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Organization Gives Hope To Long Islanders

By:Robert Vargas

01/30/2008

Just three years ago, Juanique Rhodes felt hopeless. She was a drug addict, a prostitute, someone who knew well the inside of a jail cell. Two decades of sleeping in cars had hardened her. But now, she is a sober, working mother who recently was promoted at her job, and she wants others to know how she bridged the gap that at one time seemed so wide.

Rhodes, 39, credits her recent renaissance to two things: her three-year-old daughter, Emma, and Community Housing Innovations, Inc., a non-profit organization that put a roof over her head when she needed it the most.

Community Housing Innovations has taken in thousands of homeless Long Island residents since its inception in 1991. Currently, the organization owns and manages nearly 500 housing units in Suffolk, Nassau, Westchester, Dutchess and Ulster counties.

In May 2005, after the latest of many drug arrests had her facing three to seven years in jail, Rhodes was sent from the Nassau County Jail to Phoenix House, a nationwide drug rehab center. After defeating her addictions, she was granted custody of Emma, whom she had left at the hospital at birth, and began a new life after CHI had provided her with a rent-controlled apartment.

"The moment Emma was turned over to me in Family Court, I knew that I had to be a responsible parent and find a safe place for us to live," Rhodes said. "It was hard to learn how to be a mom, especially with a child who didn't know me and who I didn't know at all. We were like complete strangers at first, but we did it and now it's like we've never been apart."

Rhodes, who resides in Ronkonkoma, works for Phoenix House, having risen from a clerk position to administrative assistant. She said that Emma, who was conceived while she was still a prostitute, was the impetus for setting her life straight but that she couldn't have done so without a home.

Despite her experiences, Rhodes said she is just one of many who find themselves faced with drugs and other problems. "My story is not unique," she said. But she expressed gratitude that CHI stuck with her during a time when she had no money and no job. Since becoming a CHI tenant in 2006, Rhodes has not only secured full-time employment but has been nominated for an excellence award at her job, has caught up with her bills and has earned a high school diploma.

"It's important that low-income, hard-working individuals such as Juanique have affordable housing and an opportunity to be self-sufficient," said Rosemary Dehlow, CHI's Long Island director. "Juanique now effectively manages her life, and affordable housing facilitated that."

CHI is funded by state, federal and local grants, and over the past decade they and 11 other partner organizations have received more than \$8 million through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Supportive Housing Program. CHI also has raised \$1.5 million through Nassau County's Office of Housing and Intergovernmental Affairs and an additional \$3.5 million from private lenders.

"Instead of developing large facilities for homeless families with disabilities, we locate apartments and houses within stable communities. In this way, the community is not impacted and the residents benefit from living in a normal neighborhood setting," said CHI Executive Director Alexander Roberts.

Supportive housing in New York State continues to grow. As part of his 2008 budget, Governor Eliot Spitzer on January 22 proposed a \$400 million Housing Opportunity Fund, a plan that will subsidize affordable and supportive housing across the state, especially for those with physical disabilities and mental illnesses.

"To grow and prosper together as one New York, we must ensure that our citizens have access to quality affordable housing," the governor said in a statement.

As for Rhodes's future, she said that she plans on staying at Phoenix House in order to "soak up" whatever knowledge she can.

"God's been good to me," she said.

To find out more information about CHI, visit the organization's website at www.chigrants.org or call 475-6390.