

SMI & Substance Abusers: End of Life

The House of Heart & Heartbreak is the title of a book to guide both families & professionals in not only end of life issues & approaches but also of what to look for in group homes. This project is the final chapter. Anonymity of the informants is guaranteed, both those who were residents and those who helped direct the house 2009-2013: total 20 interviews, 10 residents & 10 directors.

PART I.

The formats used: note-taking, taping interviews, personal observations, medical and mental health, & legal records. There were surprises, confirmations, and tensions in the process: I had assumed that all those with mental illness & / substance abuse would have considered suicide at some point, & that was not the case; I was fascinated by the fervent support of the group home, as a loving ,supportive space that, despite those who were inappropriate (to be discussed later) being asked to leave, that it was not a place of hate; I experienced as the Administrator of the House many tensions over food, space, and more, and hoped they had not contributed to the anxiety.

PART II.

RESIDENTS:

- A. Betsy (1/13/62-6/26/14)
- B. 54 years old (Native American)
- C. 62 years old (Icelandic)
- D. 60 years old
- E. 73 years old
- F. 74 years old (African –American)

PERSPECTIVES:

A. Betsy, born in Philadelphia of a doctor & teacher, had excellent schooling & began to show signs of mental illness at 14, was expelled from school for drugs, lived in AZ for forty years. Since she was 16, she lived in 22 groups homes, & had 10 hospitalizations before coming to the House of Heart. She was always evicted for abusing alcohol, until the House of Heart opened 2009. It was located at first near a convenience store, so that she could get a beer, or rum(the HOH rule no coming home drunk). She broke the rules & was sent to a locked down assisted living home for the elderly with dementia, as the only option. Other incidents after 1 mo-6 wks. she was readmitted to the HOH. When she was assaulted at the bus stop, I found her lying on the floor bleeding at the local Safeway bathroom; she crossed the street drunk & was hit by a truck, broke her arm badly 20 stitches, and was evicted from the local store. It was then that I rented a home near us in a rural area, with a pool, animals and walking space nearby. She could not adjust to the isolation & attempted suicide by overdosing on prescription meds. She was found by the sheriff wandering down the middle of a busy road, tried walking 4 miles to the Safeway, got drunk & got a ride home. To mention just a few of the 7 attempted suicides. She would always thank me for rescuing her, & say that she did not mean it. She was only living for me. She was sent to the assisted living lock down, & did not thrive. She was sent to the hospital 7 times in one year, and then to a Level 2 ranch. She was extended for another 3 mos. for oppositional behavior in the home. She was told to 'get a sponsor, go to more AA meetings.' She had tried numerous times to get a sponsor, & nobody would accept because of the mental illness & numerous relapses. She fit the Big Book's statement, 'there are some who are so mentally ill that they cannot follow the AA tenets'. Although she told the therapist that she understood that the extension of 3 mos. was best for her, emotionally she blamed me. for the extension. Her last words were 'Do not do the same thing to B. (a resident that she had planned to move in with)Her blood pressure was very low, so she was seen by a cardiologist. On her last visit, she slipped away to the pharmacy, bought 2 boxes of Benadryl, sat in the nearby wash, had seizures & coded within 1 hour, was found by a passerby, & rushed to the hospital. It was too late. She has been told not to take Benadryl as she had been on Hydroxizine, & that the combination was contra-indicated.

The autopsy revealed the combination was indeed lethal. I wrestled with her death for 30 days before the report came in, & had very little sleep, as I could not see the perspective of suicide, until I realized that God forgave those with mental illness, especially thought disorder, & welcomed them into heaven, not as sinners but as those to be nurtured. She appeared to B. in a dream that night, dancing in a flowing skirt and saying: 'I am happy & finally free.'

As a footnote: Her son aged 21, adopted by a cousin, was told of his birth mother's suicide, & he had been resisting going into treatment. Immediately, he went into Rehab for 30 days. What a legacy Betsy left!

The questions that I asked the other residents:

- What are your fears about dying?
- Have you ever thought about ending your life sooner? Plans or attempts?
- Did either your mental illness or addiction play a role?
- Do you believe in after life?
- What legacy are you leaving? How will your death affect others?
- How do you look at aging? Transitions?
- Are there any different 'end of life' rituals: mourning, or grieving that you have experienced & want to share?

RESIDENT B.

- B. came with another resident (not interviewed as we had to ask her to leave for stealing other's meds (maybe a personality disorder), ended up 5 mos in jail after she left us. Apastor brought them with a cat & a bulldog.

I learned to be flexible as I managed the HOH, (my experience was at county & Homes for the Elderly. I learned about women with different diagnosis: bipolar, schizophrenia, anxiety, personality disorder, & depression.)

I am grateful positive experience. B. had anxiety, a stroke, abandonment issues & was loved by all the residents. 'After Bets' appearance that night, I have different feelings about dying. I believe one should never fear death, as we are going home. I am in a period of spiritual growth, from Betsys death & experiencing the HOH. I have changed to the positive, am ready, & filled with love.'

I do not think of ending life sooner, and hope my legacy is sharing LOVE, through service.

C. arrived 1 year before we closed, straight from Rehab, with depression. She is sober today, and as witty as ever. She had 'nowhere to go', had been in many rehabs, \$ found the HOH to be 'open, warm & friendly, with some exceptions. She found joy, sobriety and fun, getting to know most of the other women. She loved it until women came in with too many complex issues & did not fit in - were weird'. There was camaraderie, nice chance to make friends, I wasn't alone & able to talk with others. I really liked the Four

Agreements: Don Luis Miguel:

- Always speak impeccably
- Never take anything personally
- Never make assumptions
- Always do your best

'I became a Sister of the Heart, which meant I was accepted for the first time in a long time. My family was welcome, I remember the good times.'

I do not fear dying, as I have a great sponsor, the 12 Step program, my son & grand children. For the first time, I will be missed if I die.

D.

I have experienced my own child's suicide 1 year ago, am being supported through this, & have gone to Grief Groups. The Pima County Judiciary Council were called in by the police, & they paid for the cremation. The D.A.'s office; Victims Service Division came to the scene & were very helpful. A pamphlet: Experiencing Grief was given along with names of mortuaries. Also, they gave a number of community resources, including Compassionate Friends which meets: 2nd Wed. of each month at the Catalina Methodist Church on Speedway, as well as how to boost your immune system. The hardest part was waiting for the autopsy four weeks, & not knowing if it was foul play or suicide. I believe that the dead are always with us, with an angel guiding them.

- C. I have no fear about dying; I had been thinking it would be better sooner than later, but now with grand children, I think differently. I am tired of being in pain, & sometimes wonder if I have nothing or something to contribute, if I keep on living.'

D.

An admitted alcoholic, who cannot stop, & asks for help. She was more willing 'to go with God before she was 50; then, life was fulfilling, acceptable & happier experiences occurred. Now "I am older, sicker & sadder", I have less hope for society to recover, & I observe the faults of Assisted Living Homes. Residents are treated like 'inferior children. I find it tedious to communicate with younger, inept managers, I am frustrated, angry, and unhappy. My sad experiences make me drink.' I know that I am 'heading out' soon. Some residents say the Homes are 'taking the heart out of them'; they become immobile, swollen & drink; poor hygiene, self-care. There is no hope for the future; One sad disappointment after another. I am mentally tired, have Senior moments, can't think for myself, have remorse, regrets, think others are talking behind my back, and twisting what I say. My medical issues are huge: ulcer, kidneys, peritonitis, gout, gall bladder, I struggle with not killing myself, but then say 'I'm not ready to die. Rather than ask God to take alcohol away, I ask God to allow me to be obedient and get good health.' Ps 51 v.17 is inspiring. I am lonely. My son, 34, is also mentally ill, lives in the apartment complex, but our relationship is on & off.

F. I know her & her family for 40 years. She is diagnosed with schizophrenia, & takes care of her great-grandchildren in her home so that her granddaughters can work. As an impoverished African-American, she has scraped by for a long time, in the mental health system. She has a strong faith, and is happy to be alive. She needs to take care of her medical issues: teeth, etc. and has hopes that her Haitian psychiatrist will spend some time with her, rather than just prescribe medication. "Children do not judge me, whereas everyone else does.' She is as happy as possible at this time.