

HIV-positive men find a true home and friends at Jo-Ray House

One of the disease's most crippling effects is social isolation, says a resident aided by the home's founder, Ida Byther-Smith

By Deanese Williams-Harris
Tribune reporter
9:34 PM CDT, April 20, 2008

After years of living a street life, Woody Easley has finally found a home, and a new life, at a residential facility in Chicago's Roseland neighborhood.

Easley, 60, was asked to leave another residential house in Chicago when he disclosed he was HIV positive. Now, he is one of six residents of Jo-Ray House, a home for HIV-positive men on the South Side.

The men come from different backgrounds and have varied pasts. Some have held promising careers, some have struggled with addiction, others have had run-ins with the law.

But they all have one thing in common: They found Ida Byther-Smith, the founder of Jo-Ray House, or she found them.

Byther-Smith cashed in her life savings and started Jo-Ray House in 2003 after meeting a man who contracted HIV through prison rape. His family threw him and everything he touched out when he told them he was HIV positive.

But it is her own experience that allows Byther-Smith to identify with the men on a personal level.

"[HIV] is a pot. It doesn't matter how you got in, whether you jumped in or got pushed," she said. "All that matters is we are all in the same pot."

Byther-Smith, 58, was diagnosed with HIV in 1991 and learned soon after that her husband had had affairs with men and women.

Instead of focusing on anger and turning her back on her husband, Byther-Smith took care of him until he died eight years later. People who know her story are sometimes surprised that she decided to take in men with HIV, she said.

But she believes in the end that she also is helping women.

"If I can reach one man with HIV and help him get past his anger, maybe I can save one woman from being infected like me," Byther-Smith said.

And as long as she has space, the men are welcome at Jo-Ray House, which is named after relatives, she said.

"Ida's door is always open," said John Brady, 42, one of Jo-Ray's original boarders, who is in his fourth residency at the house.

"She loved me until I learned how to love myself," said Brady, now a volunteer group leader for Haymarket Center, an alcohol and drug treatment program on the West Side.

There are house rules, but the men are free to come and go as they please. They each pay \$360 a month for rent, though it's not a requirement. Byther-Smith doesn't turn anyone away because of income, she said.

She also has qualified for grants from the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, which reports that one of the biggest obstacles for people with HIV/AIDS is finding adequate housing.

"The housing issue is becoming a public health issue," said Arturo Bendixen, housing director for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. Bendixen said 50 percent to 60 percent of people living with HIV/AIDS reported being homeless or experiencing housing instability.

"It is very difficult to find a place to store your medicine and to refrigerate it when you're homeless," said Bendixen, who added that the homeless with HIV/AIDS are five times more likely to die. "Some HIV/AIDS regimens require taking [medication] different times of the day. People on the streets or in a shelter don't have a lot of control over their regimens."

The men at Jo-Ray House speak openly about being HIV positive.

In an upstairs bedroom, Shelly Crum, 37, and Ed Phelps, 52, watch TV as they recount being diagnosed with HIV.

"I was just 24 years old," said Crum, a former postal worker. "I was trying to purchase life insurance and got a call that I needed to see my doctor."

Crum said he contracted the virus from a girlfriend who has since died.

Phelps, a native New Yorker, said he tested HIV positive three years ago on Valentine's Day.

As he sat on a twin-size bed with his legs crossed, he talked about survivor's guilt and his 14-year battle with addiction. His partner died of AIDS soon after finding out he was infected, Phelps said.

The hardest obstacle he had to overcome was social isolation, said Phelps, who was once married.

"I was angry with the universe," he said. "The real killer is not the possibility of a physical death, it's the social death."

Byther-Smith hopes the stigma of HIV vanishes when you walk through the doors of Jo-Ray House. But keeping the doors open has been a struggle.

Byther-Smith said her faith has kept her going. "God knew that there was going to be a little black lady in Chicago that would contract HIV from her husband. That was my destiny," Byther-Smith said.

"But my choice was what I was going to do with [HIV]."

dawilliams@tribune.com

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](#)