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A Onetime Crack Addict Finds a New High in His Life as an Author

By LYNNE AMES

MAMARONECK

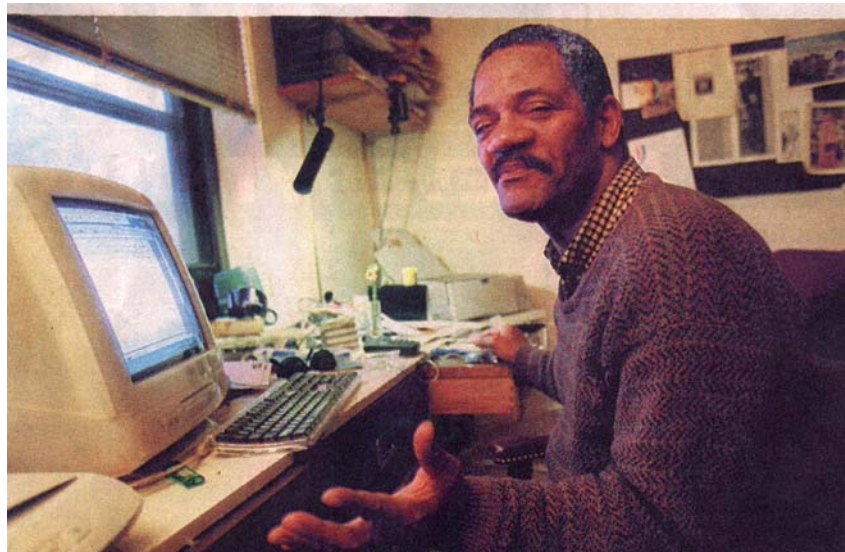
When Lee Stringer first smoked crack cocaine, he recalled recently, the “feeling was like love, sex, winning the lottery and Christmas morning all in one.” Fortunately, there was another activity that gave him a similar high: writing.

Mr. Stringer is 51 and lives in a cooperative apartment here, near his childhood home. But for 12 years he was homeless in Manhattan, addicted to crack, though he had once held jobs in advertising, public relations and other media. Even when he found a niche as a columnist for and editor of Street News, the paper about and by homeless people, and began sleeping in the paper’s offices on Ninth Avenue, he still “lived on the end of a crack pipe.”

Eventually, writing, and [in-patient treatment at Project Renewal](#) in New York, where he is now a [board member](#), saved him. He got off drugs and wrote a memoir, “[Grand Central Winter](#)” ([Seven Stories Press](#) (<http://www.sevenstories.com>), 1998). He is working on another memoir, “Sleepaway School,” to be published in 2003 about his years growing up here and his time at Hawthorne Cedar Knolls, a live-in program for at-risk youth.

Tomorrow, he will be one of four authors reading from their work at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day African-American Writers and Readers Literary Tea, sponsored by the Westchester Library system, beginning at 3:30 pm. at Abigail Kirsch Tappan Hill in Tarrytown.

Recently, Mr. Stringer talked about his work and life.



Chris Maynard for The New York Times

Lee Stringer, in his Mamaroneck home, now finds satisfaction in writing after spending 12 years in Manhattan, homeless and addicted to crack.

Q. *You’ve said that writing is all-consuming and exhilarating. Why?*

A. Through writing, I have rediscovered myself. I've revealed myself and accepted myself. Yes, it is rewarding that readers have also accepted and embraced what I've written. But ultimately, you cannot get real acceptance from anyone but yourself.

Q. What else helped you get through?

A. I remember the last time I was about to get some crack. I remember thinking, I'm about to betray everything, everyone, myself. I was in a park. I dropped to my knees and said: 'Lord, there's no way I can resist these cravings without help. You've got to take them away.' I looked up and I saw someone walking this big, beautiful Saint Bernard. The dog came over to me, kind of leaned his whole heavy body in to mine, like a hug. I took this as a kind of sign. That was six years ago, and I've been clean ever since, not even a craving.

Q. You write about rages, that as a kid in school you broke things and so forth, the kind of behavior that got you sent by family court to Hawthorne Cedar Knolls when you were 12. What was the anger about?

A. When I was growing up in Mamaroneck, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was a kind of all-American, Norman Rockwell-type town. In my elementary school and junior high, there were just a handful of black kids. At the time, it looked like my idea of America and I wanted to be part of it, but the majority of kids were not all that friendly. And I must say then, and in high school, where there were more black students, it was not necessarily about race. It was about wanting to make friends with people, but there were these snobby kids, these cliques, and it was frustrating.

In those few seconds when I got angry, I became a different person. I remember once, seeing someone I knew who was good-looking, popular; he seemed to have been rained on by every gift of life anyone would ever want. I could not for a second abide the casualness with which he was simply standing against a doorway.

Q. What ameliorated your anger eventually?

A. A combination of many things. Hawthorne Cedar Knolls. Friends. Work, writing. Project Renewal. Also self-awareness.

Q. How does having come back from the streets of New York to live in Mamaroneck, to being a respected person in the town and beyond, make you feel?

A. I'm deathly afraid to toot my own horn too loudly. But I will say it is gratifying and satisfying. I'm happy to be on the board of the Friends of Mamaroneck Library, and on the board of the Youth Shelter of Westchester, a Mount Vernon-based program to keep first-time youthful offenders out of jail. I know all kinds of people in Mamaroneck, in Westchester, all types. And I still have many friends who are homeless.