

*“The families of our tenants are very thankful, but there are so many more out there who are in need.”*



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By Meg White

# Enabling New Life in Laura's Houses

Trudy Harsh is creating stable, supportive housing options for mentally ill adults, an effort that promises to reduce homelessness and bolster families.

For 30 years, Laura Harsh was eight years old.

Complications from childhood brain tumor surgery left her developmentally stuck. As she grew into adulthood, Laura bounced in and out of temporary living situations. Her sometimes violent behavior made independent living impossible and time spent in group homes precarious. Persistent health problems meant frequent hospitalizations.

Laura's mother, Ortrud “Trudy” Harsh, GRI, worked hard to find the best schools and treatment options for her daughter, but permanent housing was always a problem. “It opened my eyes to a lot of people who are

just hidden in this society,” Harsh says.

Harsh thought she might use her real estate knowledge to bring change. In 2003, she formed The Brain Foundation to create supportive housing for the mentally ill in Fairfax, Va. But by 2006, it looked as if Harsh's dream might fizzle for lack of funding. “By the time Laura got ill and died [at age 38], I was the only member of The Brain Foundation,” Harsh said.

Though unable to find a solution for Laura, she remained determined to help others. At Laura's funeral, she requested donations in lieu of flowers. A real estate investment partner from early in Harsh's career

responded with a \$50,000 donation. Harsh leveraged the funds to buy the first of six Brain Foundation–run homes for the mentally ill. Collectively, they’re known as Laura’s Houses.

Mental illness is often a prelude to homelessness. That’s why parents whose adult children live in a Laura’s House are quick to sing Harsh’s praises. “If I could nominate her for sainthood, I would,” says William Kreher, whose 41-year-old son was one of the first Brain Foundation tenants. Because Kreher refused to put his son out on the street, where he would be given higher priority as a homeless applicant, the family had been sitting on a housing wait list for 18 years.

The Krehers had searched for stability for their son, who has bipolar disorder, ever since his removal from a school that was ill-equipped to deal with his overwhelming problems. “He has come a long way as far as being self-assured. He does his own cooking; he’s doing his own wash,” Kreher says. “[The residents of Laura’s Houses] are actively contributing to society, which they probably couldn’t do if they were living under a bridge somewhere.”

## ‘Where We Can Help’

Providing so-called supportive housing is multifaceted. Harsh fills the shelter gap by purchasing, furnishing, and maintaining Laura’s Houses. She leaves the needed health services to partner organizations.

Beyond simply providing shelter, Harsh aims to create stability. She chooses residents carefully and keeps the homes well-maintained so Laura’s Houses function like any other home in the neighborhood. “Supportive housing faces particular hurdles because society is so unaccepting and fearful of people with brain diseases,” Harsh says. “[But] people do care if they understand the situation.”

Harsh also actively seeks to lessen the stigma of mental illness by sharing her experiences in public forums. Ron and Lin Wilensky heard about the foundation at one of Harsh’s speaking engagements. Lin’s late brother Dave suffered from schizophrenia and was in and out of hospitals, receiving crisis care regularly until he moved into permanent, supportive housing. After hearing Harsh talk, the Wilenskys were inspired to replicate her model in Florida. With Harsh’s coaching and use of The Brain Foundation’s organizational documents, The Brain Foundation of Florida and Dave’s Houses were born. The Florida model differs slightly from Harsh’s. The foundation buys Dave’s Houses and then gifts them to mental health care partners to run. The Wilenskys have shown that Harsh’s model can be reproduced under various circumstances.

“Mental health care funding is pretty abysmal here,” says Lin. “That’s why we, as private citizens, need to get involved.”



From 2009 to 2012, states cut more than \$1.6 billion from mental health services, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Harsh says housing needs are becoming more acute nationwide as closed mental institutions are not replaced with alternatives. “We lack supportive services in the community,” she says, noting the wait list of one group that refers residents to The Brain Foundation contains more than 500 names.

Harsh has secured donations and grants for three more houses, which will enable her to provide stable housing for 12 more people in 2013. “There’s still limited housing,” Kreher says. “Trudy is on her own campaign to resolve that. But it’s going to take a whole lot of Trudy Harshes because the need is tremendous.” ■

The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates 25 percent of homeless people in the United States suffer from severe and persistent mental illness, compared with about 5 percent of Americans overall.