

Gathering strength

Allston hoarder works hard to overcome her addiction

By Tenley Woodman | Sunday, August 22, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Lifestyle

August is a risky time of year for Jennine.

"I live in Studentville. They throw out such good stuff. I have to walk by sometimes," said Jennine, an Allston resident who who asked that her last name be withheld.

"I've been a hoarder my whole life," said the 59-year-old.

Fifteen million other Americans share Jennine's compulsion to collect and store unnecessary items, according to a 2008 study from John Hopkins University.

Last month, a Bellingham couple were found dead in their home filled with wall-to-wall clutter.

Jennine is determined to avoid a similar fate.

A Buddha sits proudly next to other deities atop the television in her tiny two-bedroom apartment. Countertops are full of candlesticks and dishes. Any free surface is covered with knickknacks.

To the outside eye, it's a mess.

For Jennine, it's progress.

The Boston-born ex-nurse has worked with social workers and therapists for seven years to reduce clutter.

"It's not like those shows where one week it's this way," Jennine said during the Herald's visit to her home. "I have a village that helps me survive."

MassHousing estimates 2 to 3 percent of renters in Massachusetts are hoarders.

Jennine credits her Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership (MBHP) case worker Jesse Edsell-Vetter and clinician Christiana Bratiotis, director of Boston University's hoarding research project, with helping her weed through the mess.

"There's not a cure. It's very much like alcoholism. The name of the game is managing it," Edsell-Vetter said.

In Massachusetts, hoarding is a leading cause of eviction, according to MBHP.

Since working with Edsell-Vetter and Bratiotis, Jennine has passed housing inspection four years in a row.

"With a lot of hoarders, the motivation waxes and wanes. She wants her house to be an enjoyable space. Sometimes people can't even imagine decorating or hanging things on her walls. Jennine had a time in her life where she didn't live like this, so that helps with her motivation," Bratiotis said.

How it began

"I was really independent. I was a nurse. I owned my own house," said Jennine, now unemployed. "I dreaded these visits from (Edsell-Vetter and Bratiotis), the shame of dealing with my landlord. When I walk in the house now I don't hate myself."

Jennine's abuse of drugs and alcohol made it impossible for her to work. By 1996, she found herself battling her addictions and an increasingly dangerous hoarding problem.

Years of therapy have helped Jennine understand how a childhood trauma, which she would not describe, contributed to her addictions and hoarding.

Getting out from under the mess

"You couldn't walk in the door," Jennine said. "My landlord was not happy."



Photo by Arthur Pollock

“I would collect chairs, vacuums. You didn’t see the nice stuff,” she said. “My bedroom, you could walk in an inch. (It was) just like you see in the programs.”

That was before Edsell-Vetter and Bratiotis intervened.

Defining success

“Hoarding is like an addiction. It is a day at a time,” Jennine said.

When they first started working together four years ago, Edsell-Vetter saw her up to two times a week. Now Jennine checks in with Edsell-Vetter when she needs help.

“(The clutter) was a way not to deal with stuff,” Jennine said. “I would collect newspapers and magazines instead of dealing with life.

“I finally understand that it’s all about feelings. When I discard something, it brings up a feeling. I’m so glad I’m not at the beginning,” she said.

The process has been slow, but for Edsell-Vetter and Bratiotis, Jennine is a success story.

“It’s been a lot of hard work on her part,” Bratiotis said. “I can’t help (a hoarder) make any progress until they have some insight into the problem, into how severe it is and the consequences of the problem. Her motivation has been extraordinary.”

Jennine still sees Bratiotis weekly for therapy to maintain her de-cluttering routine.

“It is really easy to go back and regress without the programs,” Jennine said. “I know I’ll always need help.”

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