

# The Phoenix House News

Summer 2001

## Former Resident Jose Rios: Recovering a Passion for Art

These are the words of Jose Rios, age 47, who came to Phoenix House after a lifetime of struggle with alcohol and drugs. His artistic talent, recognized when he was a child, lay dormant for years as he struggle with "addiction and despair" A recent one-man exhibit at a prominent Manhattan gallery has generated great public acclaim and given Jose greater optimism about his future.

I was raised in Harlem. You couldn't walk anywhere and not see people bent over from heroin, kids smoking weed in the park

### Jose Rios: Recovering a Passion for Art

You couldn't walk down my block without running into 10 to 20 alcoholics. I am the youngest of four kids, which made me very independent. The first time I got drunk I was 11 years old. But it was my 12-year-old brother who got caught. That triggered the thought: "I can get away with things!" It was an escape from my surroundings. The other escape was through imagination, looking for shapes in the ceiling cracks overhead, like some folks stare at clouds.

Despite the attention and praise I got for my art, I was basically a shy kid who tried not to attract attention. Even high, I could paint and get my schoolwork done. I was in denial for years. You couldn't tell me I had problems. When I finished high school, my options were to pursue art or to make some money to gain some independence and support myself; I took a series of construction jobs. But a great part of my paycheck went to the drugs. People call this being a "functional addict" But now I can ask, honestly, how "functional" was I when so much that I earned went to drugs? I soon progressed from selling loose joints on the side to cocaine and then heroin.

It was around this time that my daughter was born. Her mother and I made several attempts to live together. What's amazing is that she never knew, through it all, that I was an addict. Not until years later.

When my father, who I hated and loved, passed away. All of the pain that I never allowed out came up. The only way I could cope was, of course, more drugs. I was past the point of trying to maintain any image of being clean. My daughter then was eight years old. I felt that I had to remove myself from her life and her mother's, even my brother's, so they wouldn't see me slide down. It was simple. If they couldn't see what was going on, I could keep lying to myself, getting high without having to look into their eyes and see how I was hurting them.

That's when I became homeless, living on the streets in cardboard boxes for ten years. During most of that time, my motivation, my drive, my primary goal was to get high and say high! I never think about an "old me" and a "new me" Everything I've been through.



"Orgullosa"(Proud) by Jose Rios



Jose Rios Poses at a recent gallery exhibit

Everything that happened to me, made me who I am today. I can acknowledge where I've come from, and embrace it all even the pain!

Today, I see others living on the street, others going through the pain of addiction, and I can relate to them. But I realize that all I can do is say a prayer and move on with my life.

When I finally got to the Phoenix House Bronx facility. I thought they would discharge me in only a few weeks. But mentally, emotionally and even financially, I wasn't ready

I had learned that even if you're committed to positive change, you need all of the tools. Where would I get the tools? From those who had been through what I was going through, like the staff at Phoenix House. Eva, my outpatient counselor, was always there for me when I needed to talk.

You must rely on yourself, be honest with yourself but you don't do it by yourself! We all need support!

There are many positive people in my life, And a lot on my plate. But, at this point, I try to deal with the important things and, at age 47, I'm learning to make choices that are good for me.

Now I can share what I have learned with others at Phoenix House, where many are going through what I went through. What I'm still going through.

