

Stories of Hope

“Wally”

Anne met Wally in the summer of 2000. It was the first of five summers Wally would return, almost like a pilgrimage, to the Shelter. Wally was an itinerant homeless person, with the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley but one of his domiciles across the United States.

At that first meeting Wally wore a torn pair of blue Ralph Lauren seersucker pants he got in New Port, a pair of Birkenstocks he was given in LA, a white t-shirt which said “RELAX” in big red letters which made him laugh when he looked down at it. Though it was mid-summer, he wore a wool brown hound’s-tooth Duke of Wellington style jacket with suede at the elbows and egg stains on the collar. The miss-match disheveled state meant he blended well in any crowd from New York to San Francisco, but in Appleton, the buttoned up jacket made him feel secure from the stares he received. Those people must know his mom and his family and how they had kicked him out, a drop-out, drunk and disgrace who just made messes by vomiting all over the linoleum in his mothers house. Wally avoided looking at anyone in the Shelter as they might see the terror in his eyes or the tremor in his hands. Wally wore the physical scars of self-mutilation and the mental scars of years of neglect.

Anne had seen Wally at PRIDE class the day after he arrived and with his graying, greasy mullet and massively wrinkled face she guessed he was at least 58 or 60. Anne found out from Wally’s case manager that he was only 48 which was a pity because Anne didn’t see any immediate way to get Wally benefits. He didn’t seem to have any work history which the caseworker could make use of, and getting a job appeared unlikely. Wally limped slightly and combined with his aged appearance it wouldn’t make him a good candidate to find work within the 23.5 days most single men stayed at the Shelter. Still, Anne persevered and along with a Shelter caseworker, they discussed a TLP (temporary living placement). After about a week in the Shelter, Anne made an appointment with Wally so she could go over some of his housing options with him. Two days later, when the appointment time arrived, Wally didn’t arrive and at lunch Anne asked if anybody knew what happened to him. He had left Shelter that morning, about 50 minutes after he was due to meet with her.

Anne did not see or hear from Wally again that year, but he re-appeared again in 2001. Anne found that Wally lived with perpetual paranoia and fear. She suspected he had bi-polar disease, a type of mental illness. He again spent only about two weeks in the Shelter before leaving, the burden of the social interactions of Shelter life too much for him to bear. He returned in 2002, and again in 2003 when Anne first introduced Wally to Randy, the caseworker. It was Randy who helped Wally apply for social security disability, but before the outcome of the application was received, Wally was on walkabout again.

It was clear to both Randy and Anne that Wally needed medication for his disease, but he always left before either Randy could get him stabilized on his medication or Anne could find appropriate housing for him at an affordable cost to Wally. When Wally returned in 2005, magic happened for him. While he had been away, his Social Security Disability benefits were approved *and* Randy was able to get him diagnosed and treated with the appropriate medication. Anne found a placement for him at Port Care Community House which offered case management and reduced rent at \$175 per month. This was Wally's gift—he finally could stop moving on in fear and depression. He could begin to function in the Community.