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Forest Hills man found calling helping HIV patients

By Alex Christodoulides

Every weekday, and sometimes at night or on weekends, Forest Hills resident Svein Jorgensen goes to work with a group of people whose lives he could not even imagine when he arrived from Ireland in 1986.

Jorgensen is the chief operating officer at Praxis Housing Initiatives, a private agency that provides temporary housing for the HIV-infected homeless and gives them the stability and skills to be able to survive on their own. New York City's Human Resources Administration contracts with Praxis to provide transitional housing to about 350 people per night.

It is related to what Jorgensen expected to be doing -- working in the hotel and hospitality industry - when he came to New York, perhaps less glitzy than the Waldorf Astoria but ultimately more fulfilling.

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Jorgensen, 44, was born in Norway to an Irish mother and Norwegian father and the family moved to Ireland when he was 8 years old. He left Ireland in 1986, when the country's economy was rocky, and chose New York City because he had relatives upstate.

Jorgensen, then 23, started on the night shift at the Martha Washington Hotel on East 30th Street in Manhattan, a 450-room single room occupancy building for women, and by 1996 he was its manager.

"When the Social Security checks arrived, there was a big smile," he said. "The next day they began allocating the money" to cover rent and expenses and see what was left over for themselves, which showed him how many residents "were one check away from homelessness." While at the hotel, Jorgensen became friends with a well-liked male resident who also worked at the Martha Washington and contracted HIV. As residents learned of the diagnosis, fearful of catching the virus, they kept their distance. The man quickly became ill and when he died, "people didn't even want to clean out his room" or touch his things, Jorgensen said. The stigma made a lasting impression.

Several years later he saw a New York Times article about Praxis Housing Initiatives, which in 1996 was a year-old transitional housing organization. He learned that Praxis was seeking someone with hotel experience to manage one of its facilities, and was hired immediately.

Praxis leases three multi-unit buildings in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn. Queens is a less likely site because the borough's buildings are mainly houses which are too small to house more than a few people and would not allow clients enough anonymity in the neighborhood, he said.

Talking about his work, Jorgensen's face lit up. His job is more than reading spreadsheets - it is being on call 24 hours a day, calling city agencies, feeding and clothing clients, getting them mental health and/or substance abuse counseling, planning job and skills training, and showing people that they can stand on their own two feet, all in 180 days from their arrival at a facility.

It is also taking clients out on field trips, organizing talent shows and encouraging artistic abilities. Keeping clients socially engaged is key to their ability to face the virus and the challenges life throws their way, and come out stronger, he said.

"Sometimes the person who comes to our facility is not the person who leaves the facility," he said.

Jorgensen admires the clients' grit.

"The determination and strength it takes to survive on the streets with little to no income is incredible," he said. Some arrive with little more than a manila envelope of their medical records, others are fleeing an abusive partner and many are battling drug addiction. But all are HIV-positive and receiving enough public assistance that their medical needs can be met.

Jorgensen's staff, some of whom are former clients who have "graduated" from Praxis housing into permanent housing, help him keep things on track.

"I get to work with individuals who are really committed to changing people's lives," he said.

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