



N.J. carpenter rebuilds life, with help from St. Bridget's Residence and Greater Newark Holiday Fund

By Carly Rothman/The Star-Ledger

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As a high school senior in Atlantic Highlands, Kevin Motley won a three-sport scholarship to community college. Within a few years, he married, had three daughters, launched a successful career in the graphic arts, and bought a home.

But Motley wasn't satisfied.

"Every day, I'd come in and there was a big pile of papers on my desk. The next day, there was still a big pile of paper," said Motley. He decided to pursue his passion for carpentry, and got a job renovating houses with a contractor in South Jersey.



Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

Kevin Motley had a supportive family, interesting career, and beautiful home when he became gripped by alcoholism. As his addiction advanced, he lost everything -- and learned he was HIV positive. But today, Motley. St. Bridget's, a Newark-based program of Catholic Charities, would like help from the fund to provide Mr. Motley with a computer he can use to stay in touch with his three daughters and advance his career.

"That was real exciting," he said. "It was like seeing the before and after: you see what you start out with, and what you're going to build."

But as Motley built houses, his home life fell apart. He had never been much of a drinker. Now, as he spent time with his new coworkers, that was no longer true.

"I don't blame it on them, but there was a lot of drinking and stuff going on," he said. "I had gotten to be in the grips of alcohol and drug abuse."

Years went by. He drifted in and out of work, then in and out of jail. When he lost his house in 1999, his wife and children moved out of state.

"I was distraught. ... I didn't care where I did, or where I went. All I could think about was my family being dispersed and it being my fault," he said. "I didn't know anything about no disease called alcoholism."

Soon, Motley suffered another blow. He'd been living with a girlfriend for close to a year. One day, he came home to find she had gone, leaving a note on the table saying he should get tested for HIV. He did. He was positive.

"I was very, very uneducated about the whole HIV process," he said. He began using drugs even more heavily, spending nights sleeping under the Asbury Park boardwalk or in the train station. "I was really trying to commit suicide."

But Motley didn't end his life. Instead, shortly after his 56th birthday in 2007, he had a revelation.

"I just got the will to live," he said. "I called it my three part plan: to get into a detox program short term, then long term, then find a place, and find myself, and live on my own."

With the support of some family members, Motley put his plan into action. He went through detox, and got medical treatment. Then he set about reaching his third goal.

Motley was able to do so with the help of St. Bridget's Residence, a housing program of Catholic Charities in Newark, which serves men with HIV, offering a drop-in center, emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing for men ready to live independently.

The program receives annual support from the Greater Newark Holiday Fund.

Most of the men in the program come with a history of substance abuse, and get treatment for their addictions, said program manger Ernest McCullough. The men also get counseling, information on how to handle their illness, and job training and placement services.

But a supportive community is one of the program's most important components, McCullough said.

"Usually when guys go to a shelter program, it's a mixed population. ... Here you know that everyone is HIV positive," said program manager Ernest McCullough. "Your fear of disclosing that is vanished...so it's easier to move on."

Motley said that was true for him.

"When I told my family that I was (HIV) positive, everyone started going out and buying black dresses and suits," Motley said. But at St. Bridget's, he said, "I heard success stories, that there really is life after that, being exposed to HIV."

"It was like coming back from the dead."

Today, Motley is working to help others struggling with mental health, and is getting certified to work as a mental health assistant and peer specialist, trained to work with people with drugs and alcohol addictions.

He is also back in touch with his daughters, often swapping pictures and messages online. Through the Greater Newark Holiday Fund, St. Bridget's hopes to provide him with his own laptop computer so he can continue building these relationships.

"All of a sudden, to be free, to be at peace, to have serenity, was such 'high,' let's say," Motley said. "I am so happy now."

For more information on the Greater Newark Holiday Fund, or information on how to donate, call 1-866-292-HOPE (4673) or visit holidayfund.org.

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