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Lost Among Us Hanahan man finds path from mental illness and homelessness to independence

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Posted: Sunday, October 27, 2013 8:39 a.m., Updated: Monday, October 28, 2013 2:33 p.m.

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David Rosier has turned a corner on the path he was on and now lives sober in an apartment off Remount Road. He was returning there from a grocery shopping trip. Wade Spees/Staff Friday October 23, 2013 [Buy this photo](#)

The apartment is simple. One bedroom, a bathroom, a living room with a colorful rug, a table, a couch and a sliver of a kitchen.

Yet David Rosier felt nearly overwhelmed with the sheer responsibility of moving into his own place: Paying rent and utilities, taking his medications, buying groceries and being so very independent.

At 56, Rosier hasn't had his own place in nearly a decade.

← For much of his adult life he has lived in treatment centers, prisons and on the streets. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, antisocial disorder, depression and anxiety, he has done what too many folks with mental illness do. He medicated himself with alcohol and drugs — heroin in the end.



Or nearly the end.

He cannot pinpoint precisely what triggered his arrival at the end of a lifelong slog through drugs, crime and homelessness.

Another criminal charge gave him a push; so did going through Charleston County Mental Health Court.

After living much of his adult life in treatment centers, prisons and on the streets, David Rosier puts groceries away in his Hanahan apartment, an arrangement that is the result of changing the course he was on and getting help through a program called Lease on Life. Wade Spees/Staff Friday October 23, 2013

Either way, when Rosier arrived in early 2011 at Crisis Ministries, Charleston's largest homeless shelter, he never imagined that two years later he would be clean, sober and living on his own.

Yet here he sits in the sunny living room of his Hanahan apartment. His is a success story far too rare for local people today facing mental illness and its crippling, well-trodden back alley into homelessness.

Housing troubles

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A stable home might be the single most critical piece of the mental illness recovery puzzle — and often the hardest to come by, especially the affordable kind.

Yet Rosier is one of a growing number of chronically homeless disabled residents finding help through a program called Lease on Life. It was created in 2008 by Family Services Inc., a North-Charleston-based nonprofit that operates several programs to help disabled people become self-sufficient.

The program helps find permanent housing for the chronically homeless who have disabilities such as mental illness or substance abuse — or both, as often is the case.

Today, the program is at capacity assisting 46 households. Since its birth, Lease on Life has served 117 people, Executive Director David Geer said.

It is funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to provide rent subsidies and other services to help clients find permanent homes while learning to become financially stable. Its staff often works with programs such as Crisis Ministries, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the state Department of Mental Health and Goodwill Industries to identify people who are able — and willing — to take part.

Not everyone is ready to traverse the tough path to recovery, which often includes confronting longtime struggles with drug and alcohol addiction.

"There is chaos in their lives," said Liz Stowe, who manages homeless prevention and veterans services for Family Services. "It takes a lot of collaboration."

To qualify for Lease on Life help, participants must be homeless and have a disability such as mental illness.

They must take basic budgeting classes and create a household budget. They also can use Family Services' Representative Payee Program, which assists with financial management to ensure limited incomes pay rent and utilities first.

In turn, participants must contribute 30 percent of their incomes to their rent, based on their ability to pay. Lease on Life helps with the remaining cost.

The program is growing in part because studies show that helping people like Rosier helps everyone. With a home and treatment, he no longer does drugs, commits crimes or lands in costly ERs or jails.

"This is a huge profit to our whole community," said Caprice Atterbury, Family Services' chief financial officer.

Spiraling down

Pinpointing the birth of Rosier's addiction is difficult. He began drinking and using drugs as a kid.

For years he held down jobs while using. He worked the shipyards in Charleston and traveled overseas for work.

But when he and his wife divorced, she received custody of their 13-month-old son and moved to New Orleans.

"I got to where I didn't care about nothing," he recalled. "Then I started using everything."

He lost his job and became depressed. When he was diagnosed, he took medications for a while. Then he left South Carolina — and left his treatment and medication behind too.

By the late 1990s he lived in and out of motels, wrote bad checks and landed in prison for grand larceny. He spent 27 months there, the first of three stints due to theft-related crimes.

In 2007 he regained his freedom. But he got high while on probation and landed back in prison, then in a Salvation Army center where he relapsed and into a Philadelphia treatment center with awful living conditions.

Drowning in depression, he took up heroin and nearly overdosed twice, he said.

Finally, he boarded a train in Pennsylvania and headed back home to Goose Creek.

"The only one who stuck by me all this time was my mom," he said, choking up. When he returned home, his two sisters also jumped in to help.

Still, he struggled with substance abuse. In 2011 he landed at Crisis Ministries.

"It started out as just a place to stay," he said. Then in his mid-50s, he had an epiphany. "I just knew I needed to quit," Rosier said. "I knew I wouldn't go anywhere."

Through Mental Health Court, Stowe connected him with Lease to Life.

Finding success

Last fall, drug free, he moved into his own apartment.

"It was nerve-racking," he said.

He pays 30 percent of his monthly disability income to rent to leave enough to pay other bills. He could afford a place only in a low-income area.

A decade ago he bought drugs in an apartment across his small parking lot. But for the relatively low rent payments, he risked being so close to temptations.

The last time he had his own place was in 2004, when his sister helped him after he was released from prison.

"I'm nervous about being on my own," he said. "It's been so long."

He still struggles with the anxiety that can leave him in a near-panicked state. And his antisocial tendencies linger, although he visits his mother, goes to medical appointments and does his own grocery shopping.

He gains confidence with every bill paid on time, with every day he spends clean. He meets with Stowe every 90 days to go over his budget.

"We have an open conversation about whether this is working or not. And it's working, because he has been doing great," Stowe said.

Rosier also got back in touch with his son, who is courteous.

Some bridges burned cannot be rebuilt easily. Or at all.

"If you really want something, you've got to go for it no matter what anyone tells you," Rosier said. "You've just got to do what you've got to do."

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