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## SPOTLIGHT ON GREAT PEOPLE

# Reaching out to city downtrodden

**S**VEIN JORGENSEN thinks people shouldn't be that impressed by the fact he has worked for just two companies since he came to this country 21 years ago.

"It means I am either slow in getting it, or I make myself comfortable and you can't get rid of me," he said.

Both those alibis go out the window once you learn Jorgensen, 44, worked at one place for 10 years and the other for the past 11.

And Jorgensen, chief operating officer of Praxis Housing Initiatives, a nonprofit which provides transitional housing to homeless people infected with HIV and AIDS, worked his way from the bottom up at both places.

That means he did a lot of different jobs within the same companies.

Today, as Praxis' COO, he oversees a 113-person staff and helps manage the company's four leased buildings — three in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn — and scatter-site housing in Brooklyn.

All together, Praxis houses about 350 people a day for as long as 180 days each. The company helps clients, all of whom are referred by the city's Human Resources Administration, to find permanent housing and access an array of city and other services.

"That is actually the greatest part of what we do, because you see people who have transitioned from homelessness and move on to their own permanent housing," Jorgensen said. "Then they come back by maybe six months later and you see a different person in front of you."

"The person who may have been gaunt and just out of hospital comes back as a healthy individual, if they do the right thing."

Jorgensen said he has had a personal interest in the well-being of AIDS and HIV sufferers since watching a friend succumb to the disease in the early 1990s.

"It was a wakeup call for me, because I could see the stigma that was associated with individuals diagnosed with HIV," Jorgensen said. "It was clear there was still a lot of educating that needed to be done."

"People had a lot of fear, because at the time people [were] not sure how the virus was transmitted. In that person's case, there was a general reluctance by a lot of people to be near him, even to clean his apartment, for fear of contracting the virus."

There also was a certain convergence going on — Jorgensen's first stateside job prepared him for his second in more ways than he realized.

First, he taught himself accounting skills as night auditor at the Martha Washington Hotel on 29th St. in Manhattan, which was operating as a single-room occupancy hotel at the time.

Working with numbers is integral to his Praxis job. But also while working there — Jorgensen would be named hotel manager eight years later — he got to know people who were living at or close to the edge of society — often dangerously close to homelessness.

"That was my real introduction into how hard it can be to survive in New York," he said. "When you're living on Social Security, you're living from check to check. Once that check came in on the first of the month, the smiles came a little bit more. But you could see they were making considerable sacrifices just to survive."

"Even though that was 20 years ago, it's something I clearly take with me today."

Jorgensen was born in Bergen, Norway, to a Norwegian father, Harald, and Irish mother, Mary. His father, a seaman and oil rig worker, died 23 years ago. His mother and sister, Ingrid Kelleher, live in Cork City, Ireland, where they moved in 1971 to be near his mother's large, extended family. He now lives in Forest Hills, Queens, with his wife, Harumi, and daughter, Michelle.

Ireland's economic woes prompted Jorgensen to emigrate in 1986. He settled first in upstate Phoenicia, N.Y., then moved in with relatives in Deer Park, L.I.

A headhunter brought him to Praxis, and he interviewed on Wednesday, was offered the job on Friday and started work on Saturday.

The position was definitely hands-on. Several of the group's facilities were overrun with what Praxis Chief Executive Officer John Foran describes as "drug dealers and loan sharks."

**T**he company took the hard line to get them out — Foran remembers Jorgensen and Praxis Director of Operations Floyd Cuevas chasing people out of the building and down the street.

"It took a lot of courage," Foran said. "Svein is a very modest man who is going to play down all the things he has done."

"I was 6 feet 5 and had a full head of hair then," Jorgensen joked. "That tells you how crazy I was."

Cleaning out Praxis facilities took a bit more than that. Jorgensen said the group instituted several security measures, in-



Svein Jorgensen, COO of Praxis Housing Initiatives, in Battery Place office. Photo by Craig Warga/Daily News

cluding limiting visiting hours to 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., limiting the number of nights guests could stay with residents, and making residents liable for their guests' actions.

"It's a matter of cooperation and responsibility," Jorgensen said. "When you visit our facility, you have to behave responsibly. If not, you are going to be unwelcome, and the person you are visiting will have to answer for your behavior."

The company also survived a surreptitious attempt by two former executives and an agency lawyer to use agency funds to create competing homeless shelters. The three later repaid Praxis more than \$790,000 as part of a 2005 settlement brokered by then-Attorney General Elliott Spitzer.

Praxis' services to clients can include everything from transitional housing to assistance with moving into permanent homes. The group also provides referrals

for counseling and other services.

"The first thing we do is a needs assessment," Jorgensen said. "Sometimes it can be pretty basic, like asking when the person ate last."

**P**raxis ([www.praxishousing.org](http://www.praxishousing.org)) also is looking to expand its available rooms, but like most New Yorkers is having trouble finding space they can afford.

"When you find a space, you have to pounce on it immediately or it's gone," Jorgensen said. "There are too many people looking for the same property."

He said Praxis hopes to eventually open a facility in the Bronx.

Praxis is having an Autumn on the Hudson fund-raiser at the West Point Club at West Point on Oct. 28. The event costs \$50 per person and includes breakfast and lunch. Seats are limited. Call (917) 522-8410, or e-mail [cbams@praxihousing.org](mailto:cbams@praxihousing.org).

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