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Guy: A safe place for traumatized folks who battle mental illness

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Eleisha is friendly and open in conversation even though we've only met once before. She's soft-spoken, candid and confident.

What she's experienced would fill a book. Not a particularly cheery book, either. I won't describe what Eleisha has faced in her 29 years, but we've all seen lists of stress factors: death of a spouse, death of a child, death of a parent figure, victim of a violent attack, trouble with the law, substances. Any one of these personal blows, let alone a combination of them, could lay a person low.

After the multiple tragedies heaped upon her, Eleisha was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression, adding an additional burden: mental illness. But actually her diagnosis helped her to find her way to Alliance House, a friendly and safe place in Salt Lake City for people with severe and persistent mental illness. It has partnered with Valley Mental Health since 1987.

Now Eleisha is going to college. She wants to be a social worker. She's interning with a hospice agency and loves it. She says, "Hospice has showed me a lot about life. All my life I've never been afraid of death but I've been afraid to live. Working with these people, they've showed me how to live. It's been a very humbling experience."

At Alliance House, clients -- called members -- come and go freely from a clubhouse-type environment. While no conventional therapy takes place, members find themselves in an atmosphere that is by

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nature therapeutic. Many members live in apartments near the clubhouse. They choose how they want to participate in keeping the clubhouse going.

Lunch is served every weekday and members may volunteer to be responsible for the meal planning, shopping, cooking, and serving. Others work on a committee that prepares members for jobs in the community. Still others run a small thrift shop. There are sister clubhouses around Utah, around the United States and in other countries, more than 300 in all.

The clubhouse model gives people freedom to be who they really are and inspires their best selves.

Eleisha says, "I always wanted to please, to make people happy. I think that's what ended up

getting me into trouble. I never thought about myself, I always thought about everyone else." She continues, "What's really helped me change is knowing there are people here who support me for me. When I got here, I didn't have to pretend everything was OK. I didn't have to be the clown or the protector or whatever that was; I didn't have to be that anymore."

Eleisha will graduate in May with an associate's degree. She has applied to the University of Utah to work on her bachelor's degree and is also planning for a master's degree and licensure in clinical social work.

I tell her it seems she's one of the superstars of Alliance House. "I wouldn't really say a superstar," she replies. "I would say I've been here almost three years. There comes a point if you come to Alliance House and you know what you're going for, if you really put the effort in and start working for your goals, you get there. I am one of those people, along with many other people, who is starting to achieve those goals."

Eleisha accepts compliments graciously, crediting others when she is praised. She's confident and proud of her accomplishments without being egotistical. She helps other people without losing sight of who she is. She's excited about her future, content with the present, and she's made peace with her past.

She often says very wise things. I leave the clubhouse wondering if it's Alliance House that makes Eleisha look so good or if she makes them look so good. In the end, I suppose it doesn't matter.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. She lives in Salt Lake City.



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