

Getting Walter Out of Queen Street

Laurie Bell tells how friends help out where experts fear to tread

I met Walter six years ago, while I was at university. He hung out in the library at my college, and would come to the cafeteria for coffee and to listen to the jukebox. Walter didn't have a place to live, nor did he have any income. He had been through the psychiatric system and had landed on the street, making the rounds of hostels.

I immediately loved Walter's wry sense of humour, and we soon discovered that we had similar tastes in music and literature. Soon Walter was visiting my house regularly — grabbing a shower, a hot meal, a place to sleep; watching the hockey game. For a couple of years we carried on this way until, suddenly, Walter disappeared. He never came around campus, and he didn't come to the house. Nor could I find him at any of his other usual hangouts.

It was more than a year before I heard from Walter again. Finally he phoned from the Queen Street Mental Health Centre. Myself and three other friends from school, who were also close to Walter, started to visit him at Queen Street and to invite him home for dinner, or out to a

movie or play. I also began to meet with Walter's case-worker and psychiatrist, to look at the prospects for his release. Soon Walter began to spend weekends at my house, where I lived with four other people. And in July 1985, Walter moved in with us.

There were a lot of great times over the next year and a half. But there were also many things about living communally, in a very full and busy household, that weren't Wal-

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ter's cup of tea. In October 1986, he asked to be brought to the hospital.

Almost from the moment Walter was back in Queen Street, Nicki, Peter, Ann Marie and I, his closest friends, began to explore housing possibilities for him. The search for housing has been long and frustrating, but incredibly educational for the four of us. We have been brought face to face, not only with the

general housing crisis in the city of Toronto, but also with the discriminatory practices toward, and complete absence of housing options for, a person who has been psychiatricized and therefore carries around the label "mentally ill."

I want to outline our six-month search. It will be a familiar story to anyone who has been through this system. But it is also a bit unique, because Walter had four friends committed to finding him housing that he wanted. From what I could see, no one else on Walter's floor at Queen Street had anyone in their life who was doing this kind of legwork on their behalf. The last six months have given us an appreciation for people who are all alone in the psychiatric system. We know that, if it was this difficult for five of us working together, it is virtually impossible for someone who is completely alone, with no one to rely on except people working in the psychiatric system.

Walter told us that he wanted to live somewhere where he would be free to make his own plans, to come and go as he wanted. First we looked into a number of houses for people leaving institutions. All of these houses had rules that would inhibit

Walter: curfews, mandatory programs and mandatory therapy. We passed on all of them.

We had a meeting with Walter's case worker and psychiatrist, and a member of Queen Street's housing department. None of them had anything better to suggest than boarding houses in the Queen Street area. Walter had

already been that route, and it hadn't worked out. There were too many people forced to live in small, run-down quarters.

I contacted the Community Housing Support Service to see if they had any creative ideas. I was basically told that Walter had no choice but to live in a run-down rooming house. The worker suggested that a paint job and some pest control would make it



Left to right: Laurie Bell, Walter Murphy, Nicki Monahan. Photo by Cathie Archbould

bearable. When I said we wanted something better for Walter, I was told that our "expectations" were unrealistic. Rooming houses were supposed to be Walter's lot in life. The worker suggested that I was placing my middle-class values on Walter.

This infuriated me. It was Walter, not I, who had decided how he would like to live. And is it only middle-class people who want to live somewhere clean, and free of rodents and cockroaches? Is it only middle-class people who want a home they won't get evicted from at a moment's notice?

We finally gave up on the experts. We began instead to tell everyone we knew that we were looking for a place for Walter to live. It was only then that things began to come together.

Nicki, one of our group of friends, had a roommate move out of her apartment May 1. We got Walter discharged, and he moved in temporarily. Nicki and Walter shared the apart-

ment for two months. On July 1, Nicki was leaving for the summer, so I arranged to have someone sublet my apartment for two months, and moved into Nicki's place with Walter.

Meanwhile, a friend told us about a new building of bachelor apartments that was under construction downtown, which would be run by Homes First, a non-profit housing organization for low-income singles. She introduced Walter and I to a woman who has been helping people who are presently homeless organize to move into the new building. Walter joined this group and, when the building is completed this fall, he will move into his own apartment.

Getting Walter out of Queen Street has been a maze of Welfare, Family Benefits Allowance, case managers and psychiatric assessments. More than anything, it's been a long search for housing.

I believe we were able to find good places for Walter to live because of our commitment to satisfy

his desire, our determination to have him live in a non-segregated, non-institutional place, and our ability to tap our personal connections in the community for leads.

Nicki, Walter, Peter, Ann Marie and I have what often seems rare in the world of psychiatric institutions: a strong, committed friendship. This helped us to overcome the many obstacles preventing people from getting good housing. We were able to do what no expert could.

We're planning to throw a shower and a house-warming party when Walter moves into his bachelor pad. It will be one hell of a celebration.