

After Self-Destructive Descent, a Man Finds a Rung to Grasp: Therapy

By ANTHONY RAMIREZ

Jan Jarvis is 6 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 230 pounds. At first, he seems sullen and imposing, especially dressed in a dark-blue security guard uniform.

But coaxing a smile out of Mr. Jarvis is not difficult, a remarkable achievement after a life of sexual abuse, unfocused rage and homelessness. With counseling and several hospitalizations for clinical depression, he has turned his life around.

Still, Mr. Jarvis has surprised even himself with how close he has come to falling back to self-destructive habits.

In August, Mr. Jarvis recalled, he took a stack of MetroCards from a secretary's desk at the Brooklyn center where he receives therapy. After a night of remorse, he returned them.

"By the grace of God, I didn't steal and I didn't go to jail, and I did do the right thing," Mr. Jarvis said. He said that he had just celebrated a birthday in August and, reflecting on his life, had started feeling low.

"I wanted to get high -- to escape," he said. "But I realized I don't want to be using and 34."

The Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, provided Mr. Jarvis with \$200 for fees and a refresher course to regain his security guard's license (he had worked as a guard in 1998). Now, he works as a guard at a carpet-cleaning company and hopes someday to be a physical therapist for the elderly.

In 1993, military doctors gave Mr. Jarvis a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, a mental illness of extreme mood swings that can be accompanied by hallucinations.

After graduating from Samuel J. Tilden High School in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, Mr. Jarvis joined the Army Reserve, working as a forklift operator in Fort Totten, in Queens, and, he said, developing a heavy alcohol, cocaine and marijuana habit.

While visiting Fort Lee in Virginia for routine training, Mr. Jarvis flew into an inexplicable rage after a sleepless night and a bout of drinking. He hurled a television set down the stairs in a recreation room and pushed a filing cabinet out a window.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Jan Jarvis, a security guard at a carpet-cleaning company, in his Brooklyn apartment. After struggling with drug abuse, mental illness and unfocused rage, he hopes to go to college and become a physical therapist.

"I thought the TV set was talking to me," Mr. Jarvis said. "It was telling me to calm down, how to live my life." Mr. Jarvis was hospitalized at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. He was 21. "When I was feeling good," Mr. Jarvis said, referring to his bipolar disorder, "I was a troublemaker, I thought I was invincible, I was stronger than 20 people."

But when he was feeling bad, he said, he felt suicidal, almost homicidal. He tried to pick fights with other men, but no one would challenge him because of his hulking size.

Mr. Jarvis said he was raped when he was 5. "It changed me," he said, taking a deep breath.

The decade or so after serving in the Army Reserve was a downward spiral for Mr. Jarvis, who slept on relatives' couches, stealing petty cash from friends and family members to buy drugs.

"I was living in a tunnel with no light in it," he said.

At last, he exhausted the patience of friends and family and, in April, became homeless when no one he knew would take him in. He wound up at a shelter op-

erated by Bellevue Hospital Center, surrounded by patients who could not control themselves, who sometimes howled in the night.

Finally, Mr. Jarvis sought help. For years, he had been prescribed drugs like lithium for bipolar disorder and Ativan for anxiety, but he never took them, he said, because "I told myself I wasn't crazy."

Now he is enrolled in therapeutic programs, including Project Moving On, a daily full-day program sponsored by the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, which provides therapeutic and social support services for adults with mental illnesses.

"Day by day, I'm changing my life around," said Mr. Jarvis, who recalls his close call with taking the MetroCards.

Mr. Jarvis hopes to go to Hunter College for physical therapy classes to help the elderly.

"When I was at Walter Reed," he said, "I had to learn how to walk again and talk. Because of my mental disease, it hurt to talk. I was a baby all over again.

"There were young people there who helped me. I want to return the favor."