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'Treading Water to Save My Life'; A Cherished Key to a Home After Years on the Street

By NINA BERNSTEIN

Police officers in Greenwich Village still remember her, the crazy, homeless bag lady who screamed at passers-by on Eighth Street in the 1980's, begged for spare change, or thrust her mad poetry into startled hands.

Time and again, when she got too wild or the weather grew too bitter, the police carted her off to a psychiatric ward or a jail cell. Time and again, she returned to forage for food in garbage cans, to call out her love for the universe in an ecstasy of mania and marijuana, or to rail at the rich who walked by her on the sidewalk. Once, she even punched a stranger in the nose and sent his glasses flying.

This skinny, disheveled woman who called herself Jane seemed to exemplify homelessness as an intractable problem. Yet today, recalling that period as "treading water in the freezing water to save my life for 11 years," the woman, whose real name is Jill Flesch, kisses the apartment key she wears around her neck.

It opens the door to her sunny studio off Times Square, one of 55 such apartments in Ivan Shapiro House, a supported housing development for formerly homeless mentally ill men and women. For the last two years, Jill Flesch has found a home there.

"It's unspeakable to have my own place," Ms. Flesch said, her high voice tremulous as she showed a visitor the Chinese lantern she had hung in the window, the Canon photocopy machine that is her prize possession, the soft bed artfully piled with pillows worthy of a Ralph Lauren ad.

The journey there was not short or easy. It included years of trial-and-error medications, some with fearsome side effects. It was punctuated by multiple hospital stays, some on wards where, she said, she was raped and beaten by other patients. It took the special persistence of a caseworker and a psychiatrist at Project Renewal, a group residence for the mentally ill where Ms. Flesch spent seven years making the transition from life on the street to life in an apartment. And in the end, it took a vacancy at a place like Ivan Shapiro House.

At a time marked by public anxiety over the mentally ill on the streets and a debate over shelters versus sidewalks, success stories like Ms. Flesch's are often unheard. But both advocates for the mentally ill and government officials say supported housing, with its 24-hour supervision and links to medical and social services, is quietly making a difference. They say places like Ivan Shapiro House have proved a humane and cost-effective solution to the troubled street odyssey of 4,000 mentally ill people previously cycled through hospitals, jails and shelters.

Ms. Flesch's own memory of homelessness is still fresh, even as she spends her third Christmas in her cozy home. She especially shudders at her recollections of the city's shelter system, which has improved dramatically since she experienced it but at its entry points remains frightening for the mentally ill.

"A shelter, it's a million times worse than the street," Ms. Flesch said. "Two hundred desperately poor, insane, drugged people — you're just in fear of your life and you can't get out. On the street there's space, people at a distance."

But even Ms. Flesch, who sometimes veers into a riff on the unbeatable freedom of street life, has not forgotten how grim it was at its worst. "I remember sitting on the sidewalk saying, 'How could anybody stand being this cold,'" she wrote in a four-page autobiography that fairly twinkles with her quirky wit. "Then I blanked out. God does that. The people think you're suffering madly. But really, nobody home."

The diagnosis of Ms. Flesch's mental illness has varied over time — schizo-affective disorder with bipolar features is the current label. Her symptoms erupted in late adolescence, but she says she began hearing voices at 3. She is 50 now.

"I've never actually had my own place in my life," she said, leading a visitor past a refrigerator festooned with her notes to herself: "When manic write and make art," says one. "Get banking slip Monday," reminds another.

Born into a wealthy Westchester County family, for a time she was buffered from the economic consequences of her illness, which intersected with the drug-steeped Washington Square counterculture of the 1970's. Eventually, about the time she gave away her silver Honda to a homeless boyfriend, her father gave up on her.

In her years on the street, she was periodically arrested and jailed, usually for shoplifting pens and stationery to produce what she called "The 8th Street News," a cross between poetry and political tract that she photocopied using change collected by panhandling.

She counts 32 admissions to mental hospitals, where she experienced the panoply of physically painful side effects that make psychotropic drugs unpopular with so many of those told to take them.

"I was in a revolving door for a long time," she said, recalling adult residences where she stayed briefly as "so much worse than the street: three people in a tiny little room, a broken washing machine in the basement, no coffee."

When she was back on the street, she considered beat officers of the 6th precinct "seraphim" — angels who protected her from aggressors, bought her food and affectionately called her "coo-coo" when they carted her to Bellevue.

But in 1990, after a six-month stay in Rockland State Hospital, she was placed in the transitional residential treatment program run by Project Renewal on West 48th Street. "I lost my mind

immediately and ran to the street, but they took me back," she recalled with the ruin of a sweet smile. (She stopped seeing dentists at 18 — "I am not a masochist," she explains.)

Ms. Flesch was one of about eight residents to move to Ivan Shapiro House, on West 46th Street, when it opened. Placements at such facilities are hard to come by. After years of arguing between Gov. George E. Pataki and Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani over financing such supported housing, a compromise signed in October will add 1,500 apartments in the city. But critics of state mental health policy say that number falls far short of what is needed, especially considering that an apartment in supported housing can be a tenth of the cost of a place in a mental hospital or a jail and half the cost of a spot in a shelter.

Ms. Flesch's eyes filled with grateful tears as she spoke of Dr. Ralph Aquila, the staff psychiatrist at Project Renewal who helped make her transition possible. "You know when yarn gets in a tangle?" she asked, likening her mind to a snarled skein of wool. "But with patience and time, all of a sudden you've got brand-new, ready-to-go yarn."

She is poor. That is usually a side effect of disabling mental illness, which typically starts before patients have qualified for Social Security disability payments. Instead they must apply for Supplemental Security Income, or S.S.I., a poverty program with lower benefits and fluctuating eligibility standards.

Thousands like Ms. Flesch were denied S.S.I. during the Reagan administration, and many became homeless. This year, Ms. Flesch received \$7,500 as part of the settlement of a federal class-action lawsuit over those wrongfully rejected. The catch was that she had to spend the windfall within two months, or she would lose continuing benefits of about \$85 a week.

Caseworkers urged her to fix her teeth. Instead she got a photocopy machine — "the dream of a lifetime" — and spent the rest to buy things of beauty on impulse.

"It was just like having all the money in the world," she exulted.

"I have always my whole life said I was the luckiest person in the world," she declared, cradling her house key in both hands. "I don't know how I became so fortunate."

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