A Man of the World, Once Homeless, Finds Caring Community

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—Erik Rogers



Sam (left) with his case manager, Erik Rogers.

Sam, a client in The Connection's Pendleton House Level II program, is a man of the world. Born in Ghana, West Africa, he's lived in Paris, Rome, and England, and in addition to English speaks French and Creole fluently. "I love to travel and talk to people from many different countries and cultures," he says. "My father was with the UN; his job took us to many different countries and places."

Sam has been homeless—in the early 1980s in New York City, and again in 2013-2014 in New Haven. The Pendleton House program, which for the past three years has provided the foundation on which Sam is again rebuilding his life and recovery, is a multi-tiered therapeutic residential program for homeless adults with a dual diagnosis of substance use and mental illness. Individuals accepted into the program begin in an engagement program to get to know the other clients and staff by attending program groups in the weeks prior to moving into Pendleton House. Earlier this year, Sam moved to a sober house in the community, continues to receive the core services offered Level I clients and is learning additional Level II skills, such as negotiating and maintaining a lease and establishing congenial relationships with landlords. These practical skills will help Sam as he prepares to move from the sober house to his own apartment.

Sam is a man of deep faith whose friendliness, generosity, and love of many people and cultures allows him to make friends easily. His journey from diplomat's son to client of The Connection has been long, filled with periods of substantial struggle and also periods of remarkable grace.

Eric Rogers, Sam's case manager says, "Sam is the most selfless person I know. There have been times when Sam would offer me things, like food and gifts, even though it was all he had. Fortunately, I wasn't able to accept them. But others have. For Sam to offer all that he has to somebody says so much about the person he is."

Sam's gifts of selflessness and generosity are often what have gotten him into trouble.

Sam and his siblings—three brothers and three sisters—grew up mostly in England. While his siblings all still live in England, Sam moved to the United States in 1978. He came because he was having difficulty finding a

vocation that suited him and his father thought he would benefit from the training programs offered by the Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC) of America, an organization established to create job training opportunities for African Americans. Sam's first stop in the U.S. was New Jersey, where he took an auto mechanics course. He later moved to New York City.

He also fell in love with a young woman and was filled with hope. But when the relationship ended, he began to struggle.

"I turned 21 in September, 1978. By October I was lost," he says.

Without family or true friends in the United States, Sam began turning to drugs to address his loneliness, and soon became addicted to alcohol. He also used marijuana and crack cocaine recreationally, but fortunately never became addicted to crack. Sam eventually found recovery through Teen Challenge, a faith-based program that works with youth, adults, and families struggling with addictions and other life-controlling issues. His success in the program led to his becoming a student supervisor, and he was transferred to Vermont, where he lived for many years. In 2013, Sam was in his fifties, and Teen Challenge decided it was time for him to move on, transferring him to the Teen Challenge program in New Haven.

His experience in New Haven was not so successful. Because he knew no one, he quickly fell in with the wrong group of people, began using again, and soon became homeless. A back injury took him to the emergency room, where doctors determined that he needed to be hospitalized to treat his addiction and mental health issues. When he was discharged, Sam began seeing a therapist at the Connecticut Mental Health Center. She referred him to the Pendleton program.

Sam has become known among his friends and staff at The Connection as the "Coconut Man" because he crafts beautiful jewelry, charming boxes, and other objets d'art from coconut shells and sells – or more often gives – his to his friends, or makes them on commission for those whom he does not know so well, but who admire his work.

Sam crafted his first coconut in a high school art class in Ghana. His work was unique and the teacher gave him high marks—he scored 49 of 50— for his creativity, ingenuity, and skill. Although he made a few coconuts over the years, he didn't begin to focus on the craft until after he moved to New Haven.

When he became a part of the Pendleton program in 2014, Sam again began crafting coconuts, presenting his finished work to staff and friends. The admiration and praise he received for the beauty and skill manifest in his work led to his applying for a Consumer Initiatives Grant from South Central Peer Services, a division of Continuum of Care. The grant allowed him to purchase a sanding machine and other tools needed to smooth, polish, and cut the shells.

As a Pendleton Level II client, Sam is working toward independence and hopes one day to have a room of his own in a house where he can continue to craft his coconuts. Sam's main source of income is doing painting and odd jobs for Mr. G, a parishioner at St. Paul Union AME (American Methodist Episcopal) Church in New Haven. Mr. G. has been an enormously positive influence in Sam's life. The day they met, Mr. G invited him to go to an AA Fellowship and also gave Sam a job painting some property he owned. Sam soon joined the church and began volunteering there in various capacities at the church, including assisting in teaching a Bible Study class.

As Sam prepares to move into a room of his own, he continues to work for Mr. G, attends St. Paul's AME Church regularly, remains a part of the AA Fellowship, and volunteers in other roles that are needed and useful.

"It's a journey working with Sam. I'm the youngest person on staff and everyone teaches me something," Erik says. "You can learn a lot from Sam—he' been all over the world." Erik pauses a moment and adds, "I wish I had the skill to make the coconuts."