

Recovery and Hope: Jerome's Story

[Another Way](#) for week of November 18, 2005

By Melodie Davis

"I thought I was going to get a doctor, and a bed. They told me I had to sign myself into the hospital and I'm thinking, 'I'll sign myself in, I'll get the help I need,'" says Jerome Lawrence reflecting on his difficult struggle with schizophrenia.

"But they shut the door behind me, locked. I was shocked. I found that I could not leave. Once you sign yourself in, a doctor has to release you. I was shaken to the core; they took away my freedom. I was in for a week and a half at that point."

Mental illness is devastating and takes a toll on millions of families and individuals. Too often the disease is lethal-30,000 suicides a year in the U.S.; and the leading cause is mental illness.

Yet, there is hope. In the last 20 years the treatment and rehabilitation of those with these kinds of illness have changed remarkably. The 90s were declared the decade of the brain and serious research revealed just how illnesses affect the brain. There may not be cures as such, but there is treatment, rehabilitation, and wonderful lives to be lived out.

In an upcoming documentary for ABC TV, [Shadow Voices: Finding Hope for Mental Illness](#), numerous persons with mental illness tell their stories. Jerome's story is one of the most moving to me.

Jerome was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his 20's after spending frustrating years in school when he often couldn't understand what was going on, and often gave up on studying. This is the illness pictured so captivately in the movie, A Beautiful Mind.

Jerome says before he went on medication, hallucinations were common: "I'd see things that I'd swear were there, but then they'd disappear the next second. I'd go in and out of a state of delusion. I'd think that situations were one way, when they were totally the opposite, like a couple would be talking and [I'd think] they were talking about me. But it was nothing that had to do with me. I just read the signals wrong-people's body language. I misinterpreted what they said. It was very frightening because one minute you'd be thinking that everything's fine and the next minute you'd be out of your mind with thoughts that somebody's trying to harm you or that you're in immediate danger. You think things were one way, and then the next second you realize they weren't the way you thought they were."

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Jerome majored in art in college. Most of his family didn't understand his illness and didn't really know what schizophrenia was; he had a sister who helped him get to appointments and helped him with medicine. Taking his medications regularly was a condition of leaving the hospital. Upon release he started treatment at a community service board. He thought, "I know ultimately I will not be well unless I take medicine. I realized I needed help."

He was training in art all the while he was sick; at one point he said to himself, "I'm going to go back to painting if it is good; if it's bad, I won't." He also studied chess and computers, which helped exercise his mind. Eventually he graduated from Georgia State University even while struggling with illness.

A few years ago Jerome became the proud owner of a Habitat home, the first one to be built for a mentally ill person, organized by Rosalynn Carter. Jerome pounded nails every Saturday, proudly helping to assemble this piece of independence. He lived on disability for about ten years until medications became available to enable him to become the gifted painter that he is. He now supports himself by the sale of his art and by a part time job at a non-profit agency, Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network in Atlanta, Ga. "I still have trouble, but I'm a lot better than I was before," he says. He has taught art classes for a program called The Work of Our Hands at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Comforter in Atlanta. (See art at <http://jeromelawrence.net/>) Jerome's story of struggle and rehab while dealing with mental illness is one repeated by thousands of persons across the country. As with a lot of other illnesses, there is always the possibility for relapse. That's why the major psychiatric illnesses need to be considered like cancer, diabetes and heart disease when it comes to insurance coverage. Insurance companies and employers have balked because they fear health care costs spiraling even more with frivolous filing of "jet lag" or other minor emotional/physical jags we all deal with.

The issues about insurance, the relationship of our criminal justice system to mental health care, and much more are complex. I haven't begun to touch the surface here. I hope you can watch the special to be aired on participating ABC TV stations beginning Dec. 4, or find out more at www.shadowvoices.com

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