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The Neediest Cases

After Years of Helping, a Mentor Lands on the Receiving End

By ABBY AGUIRRE

“I don’t know, John; I woke up and the next thing I knew I had a gun in my hand.”

As a 22-year-old counselor at a methadone clinic in Harlem, John G. Forrester heard this statement and others like it so often, he vowed to make a career in drug treatment. It was 1970, and Mr. Forrester was on summer break from college.

“It struck me how guys my age, some I had been in high school with, once they started using drugs, their development stopped cold,” Mr. Forrester, now 60, said. “Average guys end up in this position and stagnate.”

Growing up in the Stephen Foster Houses, a project on Lenox Avenue, Mr. Forrester had avoided drugs and violence in part because of his participation in the Town and Countrymen, a social club that organized dances in the neighborhood.

“A lot of it was about style,” he said of the club. “We dressed very Ivy League, very preppy, in penny loafers and bobby socks, but not white socks, they had to be off-white. It was very elaborate.”

But more than sartorial code set the Town and Countrymen apart: “Many of the guys went to college or had jobs. We were perceptive enough to get a mentor, to get a guy who went to college to guide you.”

After graduating in 1971 from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C., Mr. Forrester returned to Harlem. The grandmother who raised him had died, but he was allowed to move back into the Foster Houses. The first job he took was at St. John’s University’s Queens campus, recruiting high school graduates from below the poverty line.

In time Mr. Forrester began working toward a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling at St. John’s. For one class, he did an internship at Create Inc., a nonprofit drug rehab center across the street from the projects where he had grown up, by then renamed the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Towers. After completing his degree, he went to work as the organization’s director of residential treatment. There he refined his talent for turning lives around.

“You got to meet them where they are,” he said. Older guys liked to talk more, for instance; with the younger men, he played basketball. “Many times, if you can catch someone at that pivotal point, you can essentially save someone’s life.”

He and his wife, Elisa, who is 61, moved to East Elmhurst, Queens, in 1988, not long after their two children were born, but Mr. Forrester commuted to Harlem for the next 18 years.

In part because Harlem had changed radically, he said, the number of patients at the center began to dwindle, and in March 2006 Mr. Forrester was laid off. He had a part-time job at the Kingsboro Addiction Treatment Center, in Brooklyn, but his monthly take-home pay dropped to \$2,000 from \$6,000. Ms. Forrester brought in \$460 a month as an aerobics instructor.

He was out of full-time work for more than a year, during which he often had to choose between paying his \$1,300 rent and paying his children's college tuition. His daughter, Sharnae, 22, is studying marketing at the Fashion Institute of Technology; his son, John Jr., 21, is studying finance at Baruch College.

"Education is key," he said. "Wouldn't you pay your kids' college tuition first, worry about rent later?"

Mr. Forrester started working full-time at Kingsboro in 2007, but not before accumulating \$4,524.40 in back rent. The Community Service Society, one of seven agencies supported by the New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, drew \$1,458 from the fund in 2008 to help pay off his arrears. He repaid the rest, restoring his family's financial footing.

Not long ago, he was in his old neighborhood, walking down 125th Street, when he heard someone calling after him.

"Mr. Forrester!"

The man was a former patient, a smart kid who had come to the center a crack addict at age 19. In the late 1980s, Mr. Forrester had helped him to get clean and lobbied to get him money to buy books.

"Hey, man!" Mr. Forrester said.

In the years since Mr. Forrester had last seen him, the man had gotten his G.E.D., graduated from college and gone to graduate school. He is now a paralegal in Manhattan.