

The New York Times

January 13, 2008

THE NEEDIEST CASES

A Recovered Addict Struggles to Keep His Home



Rob Bennett for The New York Times

Gabriel Crumity, an addiction counselor, has been unable to work while receiving chemotherapy.

By [KARI HASKELL](#)

Around Gabriel Crumity's neck, a few inches to the left of the scar from chemotherapy treatments, hangs a gold medallion the size of a quarter with a triangle punched out of the middle.

"It represents 18 years of sobriety," said Mr. Crumity, 55, who was a substance abuse counselor at Samaritan Village in Manhattan for 14 of those 18 years.

"My father smoked cigars, my grandfather smoked cigarettes," he said. Mr. Crumity himself smoked for many years before he quit when he was 41.

But the combination of secondhand smoke and his own smoking caught up with him. In 2005, cancerous cells were removed from his right lung, and he continues to receive chemotherapy. "Doctors were amazed I didn't get cancer sooner," he said. He also has diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure and neuropathy.

Growing up in Harlem, he found that getting cigarettes and many other substances, some illegal, was easy. "I did a little bit of everything," he said. While his parents struggled and worked hard, he was enamored of the guys on the corner who had money, cars and girls, he said. He supported his habits after high school by cleaning boilers and fixing water tanks.

One by one, people he knew were either dying or going to prison, Mr. Crumity said. Then his younger brother died at 34 from drug and alcohol abuse.

“His death is the reason I wanted to get counseling,” Mr. Crumity said.

After his brother’s death, Mr. Crumity was briefly homeless, lived in a shelter, went into rehabilitation and started taking classes toward a bachelor’s degree in human services from Audrey Cohen College. He received his degree in 1994. Six months later, he found a job in his field.

His diploma is displayed on his bedroom wall in the Bronx apartment that he has rented for 14 years. “When I feel a little down, sometimes I’ll just lay down and stare at it to lift my spirits,” Mr. Crumity said.

He reflected on his work. “So many people have it in them to stop, but they have lost faith,” he said. “I’ve helped over 2,000 people,” he said. “It’s gratifying.”

He tried to continue working while receiving chemotherapy, but his deteriorating health forced him to quit in December 2006. In addition to his cancer treatments, he must use an electric nebulizer for his asthma and an oxygen tank to breathe. He takes 15 medications a day, including two insulin injections.

As an assistant director of clinical services at Samaritan Village, he earned \$3,000 a month. Now, he says, he “can’t seem to get out of a hole.”

His rent is \$833 a month; he pays close to \$130 for utilities, plus \$50 for outstanding taxes and \$62.50 to a bill consolidator. Initially his employer gave him a little more than \$600 a month in disability payments. “It wasn’t enough to cover the rent,” he said. He depleted his savings.

In April he applied for Supplemental Security Income. By the time he received his first monthly check for \$877 in July, “I had to choose between paying rent, eating, having light and gas,” he said. His rent was three months late.

Mr. Crumity went to housing court in July and was given telephone numbers for agencies, including the Community Service Society of New York, to call for assistance. The society is one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#).

Anna Auleley, a housing specialist at the society, drew from the fund to cover two months in arrears. The rest was paid by welfare.

In 14 years he was never late paying rent, he said. He is frustrated now. He paid income and Social Security taxes, and every step of the way getting financial help has been difficult, he said. He now receives \$63 a month in food stamps, he said, but it took a month to straighten out the erroneous information on his cards for that benefit and for [Medicaid](#). He has qualified for a Section 8 housing subsidy, but has yet to receive it.

“It’s decided by a lottery, not by need,” Mr. Crumity said. “Section 8 is my lifeline.”

“I’ve accomplished so much,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t want to go back to a shelter.”