



Profiles

Robbie

By Christine Dinsmore

Robbie* doesn't walk through the streets of Gramercy, Greenwich Village or East Harlem. Robbie struts. With a long, flowing black wig, patent leather heels, head thrown back and heavy makeup emphasizing luscious red lips, Robbie looks more like a 50's sexpot than a liberated, modern 90's woman. Robbie is neither. He is a young man—a cross dresser—living in a privately run group home for homeless teens in the exclusive Gramercy section of Manhattan.

Green Chimneys, a group home for boys who are gay, bisexual and transgendered, has become one of the city's only oases for marginalized runaways and throwaways. It sits relatively unnoticed in this quiet section of the city, an area where elderly Jewish men and women peacefully sit on benches throughout Peter Cooper Village.

The home is a lifesaver for kids like Robbie, whose name has been changed to protect him from abuse. Nearly half of the estimated 20,000 kids on the street in New York City, according to a 1992 Center for Disease Control study, are gay. Homosexual children are often ridiculed and battered by adults and other children because of their flamboyant dress, or their sexual preference. Green Chimneys, in fact, may have saved Robbie's life.

"I came here in August, straight from Lincoln Hospital," said Robbie, a mournful 16-year-old. "I was rushed to the hospital with severe pain from 125th Street and Park Avenue." It turns out that the pain was caused by a severe liver disorder brought on by his use of female hormones. Although he has since stopped using the hormones, Robbie still gets weekly treatments for his liver as an out-patient. He would probably still be on the streets of Harlem, hustling and smoking crack with his mother, if his body hadn't broken down - years before an average body takes its toll.

Robbie is the oldest son of Millie Cruz and a father he doesn't know. His stepfather, Jose Ortiz, abandoned the family about five years ago, leaving Robbie with the responsibility of watching out for his younger siblings, Xiomara, now 14, and Jose, now 12. Millie is a crack addict. She fell back to the street life after a failed attempt to get her life back together.

Millie tried to stay clean after her mother offered her a place to stay in the home she shared with Robbie's uncle in Syracuse, New York. Robbie has fond memories of Syracuse. His grandmother and uncle tried to provide them with stability. His grandmother, a religious woman, did not approve of Robbie's homosexuality, but was still affectionate. He fought his urge to cross dress for fear of her rejection.

Grandmother was loving, but stern, and did not tolerate it when Millie once again began smoking crack and hanging out on the streets. When she finally threw Millie out of the house, the kids followed their mother to a homeless shelter in the Bronx. Once in the Bronx, out of view from his grandmother, Robbie felt free to dress in women's clothes. Shortly after he began adding wigs and make-up to his feminine attire, he started taking female hormones. Eventually, Robbie's younger siblings were placed in foster care after the school reported their erratic school attendance. His stepfather, Jose, is currently in court trying to get permanent custody of Xiomara and Jose, Jr.

With the younger kids out of the picture, Robbie and his mother left the homeless shelter and began to share abandoned buildings in East Harlem. Both became prostitutes and crack addicts together. Had it not been for the consequences of his hormone use - a serious liver disorder - Robbie believes that he would still be with his mother on the streets. In many ways, his abuse of drugs and hormones rescued him from the streets. His doctors reported him to city officials because of the signs of neglect - drug abuse, illness and malnutrition. His mother never visited him in the hospital and officials could not locate her. After a two week stay in the hospital, he was sent to Green Chimneys by the Administration for Children's Services, the latest incarnation of New York City's child welfare agency.

Robbie is still torn between his mother and his survival. On an unusually warm day in January, Robbie went back to his old neighborhood. In many ways, this was a test of how far he had come since last August when he entered the group home and began a 12-step program for his drug addiction. As Robbie got off the Lexington Avenue 6 Train in East Harlem, he gazed around the garbage strewn streets and began his search for his mother. The stench of urine, mixed with the smell of pot, permeated the streets. He walked down East 125th Street pointing out places he prostituted and smoked crack.

Robbie called to the men who passed him, "Have you seen my mother?" They recognized Robbie and each commented on some aspect of his appearance, mostly telling him he looked as if he had gained weight. But no one could tell him where Millie was.

As he reached the corner of Park Avenue and 125th Street, Robbie pointed to the southwest corner. "Here's where my mother and I would work the streets," he said shamefully. He walked under the overhead railroad tracks of Metro North to

an area that was cluttered with dirty blankets, broken bottles and unmated shoes. "Here is where I smoked crack," he said, almost sounding chagrined.

Robbie continued down 125th Street, his hair flowing in the breeze, and greeted his former neighbors warmly. "Hi, Joe. Have you seen my mother?" With each negative response, Robbie's voice cracked and went up an octave as he repeated the question. The bravado he'd been perfecting for years melted as he tried unsuccessfully to keep up the facade. He continued his search.

"My mother sometimes slept here," said Robbie, pointing to an abandoned building on East 125th Street close to Madison Avenue. It was worth a try. After he climbed the rickety stairs and pushed his way through the garbage in the hallway, he banged on the door.

A gruff voice called out, "Who is it?"

"It's me," called Robbie.

"Who's me?" the man barked.

"It's Robbie," the teenager replied.

"It's your son," the man called to the woman inside.

An emaciated woman, with dark circles under her eyes, ran out crying, "My son! My son! My son!"

The two embraced, falling into each others' arms, crying. The woman, with her sunken cheeks and twisted and missing teeth, looked as if she had lived many years longer than her 33 years. Her jet black hair was pulled back with a bandanna and her tight pants looked as if they had been painted on her. Robbie, tear stained, looked more like a five-year-old dressed in his mommy's clothing than the street-tough kid fighting for his right to exist as a cross-dressing gay man.

Robbie, not wanting to say goodbye, lingered upstairs for another 10 minutes. When he returned to the street he had his mother in tow. "Instead of me eating lunch, I'm going to give it to my mother," he said. His mother refused an invitation for lunch. She was afraid to go down the street for fear that she would run into a woman who had threatened to "slice" her up for some violation of street etiquette. So instead, Robbie delivered a container of pork fried rice and two egg rolls to his mother.

As Robbie headed back toward the subway, he boasted that he had overcome his first obstacle - seeing his mother but returning to the group home. He anticipated the outpouring of attention he would get from his 12-step program when they found out about his success in walking away from the streets. "The group's going to be shocked that I went home and didn't get high."

As Robbie entered the subway, he confessed that he had a lot of writing to do in his journal about the day's events. Reflections of his afternoon in his old

neighborhood would fill many pages. He was both sad and relieved to leave his mother and the old neighborhood.

Robbie knew that the struggle between his survival and his loyalty to his mom would continue. But for that day, self preservation won out. He returned to the one oasis for gay teens in New York City.

***Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the subject.**