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Good people can turn up homeless



Dianne Williamson
dwilliamson@telegram.com
T&G STAFF

I hid my surprise when Ed walked into the room, because I was expecting someone different.

Clean-cut, trim and good-looking, he was dressed in shorts and a turquoise sports shirt that complemented his clear blue eyes. He grew up on the city's West Side and we knew some of the same people. He has relatives in law enforcement, which is partly why he asked that his last name not be used.

Mostly, though, Ed didn't want to be identified because, until recently, he'd been homeless for 30 of his 49 years.

"Sometimes it takes a while to get where you're going," he said with a wry smile. "I'm re-learning how to live."

Some would prefer that Ed and others like him do their re-learning elsewhere. Specifically, not in their neighborhood or anywhere near their families. Ed is among the first clients of the local Home Again program that's modeled after the controversial Housing First movement, which provides housing for the homeless and unease among neighbors who want no part of them.

While Ed lives in a three-decker apartment, Community Healthlink is planning a 14-bed Home Again lodging house at 62 Elm St. As with most proposals for group homes, the program has been met with intense opposition from neighbors who fear that it will bring crime to their doorsteps.

"Residents have a right to protect their neighborhood from chronically homeless people, some of whom are criminals, panhandlers, vagrants, drug dealers, members of rowdy gangs, addicts, or drunks," argued Jim Savage, a member of the Nob Hill Neighborhood Association, in a letter to this newspaper in April. "We don't know if the potential residents are going to be the 'unsympathetic homeless' who beg, drink, bum cigarettes, urinate and vomit in public."

I don't know if Ed is among the "unsympathetic homeless," but when he showed up at Community Healthlink last fall, he was sleeping in tents behind liquor stores and in the woods of Newton Hill. In the winter, he'd climb under the fence and bunk down in the pool house at Beaver Brook. Sometimes he'd sleep on the porch outside his father's home, but he acknowledged that his dad didn't like him there because "things would go missing."

Ed was a crack addict for more than 20 years. He started drinking and doing speed in seventh grade and progressed to freebasing cocaine after high school. He stole and sold cocaine to support his habit and served six months in the House of Correction in 1993. Last summer, his world changed.

"I woke up one morning and my head was numb," he said. "It scared me. I decided to look for help."

He found it in Community Healthlink, which provided counseling and other services and in April moved him to an apartment near Elm Street. The process was long and difficult, but Ed is now clean and speaks of his new life with the awe of a man who's getting a second chance.

"I wake up in a comfortable bed," he said. "I take showers. I make breakfast. It took me a while to get used to it, but I feel strong and I have a great support staff."

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Brooke Doyle, vice president of homeless outreach for Community Healthlink, said residents chosen for the Spencer House on Elm Street will contribute 30 percent of their income toward rent and receive intensive case management. They'll be offered a variety of clinical services. By last count, there were 124 chronically homeless people in Worcester. As for those who don't want them around, they're already *here*, regardless of whether they're lucky enough to land in housing.

"People have misperceptions and stereotypes of who the homeless are," she said. "But you wouldn't be able to pick Ed from a lineup of neighbors."

Ed has no history of violence — except to himself — and he wonders why people fear him. He notes that if he causes any problems, he's out of the program. He said living in a home of his own is a strong incentive to stay clean and change his life.

"People make bad decisions and I've made my share," he said. "I'm no different from people who have skeletons in their closet; mine are just more out in the open. But having my own home is probably the best high I've ever had."