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Gail Nichol Pierre on Managing Isolation During COVID-19

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RACHEL LINDY BARON JUNE 17, 2020 @5:36 PM

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BCHS resident Gail Nichol Pierre. Courtesy of BCHS.

Gail Nichol Pierre lives at Navy Green, a housing complex maintained by [Brooklyn Community Housing and Services](#) (BCHS), a Brooklyn-based organization that provides supportive housing for the formerly homeless, as well as case management, mental health counseling, and a wide array of other services.

When Pierre first arrived at the residence five years ago, she was homeless, having lost her job as a legal administrator, and had been in and out of the hospital five times over the span of a year. She's currently disabled. When Pierre arrived at Navy Green, she said, she was, mentally, a mess.

"I didn't want to see anyone," she said. "I didn't want to hear anyone." Pierre left her apartment building one day with her hood pulled up over her head, earbuds in her ears. A simple 'good morning' from a security guard sent her into a rage, she recounted – "I was so pissed."

Life, fortunately, is quite a bit different for her now. "I know it sounds drastic, but literally – this is my home. That's a huge burden lifted off me, because I had no home anymore. I needed to have a home – I needed somewhere to be." It's also a place where her children – she has four, all of them fully grown – can come visit her.

One of the services that BCHS provides for its residents is programming like art and drama classes, which, Executive Director Jeff Nemetsky explained, are aimed at helping residents relearn the kind of interpersonal skills they need to be independent, and to build and maintain healthy relationships. People who have spent years in jail, on the street, or in shelters have been marginalized by their circumstances, Nemetsky said, and need to learn how to be a part of a community again.

Pierre told us that the art classes have been a big part of the relearning process for her.

"It coaxed me back to being in a community again. Being around people again, not being afraid to say hello to someone. It took years for me to get here."

Before the pandemic, she welcomed visits from other Navy Green residents – even people she's never met – who'd greet her as "Ms. Gail", or come to borrow something from her apartment, where she lives by herself.

“People come to my door and ask for the strangest things – a fork! An opener! Milk! And I don’t even know who they are — but apparently the word goes around that I have it,” Pierre said.

This was all before COVID-19, of course.

Now, Pierre said, BCHS has enforced a set of guidelines to keep residents safe. There are no more classes or group activities, and residents (excluding those who live together in suites) are asked to maintain a six-foot distance from one another. The staff now need to ensure that habits they’ve tried so hard to help their residents break – self-isolation, pushing others away – don’t reemerge during the quarantine.

Pierre believes that she and the other BCHS residents are in good hands. She regularly speaks with a BCHS-provided counselor, and has kept up with her art practice, using care packages that the program has sent around to residents, filled with art supplies and other ways to keep them occupied while self-isolating.

Still, despite being an indoors person by nature, Pierre said she’s starting to get stir-crazy.

“I’m ready to get in a cab and go somewhere – do something. I want to go protest, too!”

And, while Pierre’s daughter – now her aid – comes to visit her every day, “you still do need that interaction with adults – you know, non-family members.”

What if this is the new normal, we asked her? “We’re getting a jump start,” Pierre said, laughing.