

# MORE THAN WORDS AND INK: Safe Shelter, Too **The House That Trudy Harsh Built**

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“There’s always a bed in jail,” mused Trudy Harsh, founder of the Brain Foundation. Frustrated that the mentally ill in Northern Virginia are winding up in jails and homeless shelters, Harsh was compelled to act, “I’ve never thought of myself as a leader, but there was such a need I decided I’d try,” said Harsh. This passion and leadership quality is what motivated NVAR to nominate Harsh, a REALTOR® with Long & Foster’s Centreville office, for the 2007 NAR REALTOR® Magazine Good Neighbor Awards program. For the last eight years, REALTOR® Magazine has recognized outstanding REALTORS® who volunteer time and energy to improve the quality of life in their communities. Although not selected as a finalist this year from among more than 320 applicants, Harsh’s story is sure to inspire.

There can be no question that Harsh has made, and continues to make, the Northern Virginia community a better place to live. Just ask the four men who live in the house Harsh established for mentally ill adults, or those who attend

her Friday night socials, or the families of the population whom Harsh serves.

Harsh was inspired to launch the Brain Foundation in 2003. She created the foundation after realizing that many families could benefit from its mission. Her own daughter, Laura, suffered a brain tumor as a child, and the resulting surgery left Laura stunted emotionally and physically. Struggling with many quality of life and medical challenges, Laura died at age 38 in January, 2006. During her lifetime, Laura was placed in several institutions for the mentally ill and impaired, none of which completely met her needs. This issue is a recurring frustration for families whose members have mental illness.

## **A Daughter’s Legacy**

Harsh, president of the Brain Foundation’s Board of Directors, recognized an opportunity to fill the housing gap needed in the community by families with similar circumstances. Fairfax County alone has approximately 650

mentally ill people waiting for housing, according to county statistics. Harsh undertook the ambitious task of seeking out and organizing the talent necessary to secure a stock of housing that in 10 to 15 years would be financially self-sustaining.

The Virginia Housing Development Authority granted a loan to the Brain Foundation in 2006 to purchase a house in Fairfax, Virginia. The home was named “Laura’s House” and has been furnished with donated items that Harsh solicited. Plans are underway to purchase two more houses for the mentally ill this year.

## **Home at Last**

Based on relationships developed during her 30-year history with the mental health community, Harsh arranged for Pathway Homes to place residents in Laura’s House and to manage their day-to-day care.

One resident commented that living in Laura’s House is like “living in the Waldorf Astoria in New York.” Another reported that he turned down an invitation to go to his aunt’s

for Thanksgiving because “he would miss [the] house too much.”

For the past three years, Harsh has opened her own home on summer evenings to provide social activities for mentally ill adults. Sensitive to her daughter’s needs to socialize, Harsh created opportunities for these individuals to meet in a caring setting in her home. Harsh hosts these socials, which are supplemented by donations of food and entertainment that she arranges.

According to Van Cooper, Director of Mental Health Residential Services under the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board on which Harsh serves, “[Trudy] is a tireless advocate. She brings more than just words or ink to the table.”

Harsh is committed to making Northern Virginia a better place for all of its residents. Her tireless efforts on behalf of the Brain Foundation, while continuing to pursue her real estate career, make her an exemplary role model as a community leader in Northern Virginia.