

A SUCCESSFUL LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY AFTER LONG-TERM INSTITUTIONALIZATION

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In this newsletter, we are honored to be able to share **Tashee Dunsmore's** story.



In Short

Thanks to her own unremitting perseverance, Tashee Dunsmore is now a certified peer specialist with a bachelors degree in painting and graphic design. Her initial experiences living in a group home full of routine and restrictions frustrated her, but with help from a peer specialist and other community providers, she moved into her own

apartment. Becoming a peer specialist and working were crucial to her recovery and today she advocates for all people with mental health needs to be given input, choice, and the ability to have some control over their services and lives.

Life Before

Tashee found herself hospitalized due to psychosis in 2007. At the time, she was in her 30's and had been living and working in the District of Columbia. She began to experience a psychotic episode and believed that people were conspiring against her. Tashee stopped working and moved in with her parents. In an effort to escape her paranoia, Tashee fled to Mexico where her condition worsened and she attempted suicide. She returned to the United States, choosing to go to Birmingham, Alabama, and was hospitalized there for about six weeks. Subsequently she was discharged to a group home, where she spent the next two and one-half years.

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congregate living. Everything had to be done as a group, including the most mundane tasks such as grocery shopping and meals.

Tashee was miserable during her stay at the group home, a 10-bed facility. The fact that she had a boyfriend there made it more bearable, but she disliked the rigidity of congregate living. Everything had to be done as a group, including the most mundane tasks such as grocery shopping and meals. She had no say concerning what time to wake up, when to clean, and what to eat. Eventually, because Tashee was vegan, the group home allowed her to buy and cook her own food, but this privilege was not offered to anyone else. Group home rules required residents to be in their rooms by 9 pm, and forbade her from even hugging her boyfriend. She was dissatisfied with most components of her day treatment program, which was mandatory for residents of the group home; the program offered classes that were not particularly useful to her.

Tashee observes that, in addition to the impact of the routine and restrictions that characterize congregate living, the quality of life in a group home is heavily influenced by the staff. Tashee has experienced staff that were kind and understanding and others who were disrespectful and yelled at residents incessantly.

What Helped Tashee

Tashee worked for several months while living in the group home. She was employed as a receptionist at a large hotel. However, nearly all of her wages were taken by the group home to pay for her care. Virtually none of the other group home residents worked, and no one was encouraged to do so.

When Tashee tried to enlist the help of group home staff to get her out of the group home, she was unable to do so. Without help from staff, Tashee herself learned about the Shelter Plus Care program, which provided eligible individuals with a rental subsidy and supportive services. She managed to get into this program and, with help from a peer specialist and a clinical director from a community services agency, to secure an apartment.

She began working as a peer support specialist, and helped individuals transition from a state hospital that was being downsized to group homes. Tashee loved this work.

While she struggled at first in her own apartment, believing that people were surveilling her and that someone had put spiders in her apartment, her new psychiatrist prescribed different medications that were enormously successful in addressing her symptoms. Tashee also got married, which provided a stabilizing force in her life. She began working as a peer support specialist, and helped individuals transition from a state hospital that was being downsized to group homes. Tashee loved this work. She designed trainings for group home staff to help them learn to develop better relationships with clients. These trainings, which included role-playing exercises, were very well received.

Tashee's Life Today

In her own home, Tashee has enjoyed the freedom to spend her own money on things she wants, cleaning and furnishing her house

the way she wants, staying up as long as she wants, eating what she wants, having company when she wishes, and having the freedom to enjoy romantic relationships. She continues to live with her husband, and with the support of the state vocational rehabilitation agency, which paid for her college tuition, books, and art supplies she studied painting and graphic design, receiving her bachelors degree in Art in 2017. She also teaches art at a drop-in center.

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Based on her own experiences and those of the many people that she has helped as a peer support specialist, Tashee believes that mental health systems would do well to focus more on serving people in integrated settings and affording them input, choice, and the ability to have some control over their lives. Designing different classes for different levels of functioning that are sufficiently interesting that people want to participate, and encouraging them to do so, is a more effective strategy than mandating participation. The use of peer bridgers, who afford individualized attention and invaluable guidance, should be maximized. Finally, service systems should encourage work as much as participation in day treatment programs.