a way to cope with the restrictions, Tsemberis says, "but from my perspective as a street outreach worker, I could see that approach was not working for those who remained on the streets."

There remained a desperate need for an alternative to this "treatment first" approach to scooping people up off the street and taking them to hospitals. So Tsemberis and his team started opening drop-in centers where people could take a shower, get a meal, and speak to a friendly face – which to those on the



street seemed like a wonderful break from the chaos outside. If someone had a broken leg, Tsemberis explains, you'd get him a cast, a cane, or a wheelchair. The handicap doesn't end his life and debilitate him completely. In the same way, Tsemberis and his colleagues began to work around the disabilities posed by people's mental illnesses and to get them to focus their abilities on ways that they could cope.

"Instead of the clinician saying, 'I think you need this or I think you need that,' it changes the entire relationship by asking clients, 'What do you need?' or 'How can I help you?'" he says. "It becomes much more a service-oriented approach to working with people and giving them a greater voice in what will happen to them. In fact, they begin to drive the intervention as opposed to having the intervention imposed on them. Then people start to have a different conversation with you."

In 1992, desperate to provide housing for those

Jerome Dinkins was finishing the tiles in his new apartment and installing great lighting. (Photo courtesy Pam Parlapiano)



Bruce Eyster is an artist through and through. No matter what his situation, with or without a home, he made art. His knowledge of the great Renaissance artists is astounding. He is living proof that the artistic soul will not be denied. (Photo courtesy Pam Parlapiano)

successfully engaged in the psych rehab drop-in center, Tsemberis took the leap. He obtained \$500,000 from the New York Office of Mental Health, a supported housing grant with which he could pay rent and staff, and began to give his clients what they had been requesting for so long – independent housing with no pre-treatment requirements. This first grant provided for rents and case-management services for fifty clients.

At that time the program cost approximately \$9,700 per person a year, compared with the \$15,000 annual cost of a cot in a homeless shelter, or the \$35,000 to \$45,000 expended annually for each bed in congregate housing. This allowed him to demonstrate that supported housing is not only more desirable for clients, it is also a far cheaper alternative for New York State.

“It’s still the cheapest program around,” Tsemberis says, “about \$22,000 per person per year, while homeless-shelter costs have risen to between

\$25,000 and \$30,000 a year and the congregate-housing cost is close to \$50,000.”

Once Pathways clients get their apartments they are very grateful, he says. Then, after a few weeks, they want to find jobs, the next issue, after housing, that people are very motivated to do something about. That sent him on a mission to find additional money for support services. Today the program has expanded to include enhanced clinical services and vocational counseling for more than 400 clients, and the annual budget has risen to \$7.2 million.

“Every year the program has grown in terms of more people housed and more services offered,” he says.

Seventy of 400 clients are working, some of them full-time, many part-time within the agency – painting, helping to fix up apartments, etc. While the agency houses primarily single adults, its roster includes at least thirty families, and in several cases parents have recovered enough stability to have their children returned to them.

The demand for an apartment through Pathways is very high, as is the retention rate: 85 percent of those who have obtained their own homes have maintained independent apartment living. The agency keeps a waiting list of 500 people anxious for a place of their own, anxious to return to a lifestyle that many take for granted.

“We want to support people so they can make lives for themselves,” he says, “but the continuum-of-care congregate-housing enterprise is growing astronomically compared to our housing-first program. It’s a pity, because that system continues to build architectural structures that inhibit the development of complex lifestyles.”

Mental illness coupled with homelessness is often a very isolating experience, Tsemberis says. On the one hand the homeless person doesn’t want to bring shame to his family, while on the other hand the family rejects the idea that one of their own has mental illness because of all the stigma and fear attached to it. There is thus a mutual pulling away. What sets Tsemberis apart from his colleagues is that in his gut he trusts and accepts the experiences and beliefs of those who have mental illness.

He also tries to remain responsive to the individual needs of his clients, as he demonstrated in the case of one of his first, a homeless man named Glen Lee. Mr. Lee was about sixty-five years old, had been sleeping on the streets in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue and 40th Street, and spent much of his time at the nearby New York Public Library. He believed New York State had robbed his family, possibly of Native American origin, of a great deal of land. So he would travel to towns with names like Glens Falls, Glenville, and Glenvale and take photographs with a Polaroid

camera to build a case to sue the state.

"He was exhausting himself," Tsemberis says.

"When I met with him I immediately offered him a place on 50th Street. He said that he would consider my offer. A couple of days later he returned to say that the offer was appreciated but he had made some inquiries and understood that the money funding our program came from the New York State Office of Mental Health. Under these circumstances he couldn't accept the apartment because it would put him in a conflict of interest with the lawsuit he was building against the State."

Tsemberis asked if Mr. Lee would consider accepting the place not as an apartment but simply a place to serve as an office space for all the papers he was carrying around, and he agreed. So Pathways furnished the apartment like a law office – file cabinets and desk along with a convertible couch. Mr. Lee lived there for several years until he finally made contact with his family, who took him back to Pennsylvania.

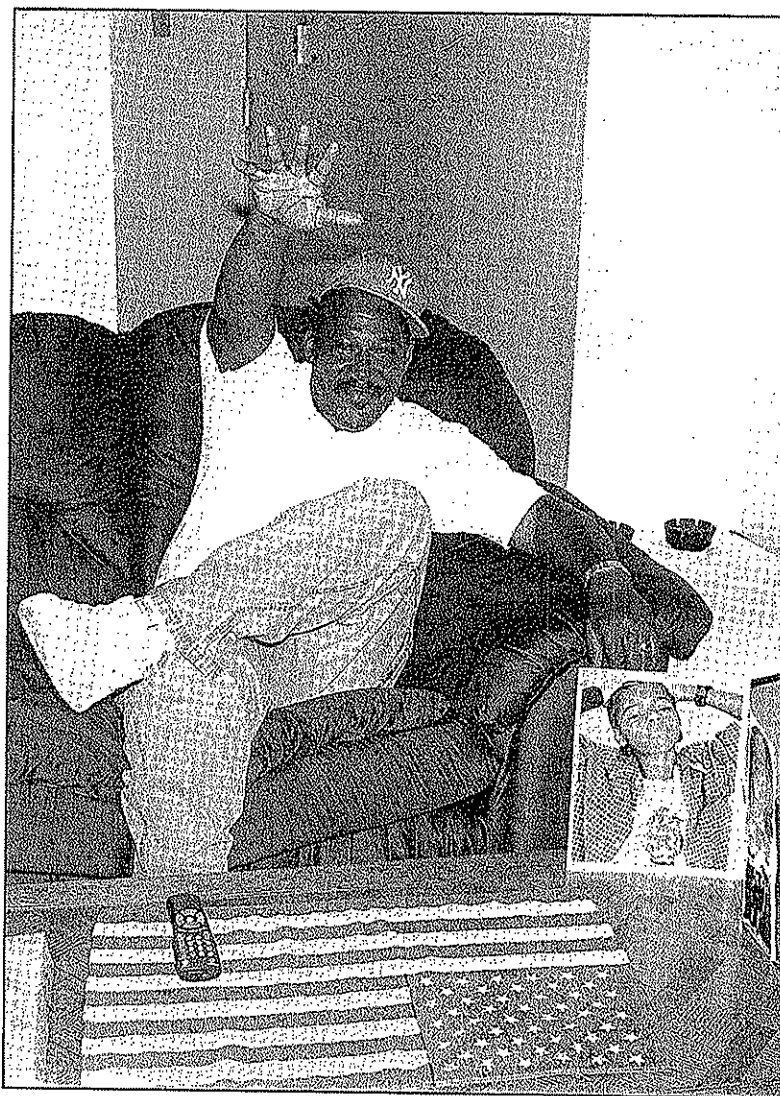
"This example demonstrates the way you have to think if you hope to meet people on their own terms," he says.

At one point Tsemberis had been asking his Pathways clients how the program had changed their lives. Many said that now they could rest, they could dream again, they could have their own thoughts for the first time without having to worry so much about their survival. But when he asked Marvin, a very spiritual individual, if he sensed himself changed when he got a home of his own, Tsemberis got an unusual answer.

"He said, 'It's like the path of the sun: in the morning it's low in the sky, at noon it's high over head but seems smaller, and then in the afternoon it's large in the west. But isn't it the same sun?' That tells me that homelessness is a transient condition. People are who they are and sometimes they are homeless and sometimes not, but let's not treat them differently because they are in one condition at one point in time."

After ten years serving the homeless mentally ill, there are two issues that continue to drive Tsemberis. First is the agency's mission to serve people who are still living on the streets: how many apartments can he find, what grants he can get, and how can he ensure that his growing staff share the agency's radically client-driven approach. But more importantly, he struggles with how to change people's minds about what mental illness means and the true capabilities of people in that condition.

Tsemberis has found that it's difficult to find mental-health professionals to do the work of Pathways. There's a tremendous amount of risk-taking and authenticity required for the job. They can't play it safe like in an office setting – they're not behind



a desk, they're not controlling the situation, and they're not selecting their clients. And most professionals don't want to spend 80 percent of their time going out to visit their clients in their communities. So it's not an easy sell. But the fact that his approach works better than any alternative is incontrovertible.

"If we can change mind-sets we can begin to create programs like this one all over the place," he says. "People have been trained in the traditional system and it's very hard for them to believe you can practice your craft in a different, more useful, and more rewarding way.

"I'm not pushing them into anything," he says of the people he is committed to serve. "I'm letting them pull me. Our slogan is Love, Respect, and Creating Possibilities. It is in that spirit that our services exist. It's compassionate, it's pragmatic, and it's about creating an environment where people are free to pursue their dreams." ■

Ben Matthews with his flag table cloth and photos of his brother in the service and a favorite rap star. (Photo courtesy Pam Parlapiano)