

The life-changing turning points out of homelessness

From the streets to their homes, two men show how hope, agency and community support can make the difference between surviving and rebuilding a life.

Harry Tan

“Home” for 50-something Rafi, a recovering drug addict, was mostly in a drug rehabilitation centre or prison, and later, sleeping rough on the streets.

Not for him the place most of us take for granted – a flat or house where we can sleep, cook and eat, have people over and safely store our possessions. A sanctuary that shelters us, yet gives us “room” to flourish as human beings.

Until now. Rafi, now out of prison and off the streets, finally has a home, an HDB rental flat, one that he is able to live in alone.

Rafi participated in my research on long-term homelessness in Singapore, welcoming me to interview him in his flat. I was struck by how bright and joyful the place felt. The one-room flat had a fresh coat of off-white paint, a matte black ceiling fan, dark-coloured tall cabinets, a white Ikea table, refrigerator, washing machine and two mountain bikes tastefully hung on wall mounts. He fixes bikes as a hobby.

I was deeply moved to hear Rafi speak of his joy when his appeal to live alone in a public rental flat was approved by the HDB. He collected the keys a day before National Day and went straight to the flat, bringing only his own bicycle and some clothes.

The flat was empty and there was minor damage, but it did not dampen his spirit. “To have a place that I can call my own, it felt like something so beautiful,” Rafi said.

RECONSTRUCTING THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

Rafi’s sentiment brings to mind a concept in research into homelessness – the “turning point”. It focuses on the narratives that people experiencing homelessness construct about themselves.

Here, a turning point in a

person’s personal story is where the course of their life changes direction in a significant way, either for better or worse.

Turning points can offer important insights into why some people become homeless while others do not, and why some stay housed while others fall in and out of homelessness repeatedly.

For instance, a group of researchers in the UK identified three types of turning points from personal narratives that enabled people to move on from homelessness.

The first is a personal epiphany – a moment of realisation or insight that some form of change is needed. The second is an identity change, where a person views themselves, in the present, as very different than they were in the past. The third is having a

sense of agency, when people feel that they can take back control of their lives and begin to take action to achieve the desired change.

TURNING POINTS BEGIN IN THE COMMUNITY

In Rafi’s case, his turning points began when he found support at a day drop-in centre for recovering addicts, which gave him a belief in a better future. He first heard of the centre while in prison, at a talk given by the centre’s staff. At the time, he was serving his fifth prison sentence for drug-related offences.

After his release, Rafi slept rough, but he visited that drop-in centre daily. There, he found a community amongst counsellors, social workers and fellow recovering addicts. With their support and encouragement, Rafi realised that no longer being homeless was possible and felt empowered to apply for a public rental flat. “It is not impossible; I can make it. Just hang tough, because I don’t want

to go back to the past,” Rafi recalled.

Rafi persevered through the process of getting all his supporting documents together – including divorce certificate, medical records, letters from counsellors and a psychiatrist’s letter from the Institute of Mental Health – for his flat application and his appeal to live alone. Usually, such flats are co-shared under the Joint Singles Scheme.

THE FRIENDSHIP FACTOR

Another person who has settled down into his own place is Adam, a man in his 60s. He made the extraordinary journey from living on the streets to owning his own home – a two-room flexi Build-to-Order flat.

Adam first experienced rough sleeping in his childhood when his family home was overcrowded. As an adult, Adam again endured prolonged episodes of rough sleeping because of several divorces and depleted financial resources.

Sleeping rough on the streets was demanding because Adam had to stay alert each night, waking up every few hours to check on his belongings.

His turning points came about due to friendship – Adam formed a close bond with an ex-colleague from his previous workplace, and connected with outreach befrienders who visited him at his sleeping spot every week.

The close friend was instrumental in Adam’s transition out of homelessness, providing crucial support that enabled him to make sound financial and housing decisions to rebuild his life.

Instead of renting in the open market, Adam’s friend convinced him to purchase a flat, since Adam was gainfully employed as a cleaner and had enough CPF savings. The same friend also supported Adam through the entire purchase process and devised a savings plan for him so that he could afford the downpayment.

When Covid-19 struck and housing construction was delayed

substantially, outreach befrienders encouraged Adam not to give up, and celebrated birthdays and different personal milestones with him at his sleeping spot.

Adam told me when I visited his flat that the secret to exiting homelessness was to “tell yourself, ‘Never lose hope’”. This sense of agency and his new identity as a homeowner became the crucial impetus behind his resolve to leave the old life behind.

His flat was in a new housing estate that was largely still a work-in-progress at the time of my visit. Almost all the units were unoccupied, construction dust was everywhere, the public transport system was barely up and running – only one bus serviced the estate, and the lift interiors still had their protective film.

Like Rafi, Adam started living there straight after collecting the keys, even though the flat was bare.

His life immediately became a stark contrast to the one he left behind – the privacy and security of having his own home brought relief and peace of mind.

Mostly, Adam appreciated the freedom that his new home afforded – free to go back anytime, free to do anything anytime. “No regrets buying the flat, I just feel very joyful and thankful,” Adam said.

In both interviews, it became clear that the joy that Rafi and Adam experienced was not just about having a home. It was also about having a community or someone alongside them on the arduous journey out of homelessness. More so, it is also about the emotional well-being felt from personal turning points – a realisation that change was needed, that they were in fact different people from the past, and could implement their desired changes with the support of the community.

People experiencing homelessness often go through adverse life experiences and struggles. The ability to find hope in themselves, to experience the care of a supportive community and know that change is possible, and to have a place to call home, are empowering turning points for creating a sustainable life beyond homelessness.

The stories we tell ourselves about the major transitions in our own lives shape how we cope with challenges and stress, and help determine how we see the future and its possibilities – or impossibilities. The lesson here is that it is not just a physical house that keeps people off the streets, but in Adam’s words, the “inside house” of the heart and soul must be maintained, too.

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People experiencing homelessness often go through adverse life experiences. The ability to find hope in themselves, to experience the care of a supportive community and know that change is possible, and to have a place to call home, are empowering turning points, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG