

The Star-Ledger

Housing program gives those with illnesses a chance to get back on their feet

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George Brown's basement apartment is large and clean, but spare. His bedroom holds basics: a narrow bed, a chair, a dresser and a dog-eared Bible.

The important thing is that it's all his. "I'm here and on my own," he said.

The 44-year-old Jersey City native didn't always have the independence he now enjoys.

The second youngest of eight children, Brown dropped out of high school when his father died, taking a job at a car dealership to help support his family. Soon, he was married with four children of his own.

But in the mid-1980s, Brown learned he was HIV-positive, a diagnosis he initially didn't understand and tried to ignore. As he got sicker and sicker, his life became gripped by alcohol.

"I couldn't hold my liquor or my beer," he said. "When I used to drink, I would want to fight. ... I used to stay in trouble."

In 1988, Brown was shot in the arm during an alcohol-fueled conflict. The injury cost him his position at the car dealership, as well as a newer job as a truck driver.

Separated by now from his wife and children, Brown eventually moved back to his mother's home. Meanwhile, he stopped drinking and moved to return to his religious roots after the death of an older brother.

But life at his mother's home was far from ideal. His family knew he had HIV, but knew little about the virus or its spread. Brown was confined to a small room, forbidden from using items shared by the family.

"My younger brother -- I'll never forget this -- I used to eat with a spoon, and he threw it in the garbage," he said. "They used to take the glasses (I used) and break them."

George contracted various illnesses and did not get proper medical care.

"They were looking for me to pass," he said.

Brown was hospitalized in 2003, after suffering a series of strokes. His weight dropped from about 170 to close to 90 pounds, he said. Confined to a wheelchair, he struggled to speak and feed himself.

"My mouth twisted," he said. "I tried to drink soda, and it went all over my clothes."

As Brown worked to regain his speech, and learned to walk with a walker, a social worker recommended he move to Canaan House, a supported independent living facility for men and women diagnosed with mental illness and HIV.

"Because of all the stereotypes and stigma, they've really been cast away," said program manager Lance N. Kearney.

At Canaan House, the 12 residents may choose to participate in support groups and other activities, but live in their own apartments. Assistance is available 24/7 if needed.

"It uncomplicates things for them," Kearney said. The Greater Newark Holiday Fund supports the program.

Today, Brown's health is improving. He goes regularly to Jerusalem Temple Holy Pentecostal Church, and is starting a Bible study group.

Now that his health is under control, Brown says he hopes to spruce up his bedroom. He would like to remove the wheelchairs stacked in one corner -- equipment he proudly says he doesn't need. He wants to replace his leased hospital bed with his own, and hang curtains over the windows.

But in the meantime, he says, he enjoys the peace and quiet at Canaan House, and the company of people who understand what he's been through.

"You've got your own freedom," he said. "I was just blessed."

For more information on the Greater Newark Holiday Fund, or information on how to donate, call 1-866-292-HOPE (4673) or visit holidayfund.org. Carly Rothman may be reached at (973) 392-4169 or crothman@starledger.com.

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