

Patrick Lee: I don't want to die in a shelter

I grew up in Washington DC, and at a very young age I experimented with drugs. I come from a very big family, nine brothers and two sisters, but I just didn't fit in, even with my own family, and I felt so uncomfortable with people. **I had very low self esteem. So I started experimenting with drugs really early and it gave me a mask, if you will, and I could do things like other people.** It worked for a while. I never finished school. I went all the way to the eleventh grade. As long as I had the street smarts I could survive, you know, which was a bad mistake because the deeper I got into drugs the harder it was for me to do anything else.

What I used to do for a long time – and it got me arrested several times – is I would burglarize people's homes and take. It was to feed my drug habit. It was to feed dope and crack. It got me incarcerated. I would come out and I would repeat this cycle over and over again for years. I got in so much trouble in Washington that every place I would go there was a black mark against me. I jumped parole and I ran for seven years. I just ran.

Most of the time people have this stereotype about people being homeless – oh they are robbers, rapists, murderers or whatever. I fit right in with people like that. **I was homeless. The A train was my living room and bedroom.** I didn't care for the shelters because they always got me in trouble. I was a very quick tempered person and I would fight you at the drop of a hat.

I went to a shelter and I stayed there almost two years. I stopped doing drugs, stopped smoking and everything. It came time for me to leave and it was scariest thing ever because I didn't know what to do. **I had no clue how to live on life's terms.** After two years in that program I lost it in less than 3 months. I went back to the races and stayed high and drunk and started the crazy cycle again.

One thing I knew I had to do, I had to stop again. I had been stopping and starting forever. I found out about Project Renewal. They said that these people could help me. If you go there with an open mind, they will help you – they will help you get what you need.

I spent a year and three months in the Third Street Shelter and had counseling in the OPD (Outpatient Counseling Department). It was control and it wasn't control because a lot is up to you. But when it was time to randomly do a urine test, it was such a joy because I know every time I'm coming back clean. And I start liking and loving myself.

My caseworkers...they saved my life. I was a walking time bomb when I walked in these doors. Anything and everything would irritate me so I didn't talk about it, I would just fight about it. They helped me to learn how to think and not fight. They took time to point things out to you that you could fix. They give you advice, 'Just follow this path and watch what happens.' That's what I did from the time that I walked in here. These people helped me a lot. I love them to death. They don't just do this for me, I see them bend over backwards for everyone that walks through these doors. I see their heart break

if someone relapses. I see the affect and I know that I don't want to hurt anybody like that again. I don't want to hurt myself anymore.

After being here for a year and some months I spent a lot of time looking for a place and getting prepared for that day because I knew I'd have to leave here. I'm not getting any younger, and I don't want to die in a shelter. I don't want to die with alcohol and drugs in my system. I don't want that to be my legacy. It was time. I was just so tired of doing these crazy things.

Project Renewal has this rental assistance voucher. That helped me so much. Now I've signed a lease and my landlord is so sweet. **In order for you to have this housing, you have to work for it...nobody is going to give it to you for free. You have to earn it.**

The job came shortly after I moved out. When I was living here I worked the stipend program doing the breakfast cooking and prepping and stuff like that. There was an opening for washing the pots. So when the opening came up, Ms. Barbara (the Comfort Foods Director) asked me if I'd fill out an application. I was so happy to get the job because I didn't want to be idle.

Now, good days and bad days do not require me to go drink or do drugs. It's not the answer and I know that now. My health is wonderful today. I haven't smoked a cigarette in two years. I'm getting ready to celebrate two years clean and sober. I don't crave for these things anymore. I started on this stuff when I was sixteen. I saw what it did to my brothers who are deceased from drugging. My father killed himself drinking and drugging.

It's so wonderful to be free. **And that's how I feel...I feel free.** When I leave work, do you know what I'm going to do?....I am going home and I'm going to the Laundromat and I can't wait...I love it...folding my things nicely and coming home and putting them away. I love my place. I wake up in the morning and I sit up in my bed and I say, 'Wow, this is mine, this is life, this is wonderful.'