

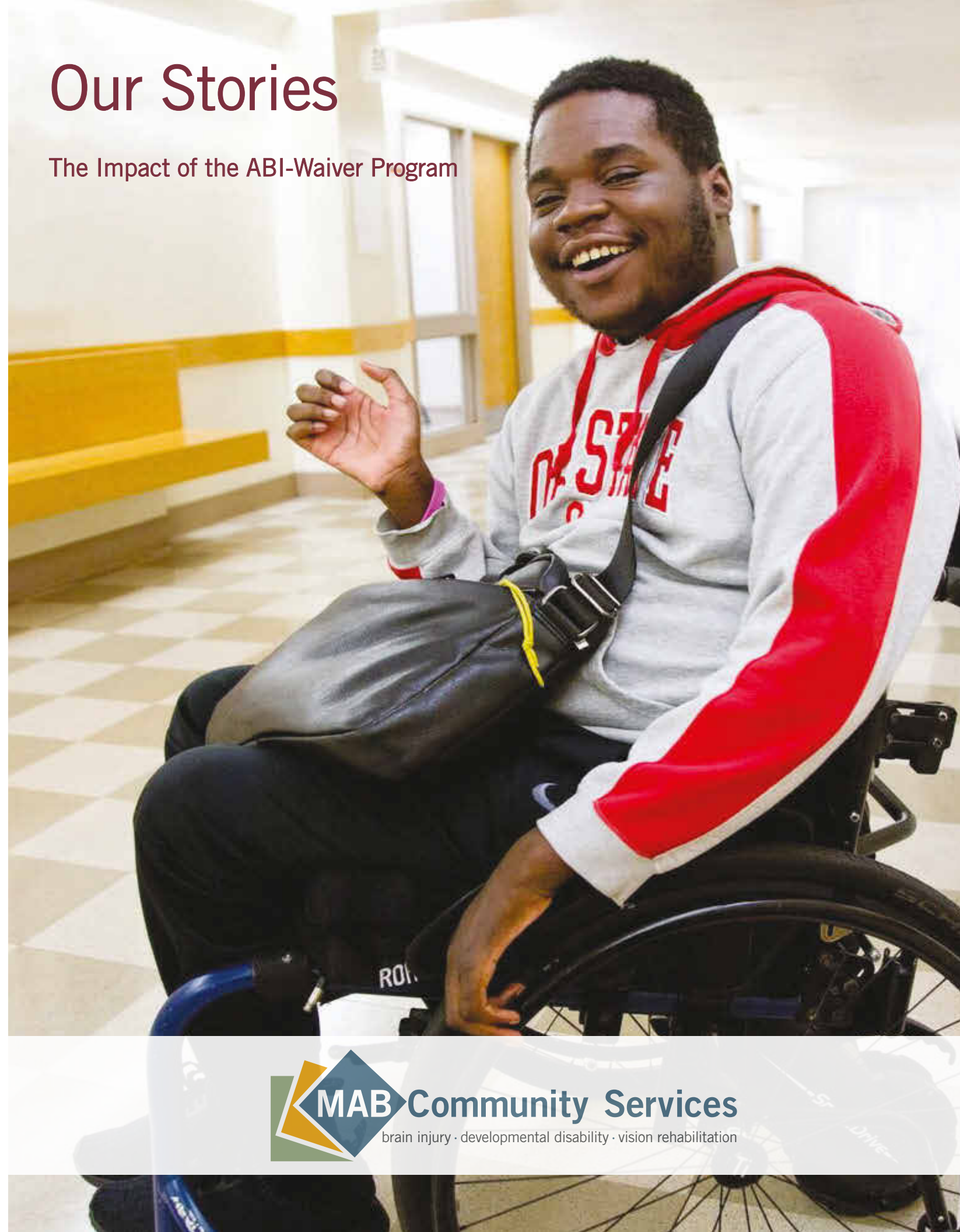
Our Stories

The Impact of the ABI-Waiver Program



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Jean was sixteen-years-old when he broke his neck playing football after school. He was a sophomore at the John D. O'Bryant High School for Science and Math in Roxbury. His esophagus was crushed, and he was paralyzed from the neck down. He was in a coma for three months. He had a tracheotomy and for more than a year he couldn't speak. He had a feeding tube and couldn't eat for more than three years. He lived at the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital for more than four years. During that time he worked hard on physical therapy and regained movement in his arms. One of his teachers from the O'Bryant tutored him and he completed his high school diploma.

Last year he was accepted to Wentworth Institute of Technology and is majoring in biomedical engineering. He wants to do research on the central nervous system. His years on the pediatric floor at Spaulding gave him first hand understanding of the needs of individuals with spinal cord injuries. In his first year at Wentworth he designed a walker with a standing assist, that can help a patient move from a sitting to a standing position.

Jean wouldn't be where he is now if it weren't for the support of his parents. They immigrated from Haiti 19 years ago and both work for Costco. Jean is motivated to earn his PhD in biomedical engineering and to make a lot of money. "Money buys freedom. You can do whatever you want. Your imagination is limitless."

Jean won't let his accident stop him. In the hospital he saw people much worse off. "The issue is how willing are you to be challenged." He has the courage and drive to achieve the life he wants for himself. He's inspired by the writings of Eli Wiesel who was a witness to great suffering on the train to Auschwitz. "Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair."

With help from the ABI waiver program, Jean has been able to move back home with his parents and two younger brothers in Hyde Park. "It's a pleasure not to hear babies screaming at night." Staying in one room for months at a time felt like being in prison. At home now, he appreciates being able to just get up and go where he wants.

Services under the ABI Waiver provide him with the support he needs so he can focus on his studies. Staff help him manage everything, from arranging for transportation to get him to class, to making sure he has the assistive technology he needs to function as independently as possible. By having all this support, Jean can devote his efforts to the important things that are going to allow him to reach his goals.

"Drive is everything." He has no intention of letting his injuries hold him back. Doing nothing is boring. He knows he can be anything he wants. And he doesn't want to be useless.



John grew up in the Reedville neighborhood of Hyde Park. His dad had an upholstery business and his mom worked at the Norcross Greeting Card company in Dedham. He had a brother and sister, but they all passed away years ago. After he left school John went to work sanding cars in an auto body shop. He bought a Yamaha motor scooter to get around. Scooters were cheap for fuel and you didn't have to pass the test for a motorcycle license.

In 2013 John crashed the scooter into a parked car and they didn't know if he was going to pull through. He went from the Brigham, to Spaulding, to a nursing home in Dedham, where he stayed for two years. There wasn't anything to do in the nursing home, nothing at all. He sat all day and talked to the old people and watched TV.

In 2015 John moved into a group home in Westwood. He uses a walker and has had a feeding tube since the accident. They tell him he'll never be able to eat by mouth again. It's hard not to sit down with everyone and eat dinner. He'd give anything to be able to go out for pizza and a beer.

John has his own room in the group home and proudly displays his model car collection on his dresser. In the nursing home he didn't even have his own closet.

Once he got out of the nursing home, all John wanted to do was to work. He was willing to do anything. Through MAB Voc he got a job doing dishes at a Friendly's in Woburn. It's the first time he's worked since the accident. It feels great to be back in the game. To get out of the house. To have somewhere to go. John works hard to do a good job. He boasts that it's hard for the cooks to keep up with him. Everyone at work helps him to succeed, to remind him where everything belongs. Both cooks, Angel and Kevin, are his buddies and come over while he's working and mess around with him. It's great being treated like a real person, but John tries to stay focused on dish washing so he won't slack off and get into trouble.

When his shift is over John is reluctant to leave. It feels good to be getting his life back. To be earning money. He's taken to wearing a checkered porkpie hat. He wants to start going places and doing things. He'd love to meet somebody special.



Herman grew up in a small town outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. The eighth of nine children, he followed his siblings and migrated north when he was 18, in search of greater opportunity. He ran a fruit stand outside a barber shop in Dorchester and one day the manager of housekeeping at Boston Medical Center came in for a haircut and the barber got him to hire Herman. He worked at Boston Medical Center for 17 years, working his way up from housekeeping to being a catheter lab technician.

One morning he was in the hospital cafeteria about to eat breakfast when he started to feel funny and began slurring his words. A co-worker called in a code blue and they brought him to the ER on a stretcher. Herman was having a stroke. They performed a craniectomy to relieve the pressure on his brain, and at the age of 51 Herman was left paralyzed on the left side. He was at BMC for two months, a rehab hospital for two years, and a skilled nursing home for three years.

He remembers seeing how lonely so many people were in the nursing home. They were just being housed, but their families threw them away and forgot about them. Under the ABI Waiver Program, Herman was able to move to a group home in Dedham four years ago.

Herman has worked hard at physical therapy and occupational therapy to become more independent. His father used to say “If you can look up, you can get up. If you’re still alive you have a chance.” Herman worked hard to build up the muscles necessary for him to slide out of bed, into the wheelchair by himself. “ It felt so degrading to use a bedpan and have an aide clean you up. You don’t know how good it feels to do things on your own. To be able to get up and go to the bathroom by yourself. If God kept you here, you can do your part by working hard to accomplish your goal.”

Living in the rehab hospital and nursing home was like living in “slow-motion”. Now, living in a group home with services through the ABI Waiver program, he’s able to keep busy. His father used to say, “An Idle mind is the devil’s workshop”. Herman works hard not to be idle. He goes to physical therapy at Community Rehab Care twice a week. Last year he grew kale and butternut squash in the Dedham community garden. He loves going fishing for porgies and striped bass in Buzzard’s Bay. When it’s sunny he always wants to go to the beach. He loves going to Castle Island to hear the waves splashing on the shore. Now that he has the skills to travel independently in his wheelchair, he goes everywhere on his own, church every Sunday, movies at Legacy Place.

But the thing that makes him feel best is volunteering at Cradles to Crayons’ thrift shop for children. Working there makes him feel like he’s part of society again it makes him feel good when a mother writes a letter thanking Cradles to Crayons for giving her daughter a coat. It makes him feel good that he’s doing something that has value.

Herman’s family is an important part of his life. He talks with his sister every day on the phone. He went to South Carolina with a personal care assistant to visit his nieces and nephews. “I wish I knew what I know now, when I was young. I might of gotten married. I don’t want to die alone. I just love life, period.”



Vinnie loves food. Growing up, his mother taught him how to roast peppers without scorching them and his father taught him how to make the tomato sauce sweet, by keeping the seeds out. After graduating from high school, he went to photography school, but the pay for photographers was terrible and when he cleared \$500 in his first week waiting tables at the new Chili's in Burlington, he was sold on working in restaurants. Being a waiter could make him "filthy rich."

Working hard to become one of the best waiters in the city, he moved from restaurant to restaurant figuring out where the best tippers ate. He ended up at the Four Seasons, serving the rich and famous, everyone from Robin Williams, to Mick Jagger. Eager to up his game, he enrolled at the Culinary Institute of American, focusing on becoming a wine expert.

After graduating from the CIA life was good. He waited tables at Neptune Oysters and moonlighted as a private chef for clients who would pay top dollar, putting him up in his own private beach house on Martha's Vineyard. He became a classic car fanatic, going to car shows at the Lars Andersen Auto Museum every weekend, and adding to his collection of the finest automotive machines on the planet. He had as many as four cars at a time.

But when he was 41 years old, driving down Storrow Drive at 11am in his 1989 silver Porche turbo 944, the driver of a 4000 lb late 60's muscle car smashed into him head on and took off. Vinnie ended up in the Charles River and almost died. He suffered a traumatic brain injury, damaging his frontal lobes and lost all his hearing in one ear. For more than two years Vinnie was in hospitals, going from the Mass General to Spaulding and finally to a rehab facility in Worcester.

Eager to move out of the rehab hospital, he moved to a group home in Waltham, but not being able to do what he wanted, when he wanted, made him feel like he was in prison. A MAB vocational counselor helped him find a job as a host at the 99 Restaurant in Waltham and he was able to move back home, to the house his grandmother bought in Watertown in 1939. He was so excited about moving home that he mowed the lawn twice.

While Vinnie feels lucky to be alive it's frustrating having to start over. He's working at a Pizza Hut in the Watertown Mall making 80 pizzas a day. He loves the customers, but it drives him crazy when things don't go right, which happens several time a day. The Pizza Hut is definitely not the Four Seasons. He's eager to move up to a job that makes him feel proud and he knows he needs to work on developing strategies to help him be more patient.

Everything is harder since his accident. Having to take two buses to buy fresh produce takes forever and the bags are too heavy to lug home. But trying to navigate Uber is maddening in other ways, especially when there's no one to call who can fix things when the system screws up. Getting mad doesn't help. Life isn't easy like it was before his accident, when he could just jump in his car to get things done.

ABI waiver staff are helping him develop the skills he needs to achieve the life he wants for himself; to get a job that he feels good about, and to provide the supports he needs to make life manageable.



Ken grew up in Jamaica Plain. After high school he joined the army and spent almost ten years as a communications specialist, putting up satellites, and couriering secure documents, primarily in the area around Manheim, Germany. When he got out of the Army he tried to find a job in high tech but couldn't get hired, despite his years of experience in the military, and ended up working as an aide in detox at the Shattuck and as an intake coordinator at the Pine Street Inn.

After years of poorly managed diabetes and hypertension, Ken had a stroke in 2010 when he was 51 years old. He's paralyzed on the left side as a result and is confined to a wheelchair. He spent two years in a nursing home and rehabilitation center in Milton and though it initially looked like a nice hotel, living in such a controlled environment got old fast. He was the youngest patient in the nursing home and got a lot of attention from staff, but he only got one shower a week and was upset by seeing staff abusing other residents.

Under the ABI Waiver, Ken was able to move to a modern apartment complex for the elderly and disabled in Hyde Park. He lives alone with the help of personal care attendants, who work shifts from 8 in the morning til 10:30 at night, seven days a week. His PCA's help him with insulin injections, toileting, showering, dressing, shopping, cooking, cleaning, and going for walks outside. His mother lives down the hall. With support from MAB, Ken hires and fires his own PCA's. It feels great to be in charge.

He loves the neighborhood he lives in; "We're near to everything." He loves food and gets take-out as a treat. "The banana boats from the bowling alley are the best." He can't wait for the Casino to open in Everett. The computer is his life line. He buys stuff on -line, keeps up with current affairs, and skypes with family and friends.

He'd love to get a job and had dreams of getting a degree in criminal justice. After taking pre-requisite courses at Bunker Hill Community College he realized how long it would take him to graduate and decided his plan was unrealistic. He's now thinking about becoming an Uber driver, working with the Mass Rehab Commission to get a car, retrofitted to accommodate his handicap. It would be a great way to meet new people.



Russ grew up in Natick, the middle child in a family of ten. His dad worked for a moving company and his mom waitressed at Jeff's restaurant in Hanson. Russ was dyslexic and was the class clown in school. He quit school before graduating and joined the Navy, working on diesel engines on an aircraft carrier, the USS Forestall, for four years. When his tour of duty was up he left the Navy and went to work, trying a variety of trades, and eventually settling in to a career installing drywall. He got married and had three kids, but his wife left him and moved to Ogunquit. By the end of their marriage, the main thing keeping her from leaving was their king-sized water bed.

Russ worked long hours on construction projects with tight deadlines, which didn't help his hypertension. And one morning, walking to the breakfast table, he had a stroke and was in a coma for five weeks. He was forty years old. That stroke was followed by an aneurysm and another stroke. Altogether he was in a nursing home in Worcester for eleven years.

The nursing home was all right. He became very active in nursing home politics, serving as president of the resident board and enjoying being a big man on campus. Russ is very outgoing and became the official greeter at the nursing home, welcoming visitors and showing them around. "You have to be a people person when you grow up in a big family."

After eleven years, he was ready to move home, to be closer to his family. Six years ago, he moved into a group home in Framingham. He's taken advantage of services through the ABI Waiver program to regain as much of his independence as possible. He likes living in the group home. "Living alone gets boring after a while". But he does like to be active and works hard at the Community Rehab Care in Watertown in weekly physical therapy sessions, to regain his strength, and speech therapy to develop compensatory strategies for short term memory loss and problem solving. He joined an aphasia group to practice getting the words out when he knows what he wants to say. He's done a lot to regain control over his own life, keeping in touch with his family through e-mail, and managing his own finances.

As in the nursing home, he's active politically, serving on the program committee advisory board at his residential program and actively participating in quality assurance activities. He loves the freedom he has living in the community. He doesn't have to tell people where he's going. He likes going on field trips to places like the aquarium, but he also likes just going out to the park or going shopping.

He doesn't feel sorry for himself for having the limitations on his life. He knows that rehabilitation takes a lot of time and effort. He's inspired by Alfred Lord Tennyson's words in the Charge of the Light Brigade, which brings back what he learned in the Navy, "Mine is not to reason why, mine is just to do or die."



Clifford grew up in Detroit in a family of five kids. Detroit is home. His sisters would do anything for him. In Detroit he could always pick up work in a fast food restaurant, but in his late 30's he moved to Atlanta with the hope of getting a job as a crane operator. In Atlanta he met a fine, goodhearted woman, and after she gave birth to their daughter, she moved to Boston and he followed her. That was fifteen years ago. His daughter means everything to him.

In 2008 Clifford had a stroke, the result of years of untreated hypertension and too much partying. He was living with another woman at the time, and when he was released from the hospital, she wasn't able to take care of him. His blood pressure was sky high. He was in and out of the emergency room and in 2010 when his apartment was damaged in a fire, Clifford was placed in a nursing home.

He made lots of friends in the nursing home. He was one of the youngest residents there and made friends easily. But he had no privacy. He slept six in a room and at night, the smell of urine and body odor made it hard to sleep. He was eager to move out and regain his sense of self-respect.

In 2015 Clifford was recommended for the ABI Waiver program and moved into a group home in Newton. When he first moved in he was depressed and couldn't believe that he could rebuild his life. He spent most of his time in a wheel chair and was frustrated by his short term memory loss and the difficulty he had in finding the right words.

But staff helped him get to the point where he developed real hope for the future.

He loved to cook and after a while was cooking all his own meals. His fried chicken was out of this world. The stroke affected his ability to read, but staff would take him to Walmart to search for all the right spices. He loved watching the Maury Povich show on TV. He had watched it regularly in the nursing home. He confided that it was gratifying to see people who had screwed up their lives more than he had. Staff organized a trip to Connecticut to watch the taping of the show. They had to get up at 6:30am to get there in time, but they sat in the first row and felt like celebrities. They made him take his Patriots' hat off, which he hated, because the scars from his hemispherectomy and cranioplasty embarrassed him.

Every time he got out of the house he felt more alive. He felt proud to go into the CVS to pick up his meds on his own, while staff waited for him in the car. He started working out more, going to physical therapy, lifting weights, becoming less reliant on his wheel chair. He took the Ride to Morningstar Baptist Church in Mattapan every Sunday for the full gospel service and to catch up with friends. He visited his old nursing home friends every week, kissing all the women, young and old, on the cheek.

And finally, staff helped him get ready to fly to Detroit to visit his mother before she died. His siblings all chipped in to pay for his plane ticket. His case manager packaged meds for every day he'd be gone and put together a laminated card explaining who he was and where he was going, in case he needed help and had trouble finding the right words, due to his stroke. Clifford called the group home every day he was away to let him know how things were going. Staff would always hear lots of laughter in the background.

After three years in a group home, Clifford is ready to move to shared living. His occupational therapist is helping him collect assistive devices that will allow him to cook using only one hand. When asked about how he feels about moving to his own apartment, Clifford exclaims "I'm free. I'm going to thank God first. And then I'm going to take one day at a time." He's not worried about falling back into bad habits because "that's what ruined my life."

