

Building a community as they build themselves

BATAVIA: In treatment apartment, personal passions link to sense of place

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BATAVIA—After six years, the sense of place within a community and ownership of it hasn't faded, even as new people move in and others progress out.

Walking around the DePaul Batavia Treatment Apartment Program's East Main Street complex, Robin Weinstein carries the pride of a ward leader eager to show off the neighborhood projects to their credit.

She understands the meaning behind a memorial plaque in the courtyard and remembers the anxiety as it was unveiled late in the grand opening proceedings; relishes in describing the importance of a train that chugs along a two-story atrium and the care she's taken in her own spaces.

The set of walls that surround her as she prepares her weekly Shabbat prayers and meal each Friday are much better, and stronger, than those she once built up as a protection from childhood bullying. They are filled with her own art, photos of cousins, grandnieces and family gatherings, and symbols of accomplishments.

"I consider coming out here like getting a college education in mental health," said Weinstein, who has bipolar disorder. "I wasn't getting the right information, the right help... but when I came out here, I found out how (what I had) worked and how to work with it. It's been a long process."

The 42-unit apartment—31 are tied to mental health treatment services and 11 are geared to affordable housing—opened in 2010 near the East Town Plaza.

Arriving from downtown, it feels removed from Batavia. Looking west, it feels like a starting point on a path to everything you'd need to be independent but stable.

Inside his apartment, Peter Langen's artistic ability is on full display. Langen has exhibited at the Genesee-Ontario Regional Arts Council and leads a coloring program for patients at the county's dayhab center, but the conversation starter is pieces like a full-body cougar sculpted from a wire frame.

It was the last piece he made before closing his garage studio, something on the far end of his life. Langen, a Batavia High School graduate, has turned his focus to acrylic animal paintings, a book of "Rochester stories" from his time in-and-out of the hospital and his own health.

"(Art) is something that relaxes me and it gets me out in the public and it gets me out from (overly) focusing on problems... it gives me a chance to show my art and see what other people are doing," said Langen, who moved to DePaul five years ago after his bipolar disorder and the medication he took to treat it made his life unworkable.

People have difficulty comprehending the pressure of having a mental illnesses, he feels, and maintaining a home, a job, even the car, on a day to day basis. He had suffered a bad car accident and couldn't hold it all down.

Now he sees a psychiatrist every few months, has a therapist and a primary care physician, a kidney specialist too. It makes for a lot of appointments but it isn't a burden.

"To be stable, without the right situation



Robin Weinstein, who has lived at DePaul's Batavia Treatment Apartment Program since it opened, is among the long-time residents with a sense of ownership and pride in her home, even as they focus on their own development. She showed off the train that is a symbol of the Batavia facility.

and the right medication, it can throw you off and (it's hard to understand) really how long it takes you to get back to where you were," Langen. "It's good to have a sense of where you're at and what you're capable of doing, with mental health it's important not to take on too much at once."

In his apartment, there is a sense of stability, a kind of launch pad. He hopes his spot on the list for the less-structured housing on campus

comes up soon. Langen's ready.

Melissa Guciniski, the manager of the Batavia facility, said the signs that someone is ready to move up become apparent to her staff, who works with the treatment apartment residents on setting personal goals and recognizing their accomplishments. With some residents as young as 18, a motherly intuition takes hold.

"Folks will indicate to you when they are comfortable and ready to move on," Gucin-

ski said. "We see people who come here sometimes kind of shy, are (tightly wound) to themselves and isolated, then they realize everyone has their own goals and that they are all just people."

"What I see is that people get antsy, and I see they are gaining the skills they wanted," she continued. "Because with having staff support

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and people in the office, sometimes we feel like mothers, that's not how you wanted to be seen, but that's kind of your role. They tell you when they are ready to move, you can see it when they are ready."

She sees people more apt to take chances that leap them ahead in sorting out their lives than in the past. Weinstein said knocking down goals is important.

"This is like going on a stepping point, you come here to reach different goals and find out what you want in a goal," Weinstein said.

Here is to help people. She volunteers at My Sister's Closet and the Holland Land Office Museum, and like Langen, Weinstein expresses creativity

through art. If she could blow out the wall of her apartment, it would be another room to store her crafts.

There's other challenges to overcome, but she would like to hit one personal wish - getting her art on the cover of DePaul's annual report.

DePaul, based in Rochester, maintains residential and supportive services across western New York and in the Carolinas. What they've built in Batavia is a crucial piece of the foundation that Vice President of Development Marcia Dlutek said is a natural fit.

"We have programs that are part of senior living, affordable housing, mental health, treatment and support," Dlutek said. "I think we're truly seen as a universal community support organization, that provides resources to people in need, no matter what their needs are."

The model of a mixed-use facility isn't new, but Guciniski said what sets Batavia apart is the personal apartments. Both Langen and Weinstein said the experience of having their own space was easier to manage and benefit from than a group home where multiple people lived on top of one another.

"In terms of mental health, if you are symptomatic, it's important to have a place to be that's comfortable," but within reach of help, Guciniski said. "You're only a phone call away from someone who can help you."

She sees people step outside of their comfort zones, to care for one another as neighbors. There isn't a need for a betterment committee because they buy into roles they want to have in their own inherent community. They are on a journey, but proud of where they stand.