

# Drop-in Center for Homeless Mentally Ill May Close

## John Heuss House in Lower Manhattan Possible Victim of Budget Cuts

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By **Carl Blumenthal**

John Heuss House occupies the basement of 42 Beaver Street in the financial district of lower Manhattan but it is filled with the commotion of an extended family on many floors. Since 1988, some 35 staff have served an average of 150 homeless, mentally ill clients at this 24/7 drop-in center.

Chances are 50/50 that by June 30 John Heuss will close its doors, the very doors which sheltered the public during the 9/11 disaster. Now that the terrorist tide is receding, John Heuss House faces another kind of attack-the Bloomberg Administration is threatening to eliminate the house's \$2 million budget. The irony is that while City Hall has subsidized Wall Street firms to remain in lower Manhattan, one of the reasons such firms have threatened to leave is homeless people on the streets. The other Catch 22 is that as tax revenues fall in a recession, affordable housing construction grinds to a halt. Then John Heuss House is blamed for not housing the homeless.

John Heuss House has the following mandate: "to break the vicious cycle of homelessness and re-home the homeless, especially those most frail, vulnerable and resistant to services. We interrupt a person's homelessness at whatever level they can be reached and then tenaciously, unflaggingly, move that person at whatever speed and by whatever means possible toward becoming a full, contributing member of his/her community, empowered to help and be helped by others."

### **Art Therapy Saves Souls**

With her Friday afternoon theater group, Bronwyn Rucker strives to "interrupt a person's homelessness at whatever level." She bounds around the room in her paint-spattered lab coat like a pinball, trying to make contact with clients who are alternately cooperative, indifferent, or antagonistic. Most of all, she must contend with the weariness of the homeless mentally ill. The combination of psychotropic

medications, inhospitable shelters, and dangerous streets would turn anyone into a zombie. Says Bronwyn, "My job is to get people riled up."

Rucker is a social worker and theater director. (The program at John Heuss House also uses art and dance for those who are nonverbal.) She founded Meltdown, a Brooklyn group of teenagers who use drama techniques to address issues such as mental illness, substance abuse, distrust, and dissatisfaction. Bronwyn's goal is to engage clients through the arts and support groups...to vent frustration, build trust, encourage participation, help clients identify who they are and what they need. Then the case workers can take over and help the clients find housing and jobs. She calls this process "supportive counsel."

While Bronwyn searches for scripts and props, I explain to whomever will listen that New York City Voices is a newspaper produced by mentally ill people for mentally ill people. They respond to the message of recovery with their own turn-around tales (after all Wall Street is the land of Horatio Alger).

Sarah Messina says that drugs triggered her mental illness and got her thrown out of several shelters. Now she's on probation for drug possession. She takes medication twice a day. She says, "I feel like a real person. I keep clean. I'm not a bum. I deal with my mental illness every day....Like anybody else, I need love." She dreams of the day when she will have nice clothes, such as a pair of jeans for every day of the week. But today she is upset because her SSI check has not arrived and she has to wait five days for it.

Richard Smith is from Georgia where, he states, "there is no support for single people or childless couples." Apparently he's swallowed the bitter pill "that psychiatry is the only medical profession where the patient can be handcuffed and escorted by a cop. If you have heart disease, you don't blame the criminal on heart disease. At least you can come here and not be judged. It's a blessing. So many cities use this kind of place for storage, putting people in jail when they need a resume. I'm using this as a stepping stone to elevate myself."

### **A Healing Community is a Productive Community**

Bronwyn calls John Heuss House a "healing community." Today's prescription includes acting out a play written by clients about self-help for depression and videotaping clients' pleas to the mayor to keep the healing community alive. Alvin reminds the Mayor that the Statue of Liberty is just out the door with its message of "give me your poor, your tired, your downtrodden. If this place is closed, it will extinguish the little flame of hope." (To help, call 212-785-0770.)

Another project of the drop-in center originated after 9/11. Called "Survival NYC" or "The Homeless Prevention Project," including

dialogue, poetry, and songs, it is a form of psychoeducation, a vehicle for the self-esteem of the downtrodden, at a time when the whole city felt down in the dumps. At last the homeless, mentally ill had something to teach the rest of us, which is how to turn homelessness inside out.

Here's an excerpt by Raymond B.: "No matter how much money you make or have, when Wall Street was covered by debris as well as madness, many Wall Street employees came to John Heuss drop-in center to avoid destruction of WTC unaware JHH has always been a safe place...we hope that Wall Street does not forget the little red door at 42 Beaver Street. May we all find a safe Haven. God Bless America."