Haven for the homeless

Nivedita Gowda visits Shraddha Rehabilitation Centre, where mentally ill patients with no place to go find shelter.

A disheveled Sudhir Phadke was found wandering aimlessly at Yogi Nagar in Borivli, muttering to himself. His clothes were in tatters and his hair was matted. Sudhir believed he was a journalist with The Washington Post. After a traumatic 15 years at the Bhawjanam Monti Municipal Corporation, Sudhir, who found himself a madman, fell prey to schizophrenia.

His wife left him, and his friends fled with his money and inhabited his house. Now, Sudhir roams the streets of Borivli, at the mercy of strangers.

Hemant Thakur, a gold medalist and professor at J.J. School of Arts, used to be a social worker and talk like Maqbool Fida Husain. He would often refuse to wear slippers. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, he lost his job. He would often sit on the steps of Jehangir Art Gallery, muttering to himself.

Ras Kulkarni, son of a police inspector from Kasarwadi, was wandering naked on the streets of Borivli. He was very violent when taken in by social workers. He had to be drugged for many days before they started psychiatric treatment on him.

Apart from the fact that Sudhir, Hemant and Khadi were mentally ill with schizophrenia, they have another thing in common: They were all rescued by the Vatwani, the doctor couple that founded Shraddha Rehabilitation Centre for mentally ill roadside destitutes.

It all started 10 years ago, when the Vatwani first spotted a man eating garbage and mumbling to himself. He displayed all the signs of a schizophrenic.

The Vatwani picked him up and put him under psychiatric treatment. After a few weeks, they treated the patient well and taught him to read and write. He had the right to work, but had to go.

His parents in Ambad Pradell were contacted and the patient finally went to his home town.

There are dozens of such inspiring examples at Shraddha.

The Vatwani are finding it extremely difficult to manage their daily expenses. But that is hardly a deterrent to the spirits of this couple.

Recently, they organized an art exhibition and auction of paintings from some of the most renowned painters in India. The tremendous response to the exhibition enabled the foundation to buy its own land at Dahisar and build a day-and-night care centre for the mentally ill.

A set of 10 greeting cards with pictures of famous paintings are sold for Rs. 8 each to raise funds for Shraddha.

But most of the funds for the foundation come from Bharat and Smitha Vatwani's private practice.

The doctors personally escort their patients to their native land and homes. Sometimes finding the correct address is the most Herculean task. This is because most of the patients are uneducated with little or no knowledge of memory about the place they come from. "Sometimes," says Smitha, "they even wonder how they landed up in Mumbai. They have absolutely no recollection.

"These patients are mentally ill. They sit in any train and land up anywhere the train takes them. So it becomes very difficult to trace their village," she says.

Shraddha Foundation presently has three permanent patients. One of them is a woman who was found at Dahisar railway station.

"The satisfaction of seeing people reunited with their families is satisfaction enough" - Smitha Vatwani.

She was violent and throwing stones at passersby. Her husband and family refused to take her home, even after she was cured. She now helps the nursing staff at Shraddha.

Smitha Vatwani divides her time between the nursing home at Borivli and Shraddha at Dahisar.

If that is not enough, she even has three adopted kids at her home in Borivli. Life is busy business for this unusually concerned couple.

I used to find it difficult when I came in the mornings to attend to my patients. Now I come only at the evenings. That way I am free during the day to do whatever I please. And most of the time, I work," says Smitha Vatwani.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A PLAY: A mentally retarded child who was brought in by the Vatwanis became a master at the art of playing the tabla during his stay there.

Picture by Vinayak Prabhu