



Chrysanne O'Dell with her dog, Buddy.  
PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

## A life back on track

*Chrysanne O'Dell knows life's highs and lows, and what it means to have a place to come home to at the end of the day*

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"I always have a hustle," Chrysanne O'Dell tells me. We are in a Starbucks, talking about her journey out of homelessness, and she is frank about her obstacles. "My credit sucked, bad financial history, criminal record."

But her eye for opportunity eventually helped her get out of homelessness.

She comes to our meetings directly from her daily appointment at an Old Town mental illness and addiction treatment clinic. She seems both frail and steely.

She is 61 now, barely five feet, slight and rail thin; her long, auburn hair held strictly in check with bands or barrettes. Her clothes are carefully matched, her jewelry prominent.

Born in Athens, Greece, she was adopted by a Greek-American family in

Boston who picked her out from photographs. "Growing up I was a nonconformist, always a square peg in a round hole."

When Chrysanne was 19, she left her home and family in Boston and moved to California. It was 1973. "I wanted to be a hippie on the corner of Hollywood and Vine," she says.

In San Diego, she rented a room and registered at ITT Tech for a medical assistantship course. Before she could make it to

Hollywood and Vine she married a man who drank. Sometimes he hit her. They lived in a trailer with no electricity and no water, three miles from the Mexican border. This didn't matter until she gave birth to a daughter at 21. "Then I was homebound. After three months I said, 'Screw this.'"

They moved to a ranch where her husband trimmed trees in exchange for rent. There followed some good years. They built a tree-trimming business.

"I'd walk up and down streets with handbills. We did ornamental trimming and grafting. Then we got a half-page ad in the phonebook. We had three crews, a mulcher and a stumpgrinder.

"We bought a condo in La Mesa. We had a Broyhill dining room set. One day he came home with the chainsaw, drunk. Goodbye dining room set."

After he threw her down the stairs, she started squirreling away some of the grocery money. She got away.

Back at her mother's in Boston, she enrolled at Northeastern University to study abnormal psychology and got a work-study job at a halfway house for men who had done serious time. That led to 10 years as a corrections officer in a women's state prison at Framingham.

She started doing cocaine with her co-workers.

"I don't know if I was crazy," she says. "I've always had eating disorders. My brain is strange. Most people will say they do drugs because they want not to feel. I did drugs, in the beginning, to be able to feel."

A boss sent her to a treatment program. She was clean for a spell and then one day, after a prison macramé class, one of the inmates threw her newly-knotted creation over the fence; instant escape ladder. "I went up after her and dropped down on top of her," she said. "She broke her back. I fractured a vertebra in mine."

Chrysanne was prescribed Demerol for the pain. "After two years the doctor decided it was way addictive and took me off." She started buying Vicodin and then heroin.

After 21 days in detox she moved back to California, "still in wicked pain." On a mission to score some heroin, she crashed a borrowed car, and was arrested for speeding and leaving the scene of an accident. "The first time I got in legal trouble."

This time 30 days in rehab was followed by intensive maintenance. A sponsor "drug my sick ass to three (AA and NA) meetings a day."

She was clean from 1989 to 1994, when her mother's sudden death and a bad breakup sent her veering off course: more drugs, a couple of bad boyfriends. She met her second husband, and they had a son in 1997. But their involvement with a check fraud and identity theft scheme landed them both in prison.

"The picker-of-men I have installed in me is broken. If they're good, they're boring."

She moved to Oregon after leaving prison and in 2000 got a job with the Better Business Bureau.

For years she made good money, she said, paid rent on her own apartment. Then she lost the job and soon after it, the apartment.

She and her son moved in with her daughter's boyfriend's father, Bob. The relationship, she is at pains to point out, was platonic. Bob paid the rent, was kind and took care of her.

On July 2, 2015 he died of cancer. "I was completely lost. He was my everything."

Chrysanne didn't have enough money to cover the rent. She and her son had to leave by Aug. 16. They stayed. On Aug. 19 while she was out and her son was at work, there was a fire in the apartment.

On Aug. 21 she collapsed on the street and

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*A series of stories about people who have experienced homelessness, and found their way home*