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In Harlem, a Shelter That Gives Young Men the Tools to Succeed

The Neediest Cases Fund

By EMILY PALMER DEC. 13, 2017

Nestled on a residential block in Harlem, Create Young Adult Residences looks like any other apartment building. A fire escape snakes up its rust-colored facade.

Throughout the day, young men who live in the building, on West 128th Street, come and go, heading to and from school, jobs and neighborhood restaurants like Red Rooster Harlem and Sylvia's.

Create, a 50-bed transitional housing program, serves men 18 to 25, many of whom have recently aged out of the foster care system. Its residents are encouraged to study or to work, and to find permanent housing within nine months. The support system has proved invaluable to many.

After being in foster care and enduring a tumultuous life with his adoptive family, Rymale Benjamin, 21, came to Create after spending three weeks at the 30th Street Men's Shelter in Manhattan.

"At first, I looked around and thought someone had invited me to their house," he said. "I thought, This place is nice; it's in a good area. I was shocked it was a shelter."

Before it became Create, the building had been abandoned. Benedict Taylor, a Franciscan friar at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Midtown Manhattan, and Ralph Perez, a lay member, took over the building in 1984, making it one of three residential housing facilities in the city associated with Create Inc., a nonprofit organization that includes a drug-treatment center and a food pantry.

The men had been serving the neighborhood since the 1960s, when Mr. Perez was still in college. They began their first residential drug-addiction recovery program there in 1973, during the heroin epidemic that was ravaging New York City.

“There were a lot of people coming to our doors who didn’t necessarily have drug problems,” Mr. Perez said recently. “But they were still homeless and had nowhere to go.”

In 1983, Mr. Perez and Father Taylor expanded their operation, taking over a three-story tenement building across the street from the rehabilitation center. They converted it into a 19-bed shelter for homeless men, the city’s first such community-based and -operated shelter financed with city and state funds, according to a news release at the time.

In 1984, Father Taylor and Mr. Perez took over another abandoned four-story building, this one on West 128th Street. Working with a group of architects, Mr. Perez helped design the dormitory space. He wanted the residents to feel at home in their rooms, he said, so each door got its own doorbell.

“It was about being more than ‘a hot and a cot,’” Mr. Perez said, referring to the standard warm meal and bed. “We wanted to help transition them into independent living. That’s what we thought was most important.”

Today, that shelter is usually at full capacity. Brian Bailey, the director, says he receives five to 10 requests for a bed each day.

Since 2009, Create, which is affiliated with Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New York, one of the eight organizations supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, has been home to nine recipients profiled over the years during the fund’s annual campaign. Combined, they have received almost \$3,000.

One recipient this year, Moussa Konate, 21, a college student, shares a third-floor room that overlooks the back garden. Mr. Konate, who is Muslim, keeps an aqua-and-yellow prayer mat, a parting gift from his mother when he left Mali, at the head of his bed.

“This is the only shelter where I feel like I am home,” said Mr. Konate, who has stayed in two other city shelters. “I leave for work and come back to sleep. And when I’m back, I feel like I’m home.”

Create provides tenants with services like job-skills training, educational support and the opportunity to gain work experience. “Without that, it’s a revolving door,” Mr. Perez said, “winding right back to homelessness.”

Father Taylor added: “The program gives people the time and space to recover at their own pace. It’s not rushed.”

Mayor Bill de Blasio has said that he was slow to recognize New York’s homelessness crisis and that a “blood-and-guts war strategy” is necessary to address it. The city provides shelter to about 60,000 people nightly, through 290 shelters and 185 so-called cluster sites, which are private buildings with apartments reserved for homeless families with children. Commercial hotels fill the gap.

After toddler sisters died last year from severe burns caused by radiator steam at a South Bronx cluster site, Mr. de Blasio announced in February a plan to close all cluster sites by 2021 and end all commercial hotel use two years after that, while allocating \$300 million to open 90 new shelters.

Since the announcement, about 350 apartments have been closed, and four new shelters for families with children have opened with 291 total units, according to the Department of Social Services. Mr. de Blasio announced on Tuesday that the city would convert 800 apartments at cluster sites, mostly in the Bronx, into affordable housing. The change could place about 3,000 people into permanent housing.

The mayor’s plan from February also includes five additional “purpose-built shelter projects,” which, much like Create, would be tailored to residents’ needs.

Today, Create is the only transitional housing program in the city designed specifically for young men.

G. Stephanie Ali, the vocation coordinator at Create, says the program provides a unique space to enable young men to gain their footing and transition into a permanent setting. Aspiring painters, novelists, basketball players, engineers, rap artists and producers have passed through the halls over the years, she said.

“Oftentimes at this age, young men feel they should be doing more,” Ms. Ali said, adding that overwhelming possibilities can hinder residents from focusing on goals. “So we’re there to help them see the broader scope of what’s out there and get them engaged in education and employment to meet that ultimate goal of housing.”

Soon after Idi Diallo, 21, a soccer player from Ivory Coast moved to New York, he found himself sleeping in the prayer hall of a mosque. After coming to Create, he later moved into his own apartment in the Bronx. He is now enrolled at Long Beach City College in California, studying business accounting.

“I can’t even describe how much Create and all the wonderful people there have helped me,” Mr. Diallo said recently. “Today, I look back on it as my new start. Moving there was the beginning of my success.”

Oumar Camara, 19, seeks a similar happy ending. He came to the city from Mali’s capital, Bamako, four years ago. At the time, he had an hour between the end of high school and the start of his full-time cleaning and dishwashing job. Often, he did not return to the room he shared in Harlem until 4 a.m., just a few hours before school began.

He moved to Create in March. A burden was lifted when he no longer had to pay \$500 a month in rent and utilities, which allowed him to quit his job and focus on school. He is now on track to graduate in June.

“Now I want to go to college, get a career and have a better life,” Mr. Camara said, adding that he plans to pursue a degree in structural engineering.

On Tuesday, Mr. Camara and Mr. Konate received keys to a two-bedroom apartment in Irvington, N.J. They will move into their new home as early as Friday.

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