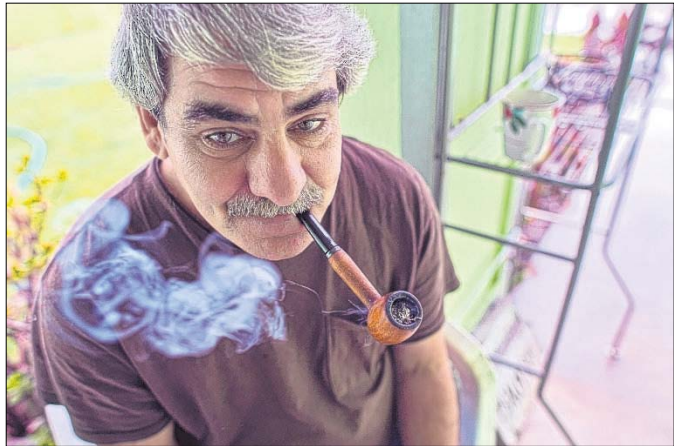


## BEE EXCLUSIVE

### Meet James Flavy Coy Brown.

Mentally ill for much of his life, he was discharged from a Las Vegas psychiatric hospital and put on a bus to Sacramento. He disappeared into the cold streets in February but has resurfaced to tell his story.



# CAST OUT BY NEVADA, HE FINDS KINDNESS



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**James Flavy Coy Brown, who had vanished** after arriving in town by bus on Feb. 12, is now living at a boarding home in Sacramento. At top with his pipe, he awaits his morning medication. Above, he chats with his daughter in North Carolina, who plans to travel here and help him.

By CYNTHIA HUBERT  
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**B**y the time his Greyhound bus hissed to a stop on Richards Boulevard in Sacramento on the morning of Feb. 12, James Flavy Coy Brown was in a mild panic.

It was 6:30 a.m., 15 hours and 11 stops after a taxi had scooped him up in front of Rawson-Neal Psychiatric Hospital in Las

Vegas, where he had spent the previous 72 hours, and deposited him at a bus station.

During the long ride to Northern California, Brown had rationed the peanut butter crackers and Ensure nutritional supplements that a staff member at the mental hospital had given him, along with his discharge papers and a bus ticket to Sacramento. His food was gone, and he was nearly out of the medication to treat his array of mood dis-



**James Flavy Coy Brown folds his laundry** outside his boarding home in south Sacramento on Wednesday. “I need clothes,” he said. “I only have two pairs of pants and two pairs of socks.” Brown lives in the house with three other residents and a rotation of caregivers.



**A simple breakfast of cereal with milk** is a blessing for James Flavy Coy Brown, who has been homeless for several periods in his life and recalls scavenging food from trash bins behind restaurants. He now receives food and care at the south Sacramento boarding home.



**Boarding home operator Joy Ubungen** listens to Brown’s plea for more sugar for his cereal. Ubungen accepted Brown as a resident at the home in early March on the promise of future payment. “My heart went out to him,” she said.



**At the boarding home,** Brown has his own small room with a single bed, and a shelf for his pipe and tobacco. He agreed to be interviewed by The Bee about his recent experiences, the latest chapter in his lifelong struggle with mental illness. “Maybe my story will help someone else,” he said.

orders, including schizophrenia, depression and anxiety.

As the bus door opened in Sacramento, Brown, 48, stepped out into the pre-dawn gloom. It was 30 degrees, and his windbreaker was no match for the chill.

Brown, a native of the American South with a distinct accent and a healthy head of salt-and-pepper hair, had arrived in the capital city with no concrete plan for survival. He had no friends or relatives in Sacramento. He had lost his ID, Social Security and insurance cards somewhere in Las Vegas. He had no idea how to fill the prescriptions that helped tame the voices and anxiety that clouded his mind.

He wondered if he was destined to die on the streets of this strange new city.

Scanning the landscape, he spotted a nearby police station. Desperation drove him inside.

“Can you help me?” he asked.

Brown’s odyssey to Sacramento has raised questions about Nevada’s state-sanctioned treatment of mentally ill people.

Advocates for the mentally ill in California, including state Senate President Pro Tem Darrell

Steinberg, call it a disturbing case of patient dumping. The federal government and Nevada authorities are investigating whether the incident is part of a broader pattern of abuse.

Preliminary reports suggest that Nevada has made a habit of discharging mental patients by bus to other states. Rawson-Neal, the state’s primary hospital for mentally ill people, bused about 100 state psychiatric patients to California between July 1, 2012, and the end of February, and scores more to other states, according to data provided by Nevada health authorities.

Nevada officials admit busing Brown to California with no arrangements for his housing or care, but contend it is not common practice.

“I don’t think you’re going to see discharges like that again,” said Nevada’s chief of Health and Human Services, Michael Willden. “It’s an embarrassment to us.”

They also acknowledge that, as budget cuts have shrunk and shuttered government mental health programs across the country, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find housing and supervision for severely mentally ill men and women.

The Bee first wrote about Brown last month,

**“I’ve been bounced around quite a bit along the way. That’s what happens when you are mentally ill. I guess that’s why they sent me to Sacramento. I guess the people in Las Vegas thought I was some kind of a threat.”** JAMES FLAVY COY BROWN

based on interviews with homeless services workers who tried to help him before he disappeared into Sacramento’s streets. Recently he contacted The Bee, and agreed to an interview at the boarding home where he is now getting food and care.

Brown was soft-spoken and polite as he sat on a patio, sipping bottled water and answering questions about the latest chapter of his lifelong struggle with mental illness. He repeatedly referred to a reporter as “Ma’am,” and occasionally burst into childlike giggles when discussing the troubles that have followed him since childhood.

“Maybe my story will help someone else,” he said.

Brown’s memory can be faulty, and details of some portions of his life are fuzzy. Some of the stories he tells about his long-ago background are fantasy, a product of his illness, according to relatives The Bee tracked down. But an array of hospital and social services officials have confirmed what he recounted about what has happened to him since he landed in Sacramento.

Brown’s experience starkly underscores gaps in the public health care system that plague mental patients across the country, advocates say, including a lack of suitable housing and crisis intervention care.

His Sacramento saga began in early February shortly after he landed in Rawson-Neal. Although his hospital discharge papers list his place of residence as Catholic Charities of Las Vegas, Brown said his last real home was a small group facility that shut down.

According to a state investigation, he spent 72 hours in the hospital’s observation unit before a doctor discharged him to a Greyhound bus to Sacramento. The discharge orders noted he should be given a three-day supply of Thorazine, Klonopin and Cymbalta to treat his schizophrenia, anxiety



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**As he enjoys television from a couch** in his boarding home, Brown has settled in nicely. Earlier, he had spent three nights in the UC Davis Medical Center emergency room watching movies on a doctor’s computer.

disorder and depression, plus “Ensure and snacks for a 15-hour bus ride.”

Brown said a doctor at Rawson-Neal told him to dial 911 when he reached Sacramento.

“But I don’t want to go anywhere,” Brown recalled telling the doctor. “Is this the only option I’ve got?”

He said the physician told him that Nevada had no place for him. “Pick a state,” he said the doctor told him. “How about sunny California? They have excellent health care and more benefits than you could ever get in Nevada.” The doctor, Brown said, then shook his hand and wished him luck in Sacramento.

His sense of the situation, Brown said, was: “If I hadn’t left then, I might have had to stay in that hospital for a long time. At least I got my freedom.”

Willden, the health and human services chief, declined to discuss Brown’s case in detail because of patient privacy laws. But in general, he said,

**“I can’t be absolutely sure, because there are so many mentally ill people on the train. These people get lost quite a bit, and we do whatever we can to help them.”** RICK RIVERA, *a Sacramento RT officer who helped Brown*

Brown’s account does not reflect hospital policy.

“I don’t think we would ever tell a patient, ‘There is no room at the inn and you’re getting on a bus,’” he said. Brown’s discharge notes included that he had mentioned a desire to go to California, according to the state investigation.

Upon his discharge to the bus station, Brown said, he spotted four other people with whom he had lived at his former group home. All had been sent to Rawson-Neal when the home closed, he said.

“Hey, Ralph,” Brown recalled calling out to one of the people. “What are you doing here?”

“He told me, ‘I’m going to California.’”

“I said, ‘Gee, they just put us all in separate cabs to send us to California? What’s going on here?’”

## **The voices in his head**

The Greyhound discharge, Brown said, was not the first time he had been cast adrift. He said he has felt that way for most of his life.

He was born in Anderson, Ind., to parents unable to care for him, according to family. A couple adopted him when he was a toddler and he spent his early life in Seneca, S.C.

There, when he was about 20 and working as a cook at a local hamburger joint, he met and married a cashier at the restaurant. Her name was Sandy. She called him Jamie.

“I was young and naive, and I didn’t realize the problems he had,” said the former Sandra Brown. Remarried with the last name Bandy now, she spoke by telephone from her home in Virginia.

Shortly after she married Brown, she said, she started to become concerned about his mental state. She learned that he heard voices inside his head. That animals told him to do bad things. He once killed a family cat that he believed to be evil. He began drinking heavily.

“He had been in a mental health facility before, and in jail,” Bandy said. “He had a temper.” She said she helped sign him up for Social Security disability benefits, “and they accepted him right away.”

When their daughter, Shotzy Faith Brown, was about 3, Sandy took the girl to Virginia, where her parents lived, and filed for divorce. The next time James Brown saw his daughter, she was 14.

Brown said he worked in coal mines and odd jobs over the years but that his mental illness was difficult to control and he repeatedly landed in jail for disorderly conduct and stealing food. In recent years, he has been homeless for long periods, he said.

“When I’m without my medications, look out!” said Brown with a nervous laugh. “I get into trouble.”

Brown left the South a few years ago, he said, at the suggestion of a psychiatrist who said budget cuts were decimating programs there. “He said things were way better out West,” Brown said. So, he said, he jumped on a bus, eventually getting off in Las Vegas.

Brown stayed in shelters, group homes and “missions,” he said, wherever he could find a bed. Often, he got picked up by police as he wandered aimlessly.

“I’ve been bounced around quite a bit along the way,” Brown added. “That’s what happens when you are mentally ill.

“I guess that’s why they sent me to Sacramento,” he mused. “I guess the people in Las Vegas thought I was some kind of a threat.”

## **In search of shelter**

Brown felt more like a victim than a threat when he walked into the police station on Richards Boulevard in the early hours of Feb. 12.

“I was scared,” he said. “Really, I just wanted to find a hospital or somewhere to be.”

He met a friendly officer, he said, and handed him his hospital paperwork.

“He told me they would take me to a place where there would be a meal, shelters, showers,” said Brown. “He was real nice to me.”

Brown climbed into the back of a cruiser, and within minutes arrived at the sprawling Loaves & Fishes homeless complex on North C Street on the industrial outskirts of Sacramento’s downtown. Someone gave him a cup of coffee while the officers talked to a staff member about his situation, he said.

But the agency, which provides a variety of services for homeless people, would be closing in the early afternoon and does not operate a shelter, Brown learned. So after awhile he followed a line of people looking for a place to sleep.

Keeping to himself during his stroll, he said, he first went to the Salvation Army on North B Street, but a receptionist told him it was full. He walked until he reached the Union Gospel Mission on Bannon Street. There, he found a bed.

The next morning, he ambled four blocks back to Loaves & Fishes, where he met with a young staffer named Molly Simones.

By that time, Brown had been off his medications for more than a day, he said. He was confused and agitated, and told Simones he was thinking about throwing himself off a bridge or in front of a car. “I had to somehow get him to a hospital,” Simones said. “But in our experience, that is not an easy thing to do.”

Simones said she was unable to transport him herself because of legal issues. Someone at the agency could fill out papers to place a legal “hold”



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**After being given his medication,** James Flavy Coy Brown opens his mouth to show that he swallowed it. His Nevada discharge orders called for a three-day supply of drugs to treat his mental illness.

on him until police could take him to the hospital, but Simones decided that process would take too long.

She asked Brown whether he could make it to UC Davis Medical Center on Stockton Boulevard if she gave him directions and a bus pass.

“He was more than willing, and I felt he could make it on his own,” she said. She made copies of his discharge papers from Rawson-Neal and wrote an account of his journey from Las Vegas. She told him to give the papers to nurses when he arrived at UC Davis.

After lunch, Brown recalled, he walked “a long ways” to a light-rail station, which is about five blocks away at 12th and E streets.

### Small acts of kindness

Brown cannot recall where he got off the light-rail train. He remembers only concrete, horns and clanging bells. Again, an officer came to his rescue.

He said he approached the first uniformed person he saw, and handed him the note from Simones. The note said Brown was “suicidal and unable to care for himself,” and should go to the hospital.

Rick Rivera said he may have been the officer Brown encountered.

“I can’t be absolutely sure, because there are so many mentally ill people on the train,” said Rivera, an RT transit officer for the past 10 years. But Brown’s story sounded familiar. “These people get lost quite a bit, and we do whatever we can to help them.”

Brown walked into UC Davis Medical Center at around 4:30 the afternoon of Feb. 13 with a police

escort, joining a growing legion of mental patients seeking refuge in Sacramento’s emergency rooms.

ERs have seen a spike in mentally ill patients since Sacramento County’s mental health facility shuttered its crisis intervention clinic and closed half its beds in 2009 amid budget cuts.

At any given time, according to UC Davis staff, three to 10 mental patients are waiting in the facility’s emergency room. The hospital has stepped up security to accommodate patients who, in some cases, are psychotic and out of control.

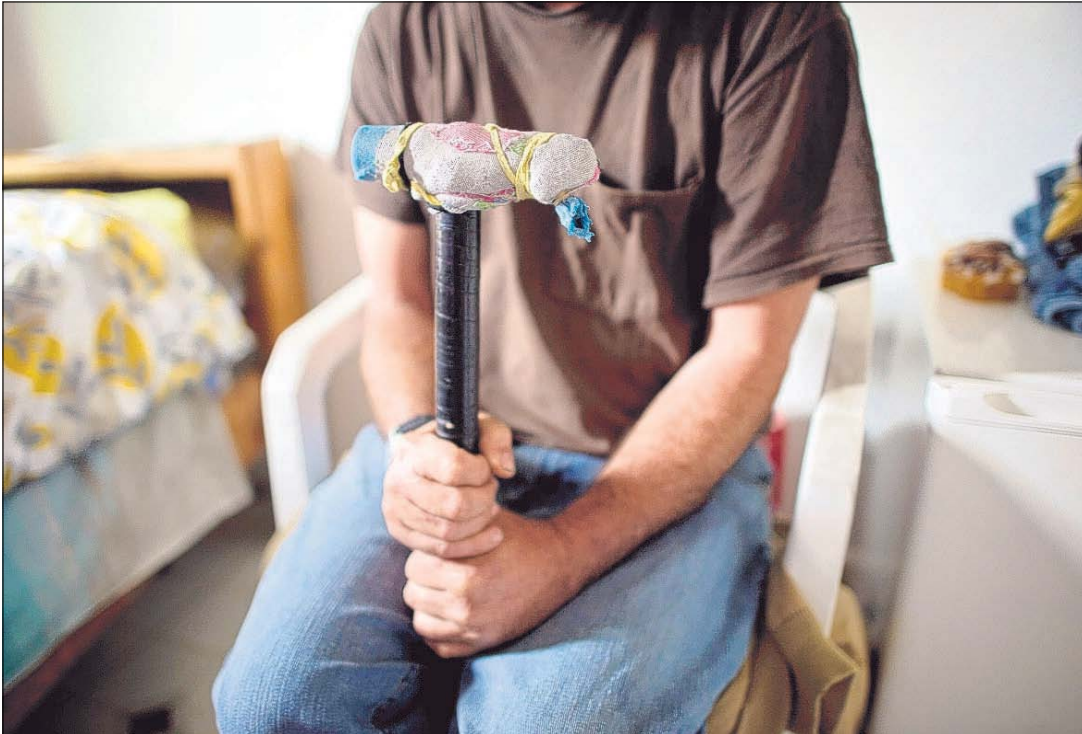
Brown was upset but fairly calm when he showed up, said Dr. Peter Yellowlees, a psychiatrist on duty that day.

A triage nurse greeted Brown, who handed her his paperwork. She and others took his blood, measured his vital signs and conducted other tests to make sure he was stable, Yellowlees said. A resident psychiatrist, Dr. Jamie Ng, asked him about his mental state and medications.

That night, Brown slept restlessly on a gurney as the the ER chaos swirled around him.

In the meantime, UC Davis social workers began calling area mental facilities, trying to find a bed for Brown. The task is difficult under the best of circumstances, Yellowlees said, but even more challenging when the patient is from out of state and has neither an ID nor an insurance card.

So for the next two nights and part of a third day, the UC Davis emergency room was Brown’s home. He had daily visits with a psychiatrist, ate hospital meals and watched Netflix movies, including “Harry Potter” and “Lord of the Rings,” on Ng’s computer. His panic began to subside, Brown said, as his medications kicked in. He was grateful for



**Brown, who says he suffers from an injured hip, uses a cane** and hopes that he can get a three-pronged cane when his daughter, Shotzy Faith Harrison, travels from North Carolina to see him. They have been in only occasional contact for the past two decades, but she is now a nurse and has offered to take him in.

small kindnesses.

“I felt like I had been rescued,” he said.

## The next chapter

Other rescuers would surface after Brown departed UC Davis.

From the medical center, he got a bed at Heritage Oaks, a private mental hospital on Auburn Boulevard. Brown recalls staying there for a couple of weeks before getting moved to Green Pasture, an assisted living facility, where he stayed until he was transferred to a boarding home in early March.

Now he lives in a mint-green house in south Sacramento with three other residents and a rotation of caregivers. He has his own small room, with a single bed and a shelf where he props his pipe and tobacco.

The home’s operator, Joy Ubungen, accepted Brown on the promise of future payment, despite the fact that he “didn’t get along” with his housemates at Green Pasture, she said.

“My heart went out to him,” she said.

Turning Point Community Programs, which contracts with the county to provide supportive services to mentally ill people, is overseeing

Brown’s care.

A staff member brings his medications every morning, watching to make sure he swallows them. The organization has provided him with clothing and psychiatric care, said Carolin Funderburg, program director for the group’s integrated services agency.

Whether the programs will be fully reimbursed for Brown’s care is unclear. As of last week, his insurance and Social Security benefits had yet to be transferred from Nevada to California.

As word of Brown’s experience has spread, other avenues have opened.

Sacramento civil rights lawyer Mark Merin said he is planning to pursue a lawsuit on behalf of Brown and others like him.

“There is something really wrong here,” said Merin, who met with Brown last week. “I have to believe there is a constitutional issue.”

And on Wednesday, the telephone rang at Brown’s boarding home. Another resident told him the call was for him.

“Hello?” Brown answered.

Shotzy Faith Harrison recognized her father’s soft drawl, a voice she had heard only a few times in the last two decades.

“Daddy! Daddy! It’s me!” said Harrison, now 25 and a nurse. “It’s Shotzy. I want to bring you home with me to North Carolina.”

Brown just smiled, he said, as he listened to his daughter talk “a mile a minute” about her plans for him. It was not the first time she had offered to take him in, he said. But this time, he planned to take her up on her offer.

“I never wanted to be a burden,” Brown said. “But I guess I’m not. Not to my daughter, anyway.”

## HOW WE DID THIS STORY

After locating him in a boarding home in Sacramento, The Bee pieced together James Flavy Coy Brown’s story by interviewing him at length, tracking down relatives across the country, and talking to doctors, social workers and caregivers he encountered after his arrival in Sacramento. Brown gave The Bee written permission to access his confidential medical information.

Call The Bee’s Cynthia Hubert, (916) 321-1082.