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(F) 19

Fresh start Program lets disabled pursue a 'Whole Life'

By Richard Lech
staff writer

IN MANY WAYS, Ray Schuholz is the same as any other 25-year-old bachelor.

He has his own apartment, which he shares with a friend, in Livonia's Morristown Apartments complex.

He cooks his own meals, whipping up such dishes as spaghetti, tuna casserole and his specialty, meat loaf.

He also cleans house and washes his own clothes.

Five days a week he packs a lunch and heads for his job as a cleanup man at a Livonia office building. The money he brings in helps to pay for such extras as his own telephone and his pet guinea pig, Fred.

On Saturday nights, he hits the bar scene and shows off his dancing prowess.

BUT UNLIKE most bachelors, Schuholz doesn't take his independence for granted.

Schuholz is considered developmentally disabled, but he doesn't like labels.

"I don't believe in labeling," said Schuholz, who got his diploma from Farmington Hills High School through the special education program. "You label yourself something, you're going to be it."

For Schuholz, success is a "package deal" that just because he is developmentally disabled he cannot live independently. Instead of being in an institution or even in a group home, he is living more or less on his own, through a Livonia-based program, the Whole Life Program.

Whole Life participants, and an emergency beeper system is in place in case of emergencies.

But the apartment is considered the participant's "own private domain," a program spokesman said.

"The Whole Life people are there sometimes, but they can't always come out here to your rescue," Schuholz said.

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HIS APARTMENT is one of nine units Whole Life has at Morristown. (There are also three units in the Blue Gardens Apartments complex in Westland.)

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Morristown Apartments," Schuholz said. "Not as disabled, but as tenants."

And being a tenant, he knows, has its responsibilities as well as its privileges.

"For instance, if you blow your music up or have a loud party, you're going to take responsibility for it," Schuholz said. "They can sign a complaint and kick you out like anybody else."

Schuholz has become an enthusiastic spokesman for the Whole Life Program. He has given speeches about its advantages at group homes, even persuading one friend to take a stab at independent living.

"I really like this program," Schuholz said. "It helps you out in your needs. And everybody's needs are different."

STARTED BY Alternative Services, a non-profit corporation, in May 1980, the Whole Life Program has 22 developmentally disabled people placed in apartments. There is a two- to three-year waiting list, said Madeline Maher, one of the program's two assistant coordinators.

The state Department of Mental Health rents the apartments, but the clients pay as much of their other expenses as they can, either with their wages from a job or with their Social Security or General Assistance checks, Maher said.

Participants pay for their own groceries, transportation, personal needs and utility bills. One man even pays

for his own rent with money he earns from various jobs, she said.

To make sure everything is going smoothly for the participants, there are separate meetings weekly with a program counselor and a program aide. The aide discusses their progress on a checklist of activities such as money management, apartment housekeeping, and personal management.

There are also quarterly meetings with the participant's interdisciplinary team — a nurse, psychiatrist, and case manager — to discuss the person's progress.

An outside rights advisor keeps the participants advised of their rights. The residents also can bring up concerns at participants' meetings, Schuholz said.

"He's fairly verbal about what his rights are," Maher said of Schuholz, "and he organizes other people in the group if he feels they're rights are being violated."

SCHUHOLZ SAID he feels his personal growth has been tremendous in the close to three years he has participated in the program. In fact, he even thinks his intelligence has grown with the different tasks he's had to master.

"My IQ has gone up," he said. "I've gotten brighter and smarter."

Schuholz has lived in a Whole Life apartment since August 1981, his first experience at living on his own. Up until age 7 he lived with his grandparents, following his parents' divorce, he said.



He then lived in the Plymouth Center state mental health institution for three years before finally moving in with a foster family, with whom he stayed for 14 years.

"In the institution, when they put people there, they really don't learn anything," Schuholz said. "They leave you alone, let you do your own thing, but they don't teach you anything. A foster care home — they're like your parents. They can teach you how to do things on your own."

Living with his foster family, he said, helped prepare him for the next step — independent living.

"When I first started (in the Whole Life Program), I didn't know what to do," Schuholz said. "Somebody in the

program showed me around, gave me a helping hand."

"The things I've learned since I've been in the program include cooking, budgeting money, self-esteem, and responsibility. If something goes wrong, you're responsible for it."

EACH PROGRAM participant has a set of goals he or she works on, such as learning how to budget money or cook.

Schuholz's latest goals are improving his vocabulary and writing letters. He has written to Gov. Blanchard, state Department of Mental Health director C. Philip Babcock, the Observer, his case worker, and his cousin, among others.

The letter to Blanchard was a thank-you note for certificates of special tribute signed by the governor that were awarded to Whole Life Program participants at a recent recognition night.

"That certificate really touched everybody," Schuholz said. "I know it really touched me."

Schuholz also has worked on becoming more outgoing, with quite a bit of success. Besides giving speeches on the Whole Life Program, he served as an alternate on a state grand jury for a year and also has made a hobby of attending public affairs television shows as a member of

Please turn to Page 4



Schuholz has his two nearest companions — a telephone and a pet guinea pig, Fred — with him in hand.



Schuholz and roommate Bryce Poulton fix something to eat in the kitchen of their apartment. Learning such basic everyday skills is part of the Whole Life Program.



Although the Whole Life apartment residents are on their own, help is never far away. Here Schuholz discusses life problems with Whole Life counselor Donna Hall at the program's center.

Staff photos by Dan Doan