



## 'PEOPLE ACTUALLY LIVE HERE' : A SEMI-LAZY LOOK AT MENTAL HEALTH IN COSAC

By Jordan Gass-Poorè, Texas State University

Sit and watch, sit and watch... That's how Fran Todd's spent the majority of her days for the past two months.

Todd, a Coalition of Security and Charity homeless shelter resident who is diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury, sits in one of numerous abandoned wheelchairs in the shelter's open-spaced lounge area.

There should be a sign that says, "Check your sanity right here," Todd said.

Florida's Council on Homelessness report states that there are 4,055 homeless people diagnosed with a mental health disorder this year in the state, and 120 of them reside in COSAC Homeless Shelter — a facility with a maximum capacity of 200.

Todd is the lounge's Joan Rivers, criticizing fellow shelter residents and staff members, smoking cigarettes (despite the No Smoking signs), sunbathing and taking her medication.

She calls two staff members "The Wrestler" and "cow-tipper lady," because of their physical appearances. They call her "Miss Intelligence," Todd said.



*Being surrounded by mentally ill people may be an environment that manifests and breeds mental illness, or, to Todd, it's just really annoying.*

Her response to some fellow residents' backstories, like the man who said he was being watched by the feds after eating a spray paint laced chocolate bar as a kid, is "I gotta go." It's a response that she said helps her maintain her sanity.

The Barry University alumna, clad in a polo and plaid house shoes, surveyed her lounge surroundings with a hawk's eye.

"People actually live here," she said pretentiously.

To Todd's right was a woman washing her hair with lice shampoo in the sunshine. Facing her was a woman inadvertently exposing her vagina as she fanned herself with the long skirt she was wearing.

And to Todd's left was Anne Marie Rollins (who wouldn't give her last name for unknown reasons), also sitting in an abandoned wheelchair, smoking cigarettes.

Rollins' faded blond hair hung loosely around her freckled tan shoulders as she described the events leading up to her nicotine addiction and marriage, which occurred simultaneously, both detrimental to her health and hard habits to break.

Although Sean Cononie, founder and director of COSAC, said Rollins doesn't have a diagnosed mental illness, that the reason she's prescribed medication is for physical ailments, the reasons



*The scab on Rollins' big toe had recently fallen off, exposing crusted, dry sores, the result of gauze rubbing against it after her ankle mysteriously swelled. Soon she'll tell shelter staff that she needs to schedule a doctor's appointment, but for the time being she waited in the lounge patiently to receive her pills that would help alleviate the pain and swelling in her ankle.*

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Cononie said those residents who receive certain types of prescription medication, like one woman's medication for bipolar disorder, can only receive it at certain times of the day.

"The controlled stuff we monitor closely," he said.

A white, plastic hospital wristband still dangled loosely from Rollins' wrist, a reminder to walk up the shelter's flight of stairs to the second floor to get her pills because she's not used to taking medication.

Instead, there was a time when she wanted to devote her life to administering it. Rollins moved to Florida about 15 years ago from Pennsylvania, where she had picked up smoking and dropped out of nursing school, after her now ex-husband was transferred here for his job with a trucking company. Then they got divorced.

"I quit (nursing school)," she said. "It's really dumb. I could have been making a lot of money right now. That's life. That's my ex-husband's fault."

Self-described as camera shy, Rollins took the time to meticulously cut her head out of all her wedding album photos because she "couldn't take it."

It was a bullet to Rollins' heart that brought her to the shelter and a bullet to Todd's head.

Todd said she was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury after a bullet lodged in her brain, where it remains behind her left eye, after someone shot her in the line of duty in 1987.

Cononie said he couldn't confirm if she was a police officer, but that if she had been her disability check would be more.

"The person I was before is not the person you're talking to now," the New Jersey native said. That person wanted to attend law school.

This person, with short, salt-and-pepper hair and tar-stained false upper teeth, now takes prescription Phenobarbital for seizures and and Xanax to take the edge off.

Todd was quick to point out that she's not bipolar, that's her roommate. She just has a bullet to the head. And she can live with that. Just not whiny, crying bipolar residents. Or residents that eat out of trash cans and have "cast-iron stomachs."

That's why Todd says she pays for her own therapist, so she doesn't end up like them. Cononie said a social worker and a mental health therapist visits the shelter occasionally to speak with residents.

In Todd's mind, her neurologist is a life saver and how she talks about Cononie, well, he's the devil. But it's better than being in jail.

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