

By Kevin Herrera
write the author

January 18, 2010

DOWNTOWN — Les Jones loves computers.

It's not because they make our lives easier or allow us to reconnect with old friends with the click of a button. Those features are great, but Jones loves computers for a different reason. In a way, computers saved his life.

A decade ago, Jones, 54, was lost. Suffering from schizophrenia and severe depression and anxiety, Jones, a towering, soft-spoken Texan with a warm smile and calm demeanor, was wandering aimlessly through the streets of Santa Monica, unable to hold down a steady job because of his mental illness. Estranged from his family, Jones was alone and on the verge of giving up on life.

"When you've lost 100 times and all you've seen is failure, you begin to wonder what the value of your life really is," Jones said.



Les Jones

Then there was a. A case worker at OPCC's Samoshel sat Jones down and asked him a simple question. If there was one thing that Jones could do, what would it be? The answer came easy to Jones. He wanted to become a computer whiz.

A decade later, Jones is managing his mental illness, lives in his own apartment at Step Up on Second in Downtown Santa Monica, has a supportive girlfriend and is helping others like him show computers who's boss through a course at Step Up which he manages. Through the course, Jones, who cut his teeth on an Apple II as an engineer at a radio station in Dallas, is giving those suffering from mental illness a chance to reintegrate into society, learning valuable skills that can help them reconnect with family, find jobs and become certified as a PC hardware/software technician.

"We are just so fortunate to have Les," said Tod Lipka, the CEO of Step Up, a nonprofit founded in Santa Monica in 1984 that provides housing and supportive services to those affected by severe and persistent mental health issues. "He has been valuable in terms of talking about his experience with mental illness and helping those within and outside the organization learn firsthand some of the struggles someone with an illness has. He's made so many contributions."

In addition to the computer lab, Jones serves on Step Up's board of directors, helping to build desperately-needed housing and maintain the 22 programs offered through the agency.

"I'm just so fortunate to be a part of Step Up," Jones said last week during an interview in the art gallery and computer lab at Step Up on Fifth, the agency's latest affordable housing development in Downtown. As a member of the board, Jones helped pick the location for the 46-unit project and spoke at its opening last year.

"I am grateful every day and know that I am blessed," he said. "No matter how bad things got, I still had that spark to compete. So many have lost that spark of hope and knowing that there is a reason to be alive tomorrow, that I can contribute to this world. I don't know why I didn't lose it, but I came close several times."

The only way Jones can describe what it felt like growing up in Houston with his illness is to use the image of a boy in a bubble, present but yet painfully unable to connect with the outside world. He was a loner and the few friends he had existed in his mind. His mother noticed the signs of depression at an early age. However, there was the stigma and the lack of information about treatment. Jones said his parents eventually assumed he was just being a bad kid and needed more discipline.

That seemed to work for a time as Jones graduated high school and attended Houston Baptist University. He had his own apartment and was working at a local radio station playing "preacher programs" on Sundays. It was there that he saw his first computer, the now ancient Apple II. One to tinker, Jones took a bite out of the Apple, pulling it apart and reprogramming it to suit his needs. For him, it was fun.

"I loved tearing things apart and putting them back together as a kid," he said. "Now when my friends buy like an entertainment stand or some furniture from IKEA and they hate having to put it together, I'm 'Ooh, ooh, Can I? Can I?'"

Things seemed to be going well in college, but then his mental illness kicked into high gear, creating chaos in his daily life. He eventually left school, had trouble holding a steady job and lost his apartment. He chose to live on the streets, working at pizza parlors, "because at least I knew I could always eat at the end of the day."

"It was hard, especially in Texas where there just aren't the services available," Jones said. "People there are very much about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. It's that belief that when you succeed you should feel the rewards for your risk and when you fail, you must find the reward in that failure. I tried, but I went through these manic phases where I felt like I was never good enough, that I was never going to be good enough."

He decided to head west in search of work, landing in San Francisco. He didn't last. With \$80 in his pocket, Jones said he came to Los Angeles and settled in Santa Monica. He soon became homeless again, unable to find work. Eventually he sought help at the homeless shelter Samoshel and in 2002 joined Step Up.

It was a conversation he had with his half-sister, whom he hadn't spoken with in 11 years, that made him seek treatment. Jones can vividly recall how he felt after taking medication for the first time.

"I never felt so free in my life," he said. "Everything was so clear, so quiet."

He reconnected with his family and began taking computer courses at Los Angeles Community College. He saved money, got an apartment with Step Up and recently paid to fly his younger brother, whom he hadn't seen in over a decade, to Santa Monica for a long weekend of bonding.

"Now that I have been able to talk with my family, I have come to realize and tell them that it wasn't their fault, and more importantly that it wasn't my fault."

His involvement with Step Up increased to the point where he now runs the computer lab, something he takes pride in. He enjoys being a teacher, preaching his mantra that "computers are stupid," helping his students gain confidence as they learn Microsoft Word, Office, e-mail programs and other tools before tackling more challenging lesson plans. His introductory course, "Computers and the Wizard of Oz," is intended to pull back the curtain and expose computers as the simple machines that they are, Jones said.

"I spend probably about half of the course making fun of geeks and even more about how stupid this machine is," he said. "I do that because most of the people who come into the classroom are middle-aged and timid about computers. I think this is a huge step for them to do this. It's a huge step for anyone, but for our members, they've overcome so much and I just want to keep that momentum going and have fun."

Jones hopes to expand the lab and teach more online courses through Santa Monica College. Students now take foreign language courses at the lab.

"I love teaching, watching those students' faces light up when they realize they can type in a Web site

address, press a button and it appears," Jones said. "It's a magical moment."

When he's not dabbling in computers, Jones likes to watch movies, documentaries and comedies mostly, eat sushi and watch the Dallas Cowboys. He calls Santa Monica "heaven" and enjoys interacting with people, something he could never do growing up. He is fond of wearing a red hat, paying homage to Red Hat, a computer operating system based on Linux the first time in a long time, the future looks bright for Jones, who would like to continue his education and do more freelance work.

"I see nothing but wonderful things ahead," he said. "I see a lot of growth. I feel like this is just the beginning of my life."