

## Resident Builds a Life in Supportive Housing

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**NEW YORK CITY** - On her first day at work, Carmen Gonzales heard the heavy doors of the jail on Rikers Island clang behind her. A substance abuse counselor to prisoners living with HIV/AIDS, she was nervous— but not about meeting her new clients.

Gonzales had promised herself she would never come back here. Seven years before, she had spent five months in the jail on Rikers Island while awaiting her own trial for selling crack cocaine.



Now Gonzales, 49, returns to Rikers Island five days a week. She received a lot of help on her long journey from addict and convicted felon to career substance abuse counselor, and much of it came from the place where she lives: Dreitzer House. The supportive housing community in East Harlem is designed to provide guidance to residents recovering from addiction and rebuilding their lives.

When she arrived at Dreitzer House in 1999, Gonzales had already completed a drug treatment program, relapsed, recovered, and begun the coursework that would eventually lead to her career.

She had been paroled in 1994 and stayed sober for less than a year before one of East Harlem's dealers offered her two vials of crack in an elevator. Soon afterward she failed a urine test and had to return to prison for 67 days.

### **Starting the recovery process**

In early 1995, soon after her release, she entered a nine-month outpatient drug treatment program at North General Hospital. The program offered many opportunities for its clients to take on leadership roles. Gonzales was soon leading several committees on client life. "I was president of this, chairman of that," she remembers.

She also became interested in becoming a substance abuse counselor herself, eventually taking courses on therapy and pharmacology at The Resource Group, a training institute on Manhattan's West Side, and interning as a counselor.

Throughout her recovery and education, Gonzales and daughter Ashley, now 15, crowded into apartments with a variety of relatives, including Gonzales' mother and sister. Eldest daughter Corinne, now 27, lived with her father, also in East Harlem.

## **Reuniting her daughters**

In 1999, Gonzales reunited her daughters when they moved together to a new two-bedroom apartment at Dreitzer House on East 115th Street. She was delighted to finally have a home of her own. “You can’t beat permanent housing,” she said. Addicts in temporary housing, especially homeless shelters, must struggle with the stress of frequent moves, the lack of a consistent support network, and exposure to people actively abusing drugs.

The 40 tenants at Dreitzer House all support each other. That’s one reason only two tenants have been evicted since the building opened, Gonzales said. When a neighbor was repeatedly hospitalized for drug issues and depression, another resident cared for her son, keeping the boy out of foster care. “It’s like a family,” Gonzales said. “Nobody ever turned their back on her.”

Neighbors were there to help Ashley when she locked herself out of the apartment. When she and her mother baked to raise money for an AIDS walk, neighbors bought 48 cupcakes, twice what kids bought at her school.

And both daughters are succeeding in their educations. Corinne has earned a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and is pursuing a master’s degree. Ashley is a straight-A student, Gonzales said.

## **Staff provides support for residents**

The supportive staff at Dreitzer House gave Gonzales invaluable support as she started her career. The woman who ran the computer center, for example, became a mentor, advising Gonzales as she revised her term papers for college prep classes at Long Island University.

The case managers at Dreitzer House connected her with Dress for Success, which provided her with two suits, a purse, and a pair of shoes to wear on job interviews. Corinne still prizes that black leather purse, and now takes it to her own job as an office assistant in Midtown.

Perhaps most of all, the case workers helped her advocate for herself in a moment of crisis. When Gonzales took her first post-recovery part-time job as a substance abuse counselor, she found she no longer qualified for public assistance health insurance for herself and Ashley.

She considered refusing the job she had worked so hard for. It worried her to leave Ashley uninsured. Also, Gonzales suffers from Raynaud’s Syndrome. Though she hadn’t yet been treated, the disease was already causing pain in her hands.

The case workers at Dreitzer House helped Gonzales find a clinic to provide her and Ashley with health services. After just six months, Gonzales was hired as a full-time counselor with full health benefits.

Another benefit of Dreitzer House for Gonzales: It’s in the same neighborhood where she grew up, just a 10- minute walk from the public housing apartment of her 89-year-old mother on East 122nd Street. Gonzales visits her mother daily, returning some of the support her mother gave in caring for Ashley while Gonzales was in prison.

She also often passes the same spot on East 119th Street where she used to sell and use drugs in the early 1990s, just a few blocks from Dreitzer House’s East 115th Street address. The parking lot where Gonzales used to smoke has been turned into luxury condominiums, but crack users still congregate in the building nearby, especially after dark.

But the career she has built, along with her relationships with family, her neighbors, and her community all give Gonzales a sense of purpose and the will to keep away from the darkened doorway. “I can walk by anyone now,” she said.