



BRAINSTORM

Everything you don't know

Vol. 2 no. 2

August 2009



EDITOR'S NOTE

by Phil Glosserman

Straight from the streets and the heart of Santa Monica, *Brainstorm* brings you "everything you don't know." The writers are members of Step Up on Second, the city's leading resource for people living with mental illness, and they are all amazing.

In keeping with President Obama's call for Americans to perform community service, this issue's theme is volunteerism. Many of our writers are deeply committed to helping others. Jacob Ramsey is one of the great souls at Step Up and an active volunteer. He was too humble to write an article about his community service, so I interviewed him and wrote the article myself. We hope this issue will inspire readers to seek out more opportunities to help others. Enjoy!

Phil Glosserman is a member of Step Up's Board of Directors and is Brainstorm's advisor and editor.

REACTIONS

To comment on Brainstorm or to receive future issues by e-mail, please write us at brainstorm@mail.org.

A Model of Volunteerism

by Phil Glosserman

Every week, I facilitate a writing class at Step Up on Second, a Santa-Monica-based organization that provides housing, meals, and an array of support services to individuals who have a mental illness. I have been impressed and inspired to find that, despite their own considerable personal challenges, most of our writers are active volunteers in the community. Marsha volunteers at the gift shop of a local hospital, Larry runs a bingo group at a seniors living facility, Alan writes and directs plays on skid row, Les teaches computer skills to people with mental illness, Craig feeds people who are homeless. And the list goes on.

One of our writers, Jacob Ramsey, is a model of volunteerism. For the past twelve years, Jacob has been a leader, a teacher, and source of inspiration for hundreds of people who have come through the doors of Step Up on Second.

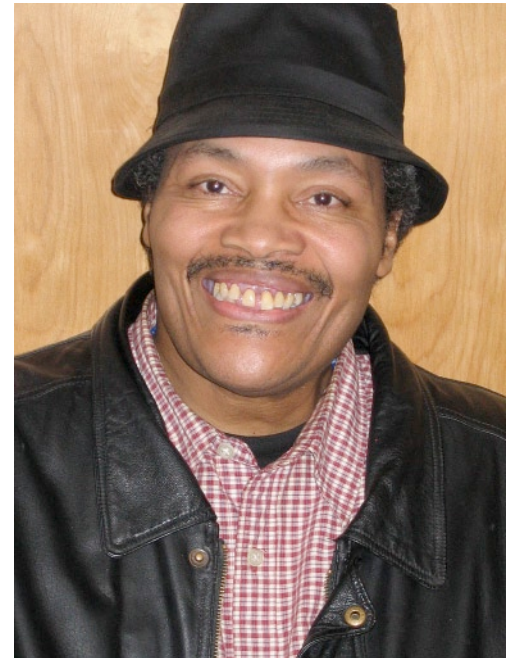
Jacob is a member and resident of Step Up on Second. Since experiencing a mental breakdown in 1995, Jacob has been living with severe bipolar disorder. He also has muscular dystrophy, which significantly limits his mobility.

"I may be disabled, but that doesn't mean I'm un-abled," says Jacob. Every week, Jacob volunteers to teach eight classes to support Step Up members in their life skills and recovery. He also serves on Step Up on Second's Board of Directors.

Jacob lives and breathes service to others. He constantly encourages and praises his fellow members for their progress, accomplishments, and most of all, for who they are.

"It's amazing how a small compliment or a little encouragement can help build someone's self-esteem," says Jacob. "Many of the people at Step Up on Second have been homeless or down and out for years. They're accustomed to being stigmatized and shunned. Many of them haven't heard a kind word for years. All people need encouragement and recognition. These are basic human needs. A little encouragement and praise can change someone's life."

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Jacob Ramsey

STEP UP ON SECOND

Step Up on Second provides effective, compassionate services for individuals in our communities who have a mental illness. Our nationally-recognized program focuses on long-term strategies and daily support services to help our members receive treatment for their brain disorders, and achieve greater independence in their lives.

Step Up on Second, 1328 Second St., Santa Monica, CA 90401

For information, go to www.stepuponsecond.org or call (310) 394-6889

Heeding the Spirit's Call

by Allan Evans

In 1982, I came home from work and whined about my job. My wife Jeanine listened up to a point, then told me, "Go down to the convalescent home on the corner. Talk to three of the residents there. Then come back and tell me about your *big* problems."

I did as she recommended. At the nursing home I met an elderly gentleman named Dave. He showed me an Airstream RV sitting in the parking lot. He had hoped to spend his retirement traveling across our country, but instead, his family put him in the home and the keys to his RV were kept locked up by the staff.

My heart went out to Dave. We went to the community room where I sat at the piano and began playing *Those Were the Days*, the theme song from *All in the Family*. Dave gasped, "How'd you know? That's my favorite song!" We sang it together three times before I had to leave my new friend. I never believed this incident was a mere coincidence. It was the spirit of life at work. I was lucky enough to be in a position to respond to its gentle nudge.

I went on to do volunteer work at SAVE (Seek and Visit Elderly), leading sing-alongs at local convalescent homes for over a year and a half. Once it ran its course, I remarked to Jeanine what great serendipity had allowed this volunteer activity to happen. She deadpanned, "That wasn't serendipity; that was the spirit of the world." Again, I had been blessed by taking part in what was presented, and in this case, loving every minute of it.

I no longer balk at, but relish, the moments I can heed the spirit's call. Earlier this year, I was exactly where the spirit wanted me: at 26th and Santa Monica Blvd. A woman in a wheelchair was trying to push herself up the curb. I pushed her six blocks to her doctor's appointment. Judging from her struggle, I probably saved her hours in reaching her destina-



tion. That was no coincidence.

It was also no coincidence that after twenty years of trying, I never achieved sobriety until I decided to put others' cares before my own.

I've learned that the successful journey inward requires meaningful action aimed outward. Whenever I volunteer to help others, I see my own troubles in greater perspective. My chest wells up with gratitude, my own problems seem trite, and I can funnel my energies for the benefit of others.

Positive energy is contagious. I see this most clearly when I tutor people. Sometimes their eyes sparkle as they realize that learning is not about struggle, but wondrous discovery.

I work with a theatre company that caters to people on skid row and offers positive options to those at risk. What I've found is that service to others is like making music—it is its own reward.

I urge everyone to take part in volunteer work. You may find, as I did, that life's true meaning is as much about engendering gratitude in others' hearts, as it is in your own. And that's no coincidence.

Awakening from a Dual Diagnosis

by Pauline Chamberline

I strongly believe in being of service to those around me. Allow me to explain.

I lived in the streets for 32 years and I have a dual diagnosis: mental illness and addiction. I have schizoaffective and bipolar disorders, anxiety, and PTSD, plus I am a recovering alcoholic and drug addict.

I now run a group at Step Up called AA Awakenings. In this group, I try to the best of my ability to educate others who feel lost about their own dual-diagnoses. I want them to see that there is someone who understands their situation and will take the

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Gratitude from My Perspective

by Les Jones

On Sunday mornings, we here at Step Up have a class in Gratitude. We write what we are grateful for and share what gratitude means in our life. I've discovered that no matter what is going on, gratitude is the "magic switch" to help turn life around. Much like when you flip on the light switch, without knowing the principles on how electricity got there, the light goes on.

I have compiled my own gratitude list. I look over it at least once a day and add to it when something new comes up. Here are just a few of the things that I am grateful for. I hope this primes the pump for your very own list.

My apartment

A great night's sleep and the mattress I sleep on (yes, it's that good)

My ceiling fan and shower (much of the world would see these as luxuries)

That I can see and read

My hearing and my music (I have a large collection)

My imagination

That I can think, speak, learn, and write

That I can laugh and smile

That I am alive, healthy, and that I am me!



My bicycle

Living in Santa Monica (a truly wonderful place)

My HDTV, digital cable, DVR, and Netflix account

Dr. Walker (my minister, a great man)

That I feel safe

That I am on the Board of Directors at Step Up on Second

My Web site, LesJones.net, and the many visitors to my site

My wonderful friends

These are a few highlights from my ever-growing gratitude list. How about you? Why not make your own list and allow it to grow. You never know what could happen.

Outed

By Daniel Concharty

Editor's note: At a recent social gathering, a family member told some friends about the author's mental illness. The family member divulged this information in the author's presence and without his permission. In this piece, he describes his reaction.

First, a hush...

The blow, so low and hard

You outed me to everyone

And now the burden's mine

Now my mental illness walks the streets

And pimps my story to friend and foe alike

The escape from my daydreaming

Is my nightmare from which I never wake

The rustling in the trees is the chatter of the leaves

On every family outing, whispering who I am

They look askance at a skewed person

Skewered on a rotisserie, like tainted meat

The scarlet letter now seers my flesh

I was branded—but not as a club member—and it hurt



I was just alone, which hurt more

Just finding myself, I don't want to see me in the eyes of another
Who the hell am I anyway?

I cannot out-shout what was already said in a whisper

A Model of Volunteerism

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In 2001, Jacob began volunteering to facilitate a weekly self-help support group called Words of Encouragement. As a textbook, he used the popular bestseller *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Every week, the group would read an inspiring story from the book. Then Jacob would go around the table ask people what they took from the story. “I would just let them talk and I’d say whatever I could to help support them and get them to support each other.”

The class became popular with members of Step Up on Second, so Jacob began adding other classes, including Positive Thinking, How to Tell Your Story, Schizophrenics Anonymous, Community Unity, Dealing with Our Hurts, and a Poetry/Karaoke Workshop.

“When you’re lucky enough to meet Jacob, as I did on my first day at Step Up, it can transform how you feel about yourself,” says Daniel Concharty. “My relationship with Jacob has changed my life. The first time I attended one of Jacob’s classes, he changed my view of my life in one hour. I had been down for a long time and needed a lot of help. Jacob made me feel welcome and treated me with dignity. I can’t say enough positive things about this great man.”

Another Step Up member, Pauline Chambers, says, “Jacob has made me more insightful about life and how to live with a mental illness.” Pauline lives with a dual diagnosis: mental illness and addiction. “Jacob helped give me the courage to achieve my goals, one of which was to help others who have a dual diagnosis like me. He inspired me to start a class. Now I teach a weekly class at Step Up. It’s called AA Awakenings. I feel I’m making a real difference in people’s lives. It’s helping me too.”

Every year Jacob, who is African American, pays tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King on his birthday by reciting the “I Have a Dream” speech in Step Up on Second’s main hall. Jacob is also an ordained Baptist minister and often performs spiritual duties at Step Up on Second, including counseling

members and conducting memorial services for those who have passed on.

Asked why he is so dedicated to serving his community at Step Up on Second, Jacob responded, “I came to Step Up on Second in 1997 after a mental breakdown. I was at a low point in my life, crying hour after hour every day. Step Up on Second met me where I was at. They provided me with shelter and sustenance. They helped me deal with my mental illness, reintegrate into the community, and start living again. Now, I continue that tradition by giving back to others who face some of the same problems as me. It’s my life’s mission.

“In addition, serving others makes me feel good. Because of my bipolar disorder, I have unwanted feelings at times. Being of service helps chase away these feelings. Instead of focusing on myself and my problems, I focus on helping others. It is a ‘we moment,’ not a ‘me moment.’ I’ve tried a lot of other things to feel better about my situation, but serving others is the thing that helps me the most. I encourage everyone to reach out and volunteer. Not only will you make a positive difference for others, it will change your own life for the better. I guarantee it!”

Reach Out

By Marto

Life is a box of chocolates—it has its sweetness, but too much self-absorbed living can make one sick. In the course of human events, service will suffice. Just do it—it will warm your proverbial cockles. Dutiful labor in the service of others is the most divine of services. It refreshes and renews. It can and will pull one from the depths of depression. It can and will give one vent to undiscovered perspectives and possibilities. So in short, each one reach one.

Awakening from a Dual Diagnosis

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time to help them walk through the beginning of a new outlook on life.

Why do I do this? I do it to be 100% of service and because I do not want to see anyone suffer the way I have. There is feeling of warmth in my heart for those who try to understand their dual-diagnosis. I am able not only to help them find their way back into life, but to support them in finding their own answers.

I came from a dysfunctional family, my childhood was

anything but what it should have been, and my alcoholism and drug abuse nearly ruined my life. I used to isolate myself and wallow in my depression. Now, I want to show my peers that there are definitely choices to live a fuller and more meaningful life. Today I feel serene in supporting my peers. It brings calm to my soul.

Others have told me that they get so much out of my AA Awakenings group. They feel there is someone who cares and can relate to their situation and their level of learning. Seeing others grasp what I share of my experience and knowledge about mental illness and addiction is the core of my own joy and peace.