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IRISHMAN FINDS CALLING Founds housing group to help homeless

BY JESSICA LYONS

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Ireland native and Forest Hills resident Svein Jorgensen came to the United States looking for work opportunities and eventually found his calling at a non-profit organization that provides homeless people, many of whom have other issues, with transitional housing.

"The economic situation in Ireland at that time was dire," Jorgensen said of leaving for the United States in March of 1986.

For the first two or three weeks, Jorgensen stayed with relatives in upstate New York. However, he found few job opportunities and soon moved down to Long Island, hoping to find work in either construction or the hotel industry.

Jorgensen worked painting apartments in New York City for a few months before getting on job on the midnight shift at the Martha Washington Hotel in July of 1986. He soon started doing night auditing and then went on to work on the morning shift. He eventually was an assistant manager and then manager of the property, which had 451 rooms and was for women only.

While at the Martha Washington Hotel, Jorgensen saw the struggle that many of the women went through.

"That's kind of how I got my introduction into how close so many people are to really being homeless," Jorgensen said. "That became a real eye opener for me - something that stayed with me till now and will for a very, very long time."

Jorgensen's work at the hotel also first exposed him to people with AIDS. A friend at the hotel contracted the disease and eventually died from it.

After leaving the Martha Washington Hotel in 1996 and taking a short break, Jorgensen interviewed for a position with the newly formed non-profit organization Praxis Housing Initiatives, Inc. Clients are referred to the organization by the Human Resources Administration.

They provide transition to those who have been homeless, have substance abuse problems or have HIV/AIDS, among other issues.

Praxis has four facilities, three in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn. Among the services they provide are emergency supportive transitional housing, independent living skills development, health services and referrals, HIV/AIDS treatment, adherence education and support, case management services, syringe access services and overdose prevention training, hepatitis education and referrals, housing placement assistance, educational and support group services and vocational and educational services.

"I love being involved with seeing our clients' transition from homelessness to permanent housing," said Jorgensen, who lives in Forest Hills with his wife Harumi and 14-year-old daughter Michelle. "The greatest joy I get on a personal level is when these clients have moved from our facilities and moved into their own independent living."

Although Jorgensen started out as a consultant with Praxis, he again worked his way up the ladder and has been the Chief Operating Officer for about the last year. His duties include overseeing the site directors, the director of operations and getting reports from the contract manager.

Jorgensen is also currently active in development that is going on with Praxis. All of the Praxis facilities are leased and they are looking to purchase land and develop their own sites over the course of the next five years.

Jorgensen said that it is a joy to work with the others at Praxis, who he said are dedicated, passionate and committed.

"I don't see it so much as labor," Jorgensen said of his job. "This is something that you see the results of your work on a day-to-day basis. I'm fortunate to have this kind of job."

To find out more about Praxis Housing Initiatives, Inc., visit www.praxishousing.org.



THE QUEENS COURIER/Photo by Jessica Lyons

Forest Hills resident Svein Jorgensen came from Ireland in 1986 and is now the Chief Operating Officer of the non-profit organization Praxis Housing Initiatives.

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