

Erik Fitzpatrick

Advocates

Interview with Robert Blaire

July 27, 2008

Robert was chosen as a candidate for this interview, because of his incredible resilience, and dedication to recovery from mental illness. Hopefully, his journey will be an inspiration to others dealing with mental health issues. The interview was tape recorded and then transcribed to paper. What follows is a brief synopsis of the actual interview, which took place on July 27th, 2008:

Robert comes from a large family of ten kids, with five brothers, and four sisters. Both his parents had problems with alcohol. At age five Robert's father assaulted him in a drunken rage and broke his jaw. This incident was the reason Robert was taken away from his family and placed in foster care. Robert started abusing alcohol and illicit drugs at age twelve. He was kicked out of high school in the ninth grade, but managed to get his GED while living in Virginia, the same year he would have graduated high school. He attempted suicide in 1991. For the next twelve years he worked on and off as a nurse's aid. In 1998 he assaulted a police officer which led to some serious charges. He was charged with assault with a deadly weapon. In a separate incident he was charged with unarmed robbery. This led to a year in jail at Billerica House of Correction, and subsequently a year at Westboro State Hospital. In 2001 he interviewed with Advocates and then returned to the community. While he lived with Advocates he also attended Gibbs College and earned an Associates Degree in Business Management. He went to Cambridge College part-time working on a Bachelor's degree in Business Management. His psychiatrist prescribed a myriad of different psychotropic medicines, and even shock treatments in 2003. He stopped using alcohol and eventually his prescribed medicine. He worked for hospitals for 8-9 months. His formal diagnosis was major depression with P.T.S.D and homicidal and suicidal tendencies. He also has a dual-diagnosis because of alcohol and drug addiction. He describes himself as an isolative person because he likes to be alone a lot. He is involved in both AA and NA. He now works full time for hotels and no longer needs SSI or SSDI. Now, he is completely free of psychiatric medication and lives in supported housing run by Advocates. Robert thanks Advocates for helping him become stabilized and reach his full potential.

The Interview:

Alright, this is about your background; tell me about yourself...

"I come from a family of ten kids. I have five brothers and four sisters. Both parents had problems with alcohol and so have all the kids. I lived with my parents until age five. My father broke my jaw in one of his drunken rages, and I was put in a foster home. I was there for seven years, in and out. After that I started using drugs and alcohol at age twelve. I have a long history of drugs and alcohol. I got married and divorced a couple of times. [I never really finished high school, I got kicked out in the eighth grade. I mean ninth grade, I finished the eighth grade.] I got my GED the same year I would have graduated high school. I worked as a nurse's aide for about ten to twelve years. I got married and divorced. The first time I had a problem with mental illness was probably 1990-1991. I had a suicide attempt and was in the hospital, [in Pennsylvania.] I got married and divorced again. I picked up a charge in a drunken rage and assaulted a police officer. I was living in the Bristol lodge Homeless Shelter. I was charged with assault on a police officer, and unarmed robbery. I went to Billerica [jail] for a year, and Westboro State Hospital for a year. In 2000-2001, I was interviewed with Advocates. I came here in August 2000-2001. I have always had problems with alcohol, even since then. It was about three years ago, I started going back to school, Gibb's College. They started me on psychiatric meds in 2000, when I was in the state hospital. In 2003 they did ECT shock treatments. I stopped using alcohol three years ago, and managed to get off all the [psychiatric] meds, like a year after that. Nowadays, I work full time, and go to school part time, and still attend AA meetings. I see a psychiatrist, I see a therapist. I talk to her on a weekly basis. With my work schedule it's hard, but like I said I work full time and go to school part time. I go to [AA] meetings."

What was your early childhood like?

"Well, like I said, I lived with my parents until age five. Then I was in a foster home, and my whole family was very "mentally sick." There was the drugs and alcohol. There were all kinds of abuse, physical, and mental abuse. My father mostly. I was put in a foster home that had seventeen kids in it. You know. And there were half a dozen of them that were mentally ill. You know it just [felt] very uncomfortable."

So, what's your education background like?

"I got kicked out of high school in the ninth grade. I got my GED, and never bothered with "schooling." I got my nurse's aid license. I was a nurse's aid for twelve years. I went back to college like three to four years ago. I was having a problem because I

was like drinkin', so I couldn't maintain college. When I got sober I went back to college, and finished in December of last year. I earned an Associates degree in Business Management from Gibbs College. I went to Cambridge College part time working on my Bachelor's Degree in Business Management."

So, can you tell me more about your work history?

"Well, I worked as a nurse's aide for a few years. When I came into Advocates, I really wasn't able to work. You know I wasn't. I worked a couple of odd jobs here and there, under the table. No, not under the table. J.D. Willis Tent Company in Watertown. That was seasonal work. Nothing that I could hold onto...because of alcohol and drugs...and taking a lot of [psychiatric] meds and wasn't in any shape to work. I've been working for the same hotels in Boston for eight or nine months now."

When do you think you were at your absolute worst, your lowest?

"When I was living in the Bristol Lodge [homeless shelter] in 98, 99. I was on a bunch of different psychiatric meds, and I was drinking still. When they sent me to Billerica House of Correction and then Westboro State Hospital. It was probably the worst time in my life. But, even after that I was in these group homes, you know. I kept on drinking. And, even though I was on these psychiatric meds. I find they were puttin' me on psychiatric meds because they didn't know what to do with me. Everytime, I drank I got suicidal and homicidal. And, the only way to control me was to give me more meds, and even that wasn't working. And, even that wasn't workin' after a while."

When do you feel you were at your best?

"Probably, when I got out of the group home, and into the partial living on my own. I seem to get better the more freedom I had, of my own. With taking care of myself, as far as financially, and living with myself."

What do you think is the greatest obstacle you overcame, to get where you are today?

"This is actually...I wouldn't know if there was any particular one...you know... there were a series of obstacles. While it's just a matter...you know...it wasn't really...I seen it as an obstacle. As far as they were unfortunately giving me psychiatric meds. I was on three or four anti-depressants or three or four anti-psyches [anti-psychotics.] And...anti-anxiety meds. It was to the point where I was on twelve to fifteen different psychiatric meds...At one point in time...And it seemed like they were just feedin' me meds because they just didn't know what to do. If they had just taken the drugs and alcohol out of the picture. When I say drugs I mean street drugs, [illicit drugs.] cocaine, heroin, and marijuana. Besides the prescriptions that I was on."

Do you feel comfortable telling me your psychiatric diagnosis?

"Well, my psychiatric diagnosis...I have had a few different ones over the years...because everytime I felt like drinkin' or druggin' I got a different diagnosis. The major diagnosis was major depression with P.T.S.D. and suicidal and homicidal tendencies, and also the fact I have drug and alcohol addiction."

It sounds like you have a dual diagnosis...

"Yes."

Do you want to expound on what that is like?

"While...again...it's like I said earlier...every time, I use drugs or alcohol...I get mentally worse...mentally ill. You know to the point where I was bouncing off the walls between the drugs and the alcohol. And the prescription drugs...you know...It's like a dog chasing its tail. [Robert laughs.] You know. They would give me more meds to calm me down, and then I would drink and need more meds. It was like a non-ending circle."

Do you think people have a preconceived notion of what a mentally ill person looks and acts like?

"I think in one point in time people may have looked at it differently than they do now. I think people are more understanding of mentally ill people, nowadays. I think years ago they used to look at it that people should be locked in a room and forgotten about. Where as nowadays in society they try to help them more. As far as understanding the illness and taking care of it. For the most part."

Do you feel comfortable telling me how many hospitalizations you had? Were you in the revolving door?

"Everytime I used alcohol I had a suicidal. Everytime I relapsed I would get suicidal. When I came into Advocates in 2001...for about five years... I would say maybe about a half a dozen hospitalizations a year. Between twenty and thirty short term

hospitalizations. Well, no. within the last seven years I've been with Advocates. I would say close to twenty. Since, I stopped using alcohol and drugs, for the last two years I haven't had any hospitalizations."

What helps you manage your symptoms, keep them at an absolute minimum, control them as much as possible?

"While...I know for me...I am a very isolative person...I just like to be alone sometimes...I find for me just keeping busy...like I said...I work full time...go to school part time...I go to a lot of meetings, and even like my job...I try to talk to people, more than I need to...as much as possible...I have a lot of friends in AA, which is one of the programs I belong to...I talk to [them] on a regular basis."

What kind of support network do you have out in the community?

"I have AA and NA, [narcotics anonymous.] that I go to on a regular basis. I have a therapist that I talk to once a week. I see her once a month, once every other month. I have my one-to-one staff "Terry," that I talk to on a regular basis."

So, you see a psychiatrist and a therapist regularly?

"A therapist, I don't see a psychiatrist now, because I am not on any prescriptions. Right now, I am not on any psychiatric meds at all."

How has Advocates helped you as a person achieve your goals?

"Well, I think Advocates has helped me become more stabilized. It's taken me a little bit of time, but I am at a point right now that I may be out of Advocates within a year or two."

Are you going to move into your own section 8? [Apartment.]

"While I actually live in the house by myself now, that I lived in for almost two years. I am working full time and making pretty good money, I have managed to get off all the psychiatric meds. I am off of social security. I work full time. So, I am almost to the point...I am with Advocates now for financial purposes-you know-and also for the therapist I see."

You don't receive SSI or SSDI?

"I am off SSI and SSDI as of December of this last year. [2007]"

It sounds like you have come a long way. Do you think you can help others on their journey, or road to recovery?

"I would like to. It's just a matter of finding the time. A lot of people don't understand that they're not in a predicament for the rest of their lives. Some people just don't understand. Like I was always in a position where I thought I was never going to work again. I expected to be on social security the rest of my life. I mean here I am off it almost a year. I find encouragement is very helpful to people. You know."

Do you think I left anything out during the interview that you wanted to say to people, say to Advocates, say to...

"No, I want to thank all Advocates staff for all the help they've given' me. You know. And I can't think of anything else right now. No."

Alright, great! Thank you very much, Robert! It was a pleasure interviewing you!