

A Student of the Mind, With a Brain That Sometimes Betrays Him



Jeremy M. Lange for The New York Times

Hector Grullon at his home in Park Slope, Brooklyn. A victim of seizures since he was 20, he controls them with Dilantin. After an accident, he ran up a debt of \$7,000 and more than \$8,000 in finance charges.

By KARI HASKELL



In Hector Grullon's backpack are items to improve his mind. One is a dog-eared psychology book, "The Power of Your Subconscious Mind."

"I like to study human behavior and I like to evaluate my thinking," said Mr. Grullon, 53, a Brooklynite, explaining why he reads Freud and Jung. In a side pocket of his pack he also carries medication, Dilantin. Two capsules twice a day keep the blood flowing freely through his brain. Without the drug, he is unable to control seizures. Though the books enlighten him about the potential of the brain, they do not explain his condition. Doctors cannot tell him why he began having seizures at 20.

"They don't know why I get them," Mr. Grullon said, rubbing his brow from underneath his pageboy cap. He was sitting in the offices of WeCare, a program for disabled adults to make the transition from welfare to work offered by the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service. The bureau is one of seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

"It has really limited me," he said, slumping down in his chair. Because he does not have a high school diploma and because of his medical condition, he has

toiled long hours for low pay.

And without insurance, his medical care has been inconsistent. Different doctors have prescribed varying dosages of medication. The seizures occur while he is sleeping. That is when he is the most vulnerable, he said. After an episode, he becomes disoriented, and at times he has been unable to work. He has lost jobs, and has had to scramble to find another one. He has painted houses, done maintenance work and polished buckles in a factory.

Money has been tight, but he has always tried to pay his bills. Little by little, he stashed away money. By 2004, he had saved \$3,000, enough to visit his parents in the Dominican Republic. The pot of money that took him so long to save, however, disappeared after a dire accident.

It was a balmy Caribbean night in the village of Montecristi. "I was crossing the street and a motorcycle hit me," he said. When the motorcyclist clipped Mr. Grullon's leg, they both collapsed onto cracked pavement full of potholes.

Mr. Grullon heard the cartilage in his knee crack. "I didn't hit my head, but there was a lot of blood on my leg," he said. His knee was put back together with metal screws. The surgery and five months of rehabilitation cost \$2,500, erasing his savings.

"I ran out of money," he said. "Any

place, even if you have family, any place without money, is tough." He returned to Brooklyn on crutches. He had a difficult time finding work, and he was often having seizures. He started to charge not only his medication but most of his other expenses.

As he got into debt, he had to apply for public assistance. The government aid, plus Medicaid, paid for a room he was renting. But more important, he could go to a doctor, and his medication was covered by Medicaid. And by taking regular dosages again, he stopped having seizures. "I have not had one for over a year," he said.

In 2005, he was ready to learn a trade. He went to WeCare offices in Brooklyn. With the help of the Neediest Cases Fund, he was able to pay \$100 for a three-day training class to become a security guard.

His first five-month assignment was at a Home Depot in May. Now he is on night duty at a Verizon warehouse in East New York. He gets \$9 an hour for 32 hours' work. "It is scary," he said. "But I believe in God and think nothing is going to happen to me."

He continued, "When I got this job, it was something better than public assistance, and maybe I can prepare for something better."

But beneath the optimistic veneer, he has real worries. The late hours could trigger a seizure, he said.

"I am no longer on Medicaid," he said. "Medicaid expects if you work, then you have to pay or go through your company. But I won't get insurance for a year."

He pays \$44 a month for his medication. He has not requested a day assignment because he is afraid that if his employer knew about his condition he might be fired.

Part of his paycheck has been attached to pay off his credit card debts, and he is unable to put aside money for another crisis. His original debt was \$7,000, but he now owes more than \$15,000 because of late payment fees. He said he is considering filing for bankruptcy.

"When I get my paycheck, I don't cash it for two weeks," he said. He pays \$350 rent for a room in a boarding house where he has a microwave oven and a hot plate. He hopes the next assignment will have better hours. "Maybe, maybe I will be lucky," he said, and get a day schedule.

He recited a lesson from one of his books: "You get positive results when you think positive. If you are negative, you get a negative result."

"I will make it," he said. Then his voice softened. "But honestly, I am suffering."