

# Stepping Out on His Own After Caring for Ill Parents

By KARI HASKELL

In taking care of his ailing parents around-the-clock, Brian Jemmotte sometimes neglected to take care of himself. And that would often lead to seizures -- some mild and some life threatening.

"I know when one's coming," said Mr. Jemmotte, 40, a lumbering 6-foot-tall man, wearing a Yankees cap that shadowed his boyish face. "The sky gets dark. It begins to spin."

Mr. Jemmotte has had seizures since he was born.

He does not remember the moments after a seizure, and he has searched for answers about the other parts of his life he cannot remember.

He knows that his parents left Trinidad for the United States in search of better care for him, but he does not know when. He does not know the age of his father, McDonald Jemmotte, or how old his mother, Pearl Jemmotte, was when she died.

Until recently, Mr. Jemmotte lived with his parents. His father was a telephone repairman who worked long hours for low wages. His mother took him to doctors and protected him from danger. She made sure that he kept at his studies. He graduated from John Jay High School with a special education diploma.

After he graduated, his parents' health slowly deteriorated.

When he was 25, they moved into his older sister's two-bedroom basement apartment in Flatbush. As the years passed, his father's mental state began to slip because of Alzheimer's, and his mother's body weakened because of diabetes, and one of her legs was amputated.

At night, it was difficult for Mr. Jemmotte to care for his parents.

He shared a bed with his father, who would wake up in the middle of the night and would beg to go outside. If he crept out, it was up to Mr. Jemmotte to retrieve him. As dawn broke, he would tend to his mother, often because a home attendant did not arrive on time or at all. Mr. Jemmotte would take over the duties and miss a day of work as a stock clerk. During that time, he held jobs at furniture warehouses in Flushing, Queens, and a toy store in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

But his mother always came first. He ran her errands and did the grocery shopping. And at home, he prepared her insulin needle.

"You have to shake the insulin," he said moving his hands up and down, as if shaking a bottle.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Brian Jemmotte is in a job program at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service. The agency helped him get an apartment after his mother died and provided aid so that he could visit his father, who has Alzheimer's.

Sometimes he did not sleep because of the stress. And when there was too much stress, he would have a seizure despite taking medication.

An episode on a morning in July 2004 was potentially life threatening. He was standing on a subway platform waiting for a No. 7 train in Queens when his eyes and world began to roll. His convulsions catapulted him onto the tracks, where he landed in a well between the two nonelectrified rails. Four cars rolled over him before the train could be stopped. Mr. Jemmotte woke up at the Elmhurst Hospital Center with just a few bruises.

"I'm lucky to be alive," he said. The newspapers described the accident as a miraculous event, but the articles did not explore how he was scarred by it.

He stopped taking the subway for a time. He quit work and sought help at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service. He enrolled in a pre-vocational training program after meeting two counselors, Elizabeth Cruz and Ramona Diaz.

He arrives at 8:30 at the bureau during the week.

"It's not hard; it's easy," he said of his employment in the workroom. He is paid per job, which can vary from preparing cosmetic samples to filling bags with fliers.

The less-demanding work made it easier at home. But his mother's health deteriorated further, and she died in June from a stroke during surgery to have her other leg amputated.

Talking about his mother, he became withdrawn. "She was a nice lady," was all he could say.

After his mother's burial, the basement apartment where he and his father lived was a constant reminder of her.

With the assistance from the Brooklyn Bureau, Ms. Cruz was able to get Mr. Jemmotte into his own furnished apartment at a complex for people with disabilities. In September, he moved in and now shares the apartment with a roommate.

All the years of taking care of his parents provided the skills for his independence.

"I know how to cook and do my own laundry," he said.

He also has shown vigor in his work at the bureau, Ms. Cruz said.

If others in the program are unable to complete the work, Mr. Jemmotte said, he stays late to finish a job. "I don't mind; it shows up in your check," he said.

Even with those earnings, his Supplemental Security Income of \$572.55 and \$140 in food stamps, he said, money is tight. Ms. Cruz wanted to head off any anxiety that could lead to a seizure by paying for transportation to visit his father at his sister's home. Neediest Cases provided \$75 for a MetroCard and \$20 cab fare in case he needs to get to his father in an emergency.

Since he got the apartment, Ms. Cruz said, his seizures are less frequent. "Brian's doing well now," she said.