

Breaking habits from the past

As a role model, she helps others

BY JENI ASABA

After 30 years of addiction and homelessness on the streets of Harlem, a Williamsbridge resident is using her experiences to give hope to those battling sickness and habit.

Kathryn Patterson grew up in Harlem at 134th and 8th Avenue, before moving to the projects in 1969. It was okay for a while, she said. Her mom was what she called a "functioning alcoholic," working every day only to return home to the bottle.

Patterson said she felt young and invisible to anyone who mattered, and received abuse from those who didn't.

"I was seven or eight years old the first time," she said about prolonged molestation from her mother's boyfriend. "That's when all my troubles started."

Attempting to flee the horrors of her past, Patterson ran away from home. Feeling frightened and alone, she found comfort in drugs, she said. At the age of 13, she was hooked on heroine and routinely sniffing coke.

Realizing she had a problem, Patterson went to the Phoenix House, a drug rehab and coun-

seling center, for help. Unfortunately, she said her time among other addicts did more harm than good. "That wasn't good because I learned tricks of the trade [from the other users]," she said.

Not knowing where to go, drugs and prostitution became her false sense of security. "I started looking for love in all the wrong places," she said.

At 16, Patterson met a 20-year-old man who gave her everything she thought she wanted. They moved in together and shortly after had two kids. For the first time, she thought she had a real family, but it came at a price.

Patterson's boyfriend of 13 years was an abusive alcoholic. "For years I thought it was my fault; something I did," she said.

The toxic relationship took a toll; both physically and mentally. But bad turned to worse when at 29, her children were taken away. Patterson said she felt like she lost everything - her entire world, gone.

But losing her kids really opened her eyes to what her life was becoming.

Continued on page 33

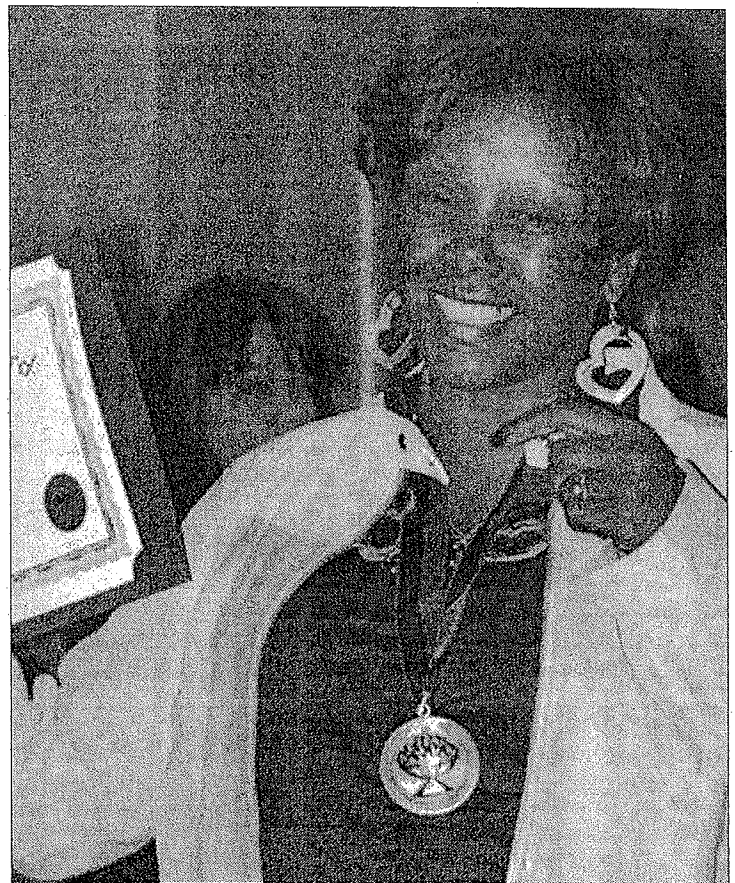


Photo Courtesy of Catherine Abrams

Kathryn Patterson received the "Rising Star" award at Praxis Housing Initiatives for her courage, leadership and determination to overcome homelessness and addiction.

Praxis honors former drug abuser

From page 5

"I didn't have an education or work skills," she said. "You want to stop but you're too ashamed to say you're an addict and need help."

Patterson bounced from place to place, sleeping wherever she could find a bed, doing all she could for the extra change to buy her next meal.

Numerous times, she went to take an HIV test, never wanting or caring about the results, only relying on the \$50 check she received from filling out the required survey. But one day the routine ended in heartbreak.

On January 27, 2004, Patterson was diagnosed with HIV. In a desperate attempt to escape from the pain, she attempted an overdose, taking 50 pills to end her life. For a little while, she said, she stopped breathing. She remembered the surprised expressions from the hospital staff when she woke up.

"One of the nurses told me, 'God must want you here,'" referring to her unexplained recovery. The nurse gave her a Bible, a

book, Patterson said, that helped save her life.

Soon thereafter, an unexpected visit from her children showed Patterson she still had people who loved and supported her. "The kids came around and gave me a whole lot of inspiration," she said. "I realized I could do it if I just took one day at a time."

Patterson said it was in her family's support that she found the strength to set out on the path of recovery.

From 2004 to 2005, she fought her addictions at Praxis Housing Initiatives, a not-for-profit organization that provides transitional housing for New York City's chronically homeless.

She dedicated most of her time at Praxis to learning about HIV and providing support to others living with the virus.

In October 2007, Patterson was hired as an assisted daily living monitor at Praxis, working one-on-one with residents, giving support during their transition to permanent housing while encouraging the clients to make conscious life choices.

Praxis has awarded her the "Rising Star Award," recognition for individuals who have rebuilt their lives, proving change is possible through hard work and commitment.

"Kathryn Patterson is a powerful role model for female residents at Praxis, constantly putting the needs of others before her own," John Foran, CEO of Praxis said.

Patterson continues to fight her virus and provide support to others living with AIDS. She said she isn't ashamed of her life, but instead feels blessed to be able to share it with others.

Three months ago, Patterson moved into her own home at Radcliff and Burke avenues. She has a loving relationship with her children, she said, and is seeing a wonderful man who shares her dream of opening a not-for-profit for those struggling with illness and addictions.

"Life is really pleasant for me today because I have something to give back," Patterson said. "I wake up every day thanking God and praying I can touch someone's life."