

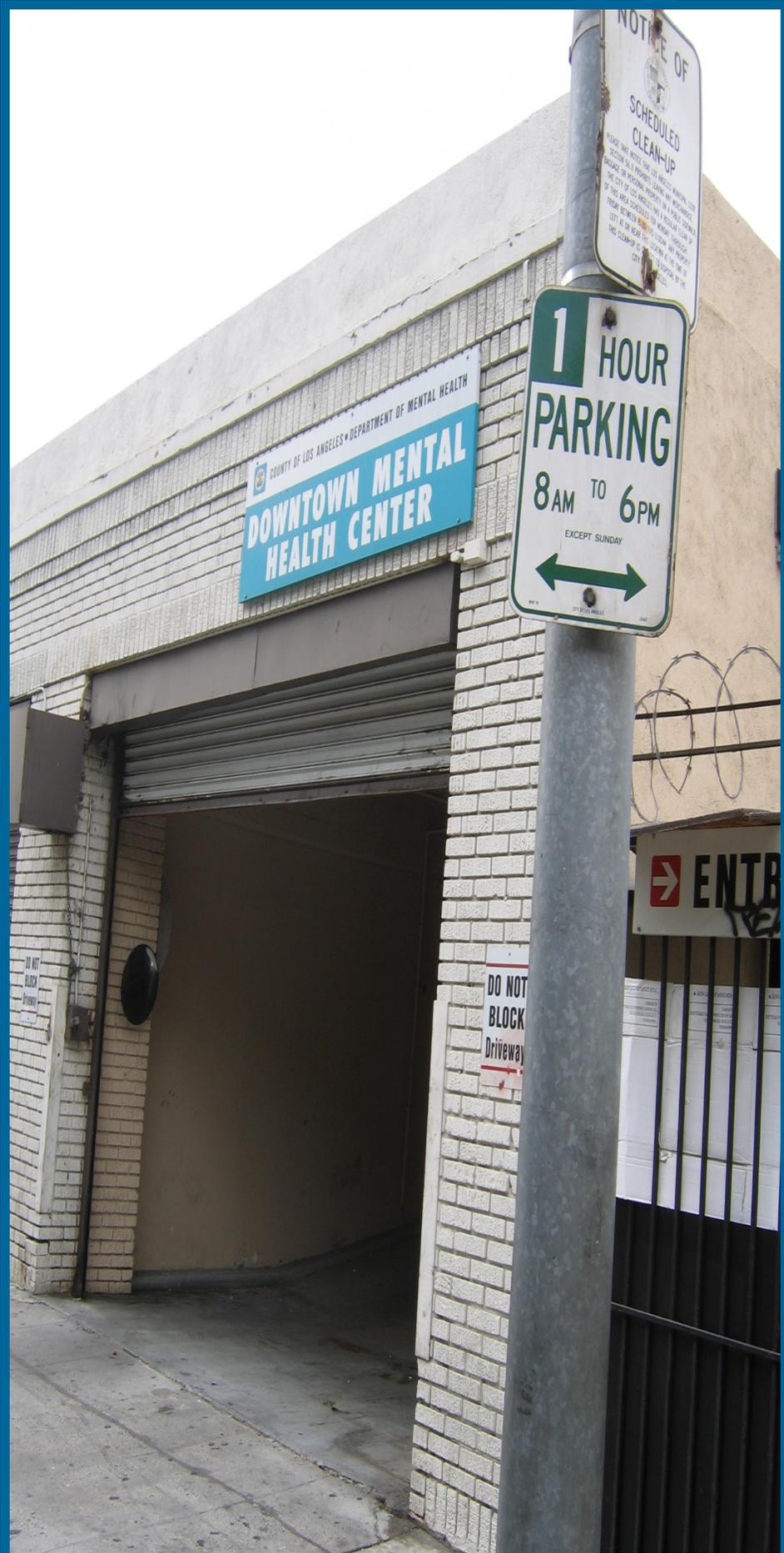
In My Own Words:

Resiliency, Hope, Wellness & Recovery

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When talking about resiliency and the potential that the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) holds for the mentally ill in Los Angeles County, I am living proof that hope, wellness and recovery can become a reality.

For many years I struggled with my mental illness (diagnosis of schizophrenia and dual diagnosis of alcohol abuse later in life), growing up in a Latino culture that did not understand what I was going through. To them, I was “loco” or crazy. By age 17, I was committed to the State Hospital and released three years later back to my family who was unprepared for my return home. As the frustrations grew on both mine and my family’s part, I left my family home and moved to downtown Los Angeles Skid Row area.

I can remember my first week living on Skid Row as there were a lot of people who were in similar conditions as I was in, being mentally ill. They had all of their lifelong belongings in shopping carts and/or milk crates. They had no one to answer or listen to. Finally, I was by myself, a loner, but I was homeless, hungry and cold. My first priority was to survive. I walked down the streets looking for any food lines and shelters to sleep in. The elements that plagued Skid Row were there too; people dealing drugs and alcohol to anyone who wanted them. There were times when the shelters were so full I had to sleep on the sidewalks using card board boxes for cover and newspapers as insulation from the wet and cold concrete. With no family or friends, the holidays were very depressing as painful memories filled me. To relieve the pain, I began to drink alcohol. It did not matter what proof the bottle was as I would drink it to the bitter end. I hit rock bottom, and I felt there was no way out.

I lived on streets, shelters, empty railroad cars, and doorways, eating anything people left behind. Finally after 20 years of living in misery I decided to transform my life and ask for help. It was the first time in my life I did this. I walked over to the L.A. Mission and spoke to a doctor who then referred me to the Downtown Mental Health Center (DMHC). Entering the Center, I was scared and

uncertain about how they would treat me. In time I became comfortable with the staff and began to attend therapy and dual diagnosis group sessions. The staff moved me to another group, the Community Living Program. While in the program, I received a “Section 8” voucher that allowed me to move into my first apartment.

As part of my recovery plan, I was encouraged by the DMHC staff to reunite with my family. It was difficult as my parents were angry with me for leaving without saying goodbye, but we came to an area of understanding and peace. Now, I talk to my family on the telephone and see them during the holidays, something I had yearned for while living on Skid Row.

Feeling better about myself and the direction my life was heading, I became a member of “Project Return: The Next Step,” an organization operated by former mental health clients. The organization’s mission is to provide social opportunities, promote wellness, personal growth, build self-esteem, as well as community involvement through self-help and peer support that encourages and empower leadership. “Project Return: The Next Step’s” motto is Taking Charge Together. While at the organization, I worked as Club & Regional Aide and Coordinator for the IMD Hospitals.

I wanted to do more and help others toward recovery. My wish was granted when I joined a group of former mental health clients and consumers as part of a Japanese-American Consumer Exchange Program. Since 2002, I have traveled to Japan and shared my experiences of recovery and love for the arts with Japanese clients, consumers, and mental health and medical professionals. Hopefully they will be able to overcome the cultural stigma associated with mental illness and eventually participate in their community. Sadly, the mentally ill live on the river banks outside of the big cities.

Last month (December 2006), another one of my goals became a reality when I was transferred as a MHSA Mental Health Peer Advocate to the Downtown Mental Health Center where my road to recovery began.

On my first day at the Center, I felt the same way that I did when I entered through the doors 20 years ago—scared and uncertain. This time, how would the staff treat me as a former client of theirs? The staff welcomed me with open arms because they saw me as their child who grew up, graduated and came back home to help the other clients and consumers get back on the road to recovery. One of my former therapy group members said, “We are all proud of you, Stephen...You give us hope that we are all searching for here on Skid Row.”

To me, recovery is real and a reachable goal for people with mental illness. Peer-to-peer support is a vital part of the recovery process because it helps build the natural foundation for support. I know, I am living proof of that.