



## Christmas wish comes true: A home for the holidays

By Hiroko Sato, [hsato@lowellsun.com](mailto:hsato@lowellsun.com)

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LOWELL -- Basking in the sun by the windows in his small studio apartment, Richard Archambault looks out over the snow-covered city streets.

"My buddy is still out there," Archambault says about his friend who he says camps out near the Rourke Bridge on the Merrimack River every night.

Cold air doesn't just blow, Archambault says. It comes into a tent from beneath the ground, piercing through the layers of blankets.

He should know. Archambault used to live in a tent, too. Without a place to call home for the past 2 1/2 years, he tried every possible way to stay warm in the elements.

But today, Archambault has a permanent roof over his head, thanks to Pathfinder Safe Haven, a program designed to help the homeless with mental-health needs. On his chair is a bag of Christmas presents from program volunteers. And on top of his dresser sits a picture of Jesus, who he says carried him through thick and thin.

"I'm just grateful for what I have," Archambault says. "I'm happy to be happy."

Archambault, 58, moved into a 12-unit apartment building on Rock Street in late November, just in time for the holidays. The building is owned by Bridgewell, a nonprofit organization that provides a wide range of services to people with disabilities through its offices in Lowell and Lynnfield. The organization operates the Pathfinder program on the first floor of the Rock Street building, taking care of both those who live there and others who drop in for help.

Archambault knocked on Pathfinder's doors last spring, not long after returning from Clearwater, Fla., to which he had fled for the winter. The Pathfinder program provides 3,000 free meals a month and works with area organizations to offer medical transportation, help with job searches, GED classes and access to showers and laundry.

Archambault had help accessing his Social Security benefits as well as the use of the building address to receive his mail. Most importantly, though, Archambault says, a counselor helped him get medical appointments, and he finally received the right medication for his depression, which stemmed from childhood tragedies.

The future suddenly started looking brighter, he says.

The soft-spoken former factory worker lost his mother at age 4 while growing up in the Acre neighborhood. His grandmother, who took him in, died two years later. He then spent the next six years in the Franco American Orphanage on Pawtucket Street until his father took him home at age 12. Archambault will only say life was tough. He eventually graduated from St. Joseph High School in Lowell and worked for GE and a gas station while helping his father's construction business.

All that time, he said, the blow he felt when losing his mother and grandmother never went away.

"It's a world of problem and pain," he says of his mental state back then.

What he didn't know is that his pain was caused by a clinical problem. Archambault, who divorced at age 29, says depression caused him a lot of problems, leaving him unable to hold jobs for the past 10 years. He was diagnosed with depression in 2006, two years after his 75-year-old father died of a heart attack. By that time, Archambault was moving from a friend's house to another for a couch to sleep on. He then began sleeping along the river.

At Bridgewell in Lowell, up to 50 people walk through the door every day to access Pathfinder's outreach support program. Only 12 men at a time can move into its residential units, half of which are licensed by the state Department of Mental Health and the rest by the federal Housing and Urban Development. Archambault still feels the psychological trauma from his life experiences and admits he starts shaking whenever verbally threatened by someone.

But Program Director Dave Robinson says Archambault hopes having a roof over his head helps instill a sense of stability. Once he sees success in himself, he will get back on his own feet more easily, Robinson says.

Archambault urges the homeless not to give up.

And he tries to heal his wounds one day at a time, reciting his own prayer:

"Thank you Lord for a place to stay.  
Thank you Lord for another day.  
I accept you as my Lord and savior.  
Come into my heart.  
And forgive my sins.  
And help the homeless."

Bridgewell will soon open another 12-unit building on Rock Street..