

FACING HOMELESSNESS

in Fort Wayne

A Storytelling Project to Increase Awareness.



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An affiliate of The Facing Project



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The following are true stories of people living in Fort Wayne, Indiana, as told to our volunteer writers. Names have been changed to protect the interviewees' identities.

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Above: George Henry Scott Jr. leads the Longest Night Walk to Headwaters Park, where the community gathers to remember those who died in homelessness in 2012.

Below: Fort Wayne residents gather together in Headwaters Park on the longest night of the year to remember the eight homeless individuals who died in 2012.

–Photos by Thomas Hesselschwerdt



FOREWARD

Fort Wayne Mayor Thomas E. Henry

Our city has many great attributes, many great accomplishments, and many people who care. Despite the economic recession, we've managed to improve our neighborhoods, maintain a good quality of life, attract businesses, and create jobs.

Still, we know that some of our citizens continue to struggle, often due to circumstances beyond their control. For some, that ongoing struggle means searching to find shelter, safety, and warmth.

In 2012, the Point in Time Count documented 558 homeless, sheltered, and unsheltered in our community. And, our partners at the Rescue Mission have estimated that we may have as many as 1,200 men, women, and children who are homeless in Fort Wayne at any given time.

When we think about the homeless, we may not realize how many families have been added to these unfortunate ranks because of overwhelming medical bills, sudden job loss, or a death in the family.

When we visualize the homeless, it may not be the face of a child that comes to mind. Yet, hundreds of children in Fort Wayne struggle to do well in school and avoid drawing attention to the fact that they may be hungry or have to worry about where they will sleep at night.

When we imagine the backgrounds of our homeless citizens, we might be surprised to learn that some have served in the military, once lived in our neighborhoods, and aspired to and accomplished much before falling on hard times.

I applaud the many agencies and the Fort Wayne Area Planning Council on Homelessness that work to assist these families and individuals in finding shelter and for giving them the hope and opportunity that will help them get their lives back on track.

I commend this community of writers and artists for using the arts to give a voice and a face to the experience of homelessness in our community that moves beyond the numbers. Because of their work, we can raise public awareness about the plight of our homeless and overcome the stereotypes and misconceptions. It's very important that their stories be told.

The creation of this book serves as a reminder that homelessness is an important issue for our community and one that requires all of us to be involved in finding the answers for those who face so many challenges. This project, documenting homelessness with dignity and sensitivity, serves as more evidence that Fort Wayne really is a community that cares.

INTRODUCTION

Lutheran Social Services of Indiana President and CEO Angie Moellering

*O*ut of sight, out of mind.

I guess you could say we're fortunate in Fort Wayne—fortunate that the presence of the less fortunate is mostly hidden from us. Unlike in many other urban areas, we aren't accustomed to seeing homeless people sleeping on sidewalks, in doorways, or in cardboard boxes. We don't see enclaves of the homeless, where they gather for their own sense of community and at least a small degree of security.

But the homeless are here, in great numbers, and they need our help. Moreover, we live in a time when many more people are just a job—just one paycheck—away from finding themselves without adequate housing. With Facing Homelessness in Fort Wayne, an affiliate of The Facing Project, we hope to bring the plight of the homeless into plain view. Our local shelters and social-services agencies can do only so much. With Facing Homelessness, we hope to engage the entire community.

Lutheran Social Services of Indiana is a member of the Fort Wayne Area Planning Council on Homelessness. Our role in this Facing Homelessness project began when one of our staff members, Heidi Kaufman, heard the co-founders of The Facing Project speak before the council. We readily agreed with Heidi that we should join The Facing Project movement with our own project. Heidi was joined by another of our staff members, Bethany Pruitt, to lead our efforts. To make it all possible, our agency formed a partnership with Community Action of Northeast Indiana (CANI), Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne, the University of Saint Francis, Mission Church, Genesis Outreach, and Michael MacLeod Studios.

In this book, you'll find 18 compelling stories of homelessness. To gain the stories, we asked people who are or were homeless or who work closely with the homeless to relate their experiences to our volunteer writers during one-on-one interviews. The writers included college students and professors, local freelance writers, and others who work with the homeless or are otherwise advocates. The artwork was provided by students at the University of Saint Francis and others. Combined, these vignettes provide real insight into the challenges facing the homeless in our community. It's our hope that Facing Homelessness in Fort Wayne will inspire you and others to become engaged in addressing this very real problem.

The goal of Facing Homelessness in Fort Wayne is to start the conversation, raise awareness, find solutions, and garner support. By achieving that goal, we can provide hope to the many who think they're hidden from sight—and forgotten.

**FACING
HOMELESSNESS**
in Fort Wayne



—Photo by Jacob Gutzwiller

OUTSIDE LIVING

James' Story

He is 56 years old.

I have been living outside for a while now, but that's gonna change soon. I got some things in the works. You know what I mean? But, it's not easy.

Here, we don't have safe houses. In other states, like Michigan, when winters are harsh, there are places where you can go to try to keep warm. They're only open from around November or December to February or March. Still, you got 12 hours to escape the cold, and maybe somebody going through that can use that to get a job. In Fort Wayne, there's the Rescue Mission and the Salvation Army. There are halfway houses, but you gotta have money for that.

What people gotta understand is this is "situation living." It can happen to anyone. It's easy to get separated from your money. That guy in the Bible, he's a good example. You know that guy they call Job? Satan took everything he had, so he would turn on God. He refused to do that, and he went bankrupt. That can happen to anybody. How you look at it depends on how stubborn you're gonna be about it. You could have a big house, maid service, and you get complacent about material things. And, you can end up sleeping outside. But, then, I had a friend who was homeless for four years and moved into an apartment. His situation changed because of the people he met out here.

In college, they teach you about situation living. But, they teach you that you'll become a success. Anybody can figure out how situation living works, but there are "educated fools." If you don't catch on, you in trouble. But, once you catch on, a third-grader could understand that once it gets cold you gotta get warm. If you get hungry, you find food. A lot of people take to going to jail once it gets cold. You find ways. Me? I like to read. The library's full of books.

When my situation changed, I wasn't trying to fight to stay inside. That word, "homeless," I can't relate to that because I made my home with God a long time ago. My home is wherever we lay it down together. A homeless person is someone who doesn't have a house and hasn't found a home with God. I have a home. I just live outside.

And, every night of the week except Saturday we got a different group that shows up. That tells me there's some good people in this world. About a year ago, this guy started showing up asking if people needed assistance. I think what he does, it's a good thing. And, I wouldn't have met him if he hadn't been here with a cheeseburger in his hand, asking if I needed a blanket. If I was raising money to support a thing, his group? I'd support it.

But it can be tricky. Some of these people you meet out here you get a good feeling about. But, sometimes they bring other people you aren't so sure of—other people who might have other intentions. It's interruptions. Just like TV. I can be sitting here, reading my *National Geographic* and be interrupted. And, maybe I don't want to talk to them. Maybe I just want to sit here, eat my cheeseburger, and read.

—As told to Danee Pye

AN UNFAIRY TALE

Alicia's Story

She is 22 years old.

When my sister and I were young, we often would watch movies about beautiful princesses in far-off countries. In our favorite stories, the heroines would begin their story as pretty, pure-hearted young women who, through struggles and determination—and maybe a little bit of magic—would overcome their difficult circumstances to reach a state of “happily ever after.”

Now, I’m fairly certain that no one ever told me my life would be a fairy tale. In fact, I was continually told that life isn’t fair. However, I was just as frequently told, as a child, that, through hard work, I could do anything to which I set my mind. “If you can dream it, you can do it.” I had dreams of getting my degree in visual arts from the University of Saint Francis.

My family has had ties to Saint Francis since I was a little girl. I would go to Rolland Arts Center to see my uncle’s dramatic performances by the Saint Francis Jesters, and I knew that I wanted to have my college experiences there. So, when I got my first job at the age of 15, I began setting aside money to help pay the \$24,000-a-year tuition. I knew that it would take a lot of hard-earned savings to be able to attend Saint Francis. Their Department of Visual Arts is unparalleled by any other program offered at surrounding schools, and I felt the sacrifices would be worth the gain.

Unfortunately, I did not foresee the additional personal and financial difficulties that developed during my junior and senior years of high school. I don’t want to seem like a victim or a martyr, but when my father lost his job, my parents removed the money I had in my savings account without consulting me. Soon, their financial woes led to bankruptcy and divorce.

It was at this time that my mother informed me that the man I had known as “Dad” my entire life was really my stepfather. Amplifying this bombshell, my father felt no need to resume any responsibility for me once I learned the truth. The fact that my father no longer felt a need to care for me was incredibly hurtful; however, his and my mother’s clear favoritism toward my younger sister suddenly made sense. I was no longer confused about why she could miss curfew without mishap or punishment, and when she became pregnant as a teenager, both of my parents made it apparent through their actions that any support and resources they had to offer would go to her.

By then, I was a freshman at Saint Francis. In order to afford my first year, I accepted any loans available to me. This meant that the bulk of my debt was unsubsidized, but it was the only assistance I could receive due to my parents’ financial history. Around the time that I was completing my spring semester, my mother and sister moved to Ohio. Since my father had made it apparent that



—Photo by Kaitlyn Elliot

I was no longer his daughter, I found myself without a place to live during the summer months, and there it was. I was displaced. Not only had I lost my father figure, my nuclear family, and my college savings within the space of two years, I no longer had a place to live—let alone call home.

I am now a senior at Saint Francis. Through sheer determination and exhaustive effort, I have worked full time while completing 18 to 24 credit hours each semester for the past four years. I have lived in my vehicle, I have shuffled between friends' houses, and I have sporadically stayed with a generous aunt. My belongings are scattered between my grandfather's garage, the trunk of my car, and anywhere I can manage to find a bed for the night.

Sometimes, when I look at my life, I am overwhelmed with sadness due to my lack of roots; I am not just house-less, I am home-less. I knew that going to college would mean that I would need to make sacrifices and work hard, but I never guessed that my princess montage—you know the moment in the movie when the girl would show her worth and change her life with perseverance and willpower while singing about her plight—would take this long or require this much effort. I never thought I would be missing the comforts of my family and my home life.

I'm doing everything they tell you to do if you want to succeed. I work 40-hour weeks, I get good grades, and yet I am always a few payments behind. I always have a few more bills to pay, and I will graduate with several tens of thousands of dollars against my name. I try not to feel the shame of my circumstances—my lack of home is temporary—but it is difficult to dream of the future, hard to have pride in my accomplishments. It is even trying to maintain daily stamina when I don't always have a place to sleep at night.

Throughout this entire experience, there has been one consolation, however. The princess had to rely on her fairy godmother to get her from the sooty fireside to the grand steps of a castle. But, when I make it there, I'll be able to say that I did it without magic. I did it on my own.

—As told to Doris Graham

NO REGRETS

Caroline's Story

She is 41 years old.

My journey to homelessness began when I took my children and left my abusive husband and rented an apartment in 2010. I was employed by a public school system during this time. In April 2012, I was terminated due to absences resulting from mandatory court dates for my divorce proceedings. I was then evicted from my apartment on June 1—no income, no rent. My child support payments had not come through yet.

One of my friends offered to let us stay in her home. The arrangement was that I would cook and care for her children. This lasted only a week because my friend wanted “rent” money in addition to my services. Since I had no money coming in, I had to leave.

We stayed in the car for a night. I sold some possessions to get the price of one night in a hotel room. Then my advocate found us a spot in a shelter where I could stay for 30 days. I spent all of those 30 days looking for work—all day, every day. When the time expired, I had not found a job, but was granted an extension.

When I was with my ex-husband, he was extremely controlling to the point of giving me an allowance and making me account for every penny. I didn't know how much money he made until he had to provide a pay stub for court. The house had to be spotless and everything in its place according to his plan. He controlled our lives in every way he could.

The shelter rules, while necessary, brought back all that anxiety. I felt diminished. All medications were locked up—a good thing—but the schedules for administering them were not necessarily according to the needs of the clients.

Residents shared chores at the shelter. This was expected and reasonable. The chores were rarely performed acceptably, and no one was held accountable. Sanitation became a huge issue for me because I had always taken the best care of my house and my children.

Safety turned out to be a problem. Some residents lied about their situations to get into the shelter. People with mental-health problems lived there. Some of them became more than disagreeable, started fights, and threatened physical violence.

Soon after this I got a job and left the shelter. Making my own decisions and being free again was a great feeling.

After this I got a job and moved to my present home. By this time, it was August 2012. I am holding my own. It's not easy, but I have no regrets. The

freedom is worth it. I look at it as making the best of a situation. I don't feel bitter.

This experience has taken a huge toll on my children. Their education was interrupted, and they have lived through traumatizing situations. We had to move away from a small community to a much larger one, so there have been many new experiences and adjustments. Still, it was worth it to be in charge of our lives and safe.

-As told to Cheryl Pruitt



-Photo by Chelsea Holland

STEPPING STONES

Mary's Story
She is 30 years old.

7 didn't plan to be homeless ... but then, I guess nobody does.

The problems started because I lived in Fort Wayne, but my job was in Avilla—more than a 20-mile drive each way. So having a car was a necessity. But on a limited budget, the car I could afford had problems of its own.

When my car decided to poop out, I was pregnant. I needed reliable transportation, but I didn't have the money to buy a different car. And I couldn't get to work without a car, so I had to find a new job closer to home.

I walked or rode the bus to apply for jobs. It was the middle of summer, and I was six months pregnant. I found a job, but it wasn't soon enough to make the rent on my apartment. I was on a month-to-month lease, and I was already a month behind. My landlord had been kind enough to give me that much leeway, but he couldn't keep doing it. I understood—I am sure he had been burned before.

I called around to different agencies to try to get help with my rent, but there is an application process for most kinds of assistance, and I needed help immediately. It wasn't going to come fast enough. Reality sunk in. I was homeless.

At the shelter I had 30 to 45 days to get my act together and figure out my next move. My job was only three blocks away so I walked to work. I was saving money to begin rebuilding my life.

Being at the shelter wasn't that bad, but it was only temporary. As soon as I moved in, I had to start thinking about moving out. The more I focused on it, the more I started to panic.

You see, I had always wanted to have children—to be a mom. But now I was worried about not having a home to raise my son in, let alone be able to provide him with basic necessities. This was not what I had planned.

But I was so motivated to make things better for myself, and the staff at the shelter saw that and helped all they could. Another woman living there told me about a program that might be able to help me get back in to a home.

Through the program I was able to get an apartment, but one of the stipulations was that it had to be outside the city limits. I found an apartment about 30 miles away in Bluffton. I figured I could make it work because by now I had saved up some money and could get another car with the money I would have spent on an apartment.

But there was a hitch in my plan. After working at my new job for a month, I had to tell them I was pregnant. Because I had been at my job for less than a year, I would not get maternity leave. I would have to quit, reapply after I had the baby, and then wait for a job to come open.

I was even more panicked now. I was trying to rebuild my life, trying to get ready for the baby, and now I had to figure out how we were going to live with no income.

My main goal in life is to provide stability for me and my family. I felt like I was getting nowhere toward this goal. It was a vicious cycle. Every time I had one thing figured out, something else would fall apart.

It was a really tough year. So many decisions. Should I put this \$20 in savings, or buy diapers to provide for my son when the money isn't coming in anymore? So many questions. How am I going to pay for child care once my son is born and I have to go back to work?

The rental assistance on my apartment was expiring when I learned of a house giveaway contest. Could it be true? Someone was giving away a house, and all I had to do was write an essay about why I felt like I deserved it?

I wrote and rewrote that essay ... and it paid off.

Having my own home is amazing, and it is all because of the generosity of a man who saw a way to make a difference. My home provides a foundation for me as I work toward my goals. It is one less thing I have to worry about.

When you get into a bad situation, it is so easy to flip the switch into "survival mode," and that makes it really hard to think down the road. But every time you accomplish something, it is like a steppingstone toward your goals.

I am going to college now—studying sociology. I would like to start a nonprofit someday that focuses on fatherhood. For now, I want to give back in any way I can. I am motivated by my desire for my children to have dreams and to see them live their dreams. But I have to do that first—to set an example for them.

Through all of the challenges of my life in the last few years, I know one thing for certain: The more that you give of yourself, the better your life is going to be.

—As told to Jennifer Renner



WHAT'S NEXT?

Linda's Story

She is 50 years old.

Life was moving all around me, but I was standing still. My youngest was off for college, my husband had his job, and I was sitting, still recovering from an injury that had happened years before. I was tired of it. What was next for me? I knew I needed to be careful about how much I took on so I did the only thing I could think of. I prayed. I prayed that God would use me in a way that when people looked at me they didn't see me, but saw God within me. I wanted to minister to people. I wanted to love on people. I just didn't know how to do it.

After numerous random circumstances that can only be described as God-ordained, I found myself on a tour of a local shelter. The part of the tour that stuck out to me the most was the thrift store that was owned by the shelter. Anyone can come and buy things they like, but there is another purpose to the store. People graduating from the shelter's programs are able to get a voucher for the store so they can furnish their new homes. A lot of these people came to the shelter after living on the streets, and they have nothing with which to furnish a home when they get one. I asked if they needed volunteers for the store, and they did. It was quickly obvious to me that this is where I was supposed to be.

I am now there almost every day the doors are open. Often people who come in with vouchers to furnish their new homes are overwhelmed by the amount of things to choose from. Many were recently living for months or years with just the clothes on their backs. Seeing the volumes of items the store has to offer can be overwhelming for them. Some think about leaving, but I talk to them and walk them through the store section by section to help them get what they need. I make sure they know that there is no judgment in this place for them, only acceptance. I tell them that we are here for them, even after they have used their vouchers, and if they need anything to come back and see us.

I have also found ways to reach out to those in the neighborhoods surrounding our store. We have many customers who come in at least once a week just to have someone to talk to. I make sure they know that they don't have to buy anything and sit down to chat with them. One gentleman I will never forget had recently lost his wife. He just needed someone to be there, and we were able to be that place for him to go when the loneliness was just too much. We were blessed by many generous donations this winter and were able to donate books, hats, scarves, and gloves to schools in the surrounding neighborhoods. These schools are often underfunded, and we wanted to be able to show these children they are not forgotten.

Working at the thrift store has been a stretching experience. There are times when a customer becomes upset and says things that are hurtful, but I keep a Bible handy in the back and go there to read and remember why I am serving. It doesn't take too long for my joy to return. I head back out to the floor and continue serving and learning from this wonderful group of people. The good far outweighs the bad. I am still humbled that God has allowed me to serve in this way and continue to pray that those who walk through our doors don't see me, but see God greeting them.

-As told to Heidi Kaufman



-Photo by Andrea Light

I JUST BLINKED

Danielle's Story

She is 25 years old.

Everybody has a story. Stories matter. People need to know what's going on, what people like me and my kids are going through. We are real people with real stories living right here in Fort Wayne—or trying to live here, at least. I guess this is my story, though it's hard to say how it started. I haven't seen my baby for more than a few hours at a time in over a year, no more than seven days in the past month. Maybe it started when we had to split up the family. No, it probably started before that, with the bedbugs.

Back in 2010, I was married to someone who wasn't nice to me or to my kids. When he started hitting the kids, that was when he had to go, or rather, we had to go. We went to live with my mom, but after a while, she decided she wanted to move, and we couldn't stay with her anymore. So we moved to a trailer.

For a while, it was all right, but in February, we got bedbugs. I couldn't believe our bad luck. The landlords refused to take care of the problem. So after six months, I was forced to move my daughters and me into a homeless shelter. It was bedbugs or homeless. What a choice.

Homeless. It happened so easily. I just blinked, and then we were homeless. I have to be matter-of-fact about it and focus on the situation at hand. I have to just be step-by-step about it, you know? Or else I'll lose it. And I can't lose it. My kids need me. My fiancé needs me. I'm holding this whole thing together.

Our first shelter was really great. I knew our situation would be temporary because the staff at this place was so willing to help us and I was so willing to work hard to get us "back on our feet," as they say. These people even talked about my going to school so I don't have to be a certified nursing assistant (CNA) for the rest of my life.

I like being a CNA because it's a good career foundation, but it's hard work. I know I'll get burned out eventually. It's a physical, dirty, messy, sweaty job, and I make only about \$1,000 a month. After the normal monthly expenses, like rent, utilities, and car payment, there isn't a lot left over for clothes and shoes for two growing 8-year-olds, not to mention the baby I rarely get to see. Going to school to get a degree for a better paying job sounded like a dream to me. I couldn't make it work then, but I knew I wanted it to be a future goal.

The first shelter we lived in was a temporary shelter so I knew we'd have to find a more permanent one. I applied to another shelter and to our local housing authority (a social-service agency that helps people find and pay for housing). The day I found out that we'd been accepted to move into the second shelter, I also got my acceptance letter from the housing authority. However, it did not work out with the housing authority, so we moved into the new shelter.



-Photo by Nicole Miller

This turned out to be a much different experience for us.

The second shelter was not like the first. It was much more regimented and rule-based. If rules were not followed, we would get a mark against us. Three marks turned into a notice. Three notices became a warning, and three warnings meant eviction. You could get a mark if your children weren't with you at all times. My twins are 8, and they get bored and wander away. We got very close to eviction.

When I got a full-time job I still had to do my chores. Just the cooking chore was overwhelming. There were 30 people living in that place. That's a lot of people to feed.

It was hard to save money because once I began working, I began to pay rent. Yeah, homeless shelters charge rent. I bet that's something not a lot of people know. Even with the rules and paying rent, that shelter would have been fine if not for the bedbugs. Yes, bedbugs again.

When I felt the first itch, I thought, oh no, not again. I just couldn't believe it! We had been through this before, and old memories started to come back to me. This is how we became homeless in the first place. I raised a big stink about them. The director heard me, and our room was getting treated for bedbugs.

Even though the bedbugs got taken care of, I knew we had to get out of the shelter. My kids no longer wanted to live there. A friend of mine offered to let us stay in her apartment until I could find a somewhat permanent place through the housing program I am working with.

Our new house is going to be just ours. This organization will pay for about half our rent, and I will cover the rest, as well as utilities. The house has two bedrooms and plenty of living space. Right now, I am only approved for this program if I have just my twins with me. That means the baby and my fiancé have to keep living apart from us. If I can manage to get off the program, there is enough space for them to maybe live with us.

Maybe.

Maybe is more than we've had for over a year, so I'll take it.

—As told to Katherine Pruitt

BIRTHDAY BLESSINGS

Allison's Story

She is 37 years old.

It was five or six years back, around 2008, when an ice storm hit Fort Wayne. That was the first time it occurred to me that some people have no place to go when extreme weather hits. No place to go at any time, really. I kept hearing reports on the news about the lack of shelter around town, wondering “what were people who were homeless doing?” This was the first time I really considered the topic of homelessness.

I've always worked in social services, but I went back to school later in life, with an 11-year-old son at home. I graduated at the time when the bottom fell out of the economy, making it hard to find a job, and, for the first time in my adult life, we were living paycheck to paycheck. It was the right time for me to begin giving back to the community because I realized that could be my family living out on the street. All it would take is one unfortunate circumstance. Having always known that I wanted to start my own nonprofit someday, that realization kind of gave me the push in the direction of what my path was going to be.

I started Birthday Blessings in 2009 as a way to reach out to the children of the homeless community around Fort Wayne, hoping to eventually expand to outlying areas of northeast Indiana. The main focus that we deal with right now is shelter parties, going to different shelters every month and celebrating for any child having a birthday that month. We serve a meal, have cake and ice cream, hand out goody bags, and give a present to the kids with birthdays. We try to do some type of craft activity and things like that. I really see these parties making a difference in the attitudes of the shelters.

With some of the shelters being long-term facilities, we see some of the same people every month, sometimes for a year at a time. Understand that these shelters are cramped, often with multiple families living in close quarters. Of course my main focus is helping the kids, but I think the thing that surprised me the most was the camaraderie that started to come out in something like a family-style dinner among the adult residents. It is such a unique thing because you see women taking care of other people's kids and caring about one other.

Starting Birthday Blessings has made such a difference in my life. It has definitely humbled me a lot, having met some of the most compassionate people in these shelters, seeing them take care of one another. Giving kids a birthday party when they have never had one before—they are so grateful for something that I take for granted each year.

One of the reasons I started Birthday Blessings was because I wanted my son to be a charitable person and have that ingrained in his values and his morals. I have my son help me out at the shelters to develop these



–Photo by Mariah Hutcherson

characteristics. I think the thing that really hit home with him was that one time he saw someone who went to his school. He didn't say anything until after the party, and then he said, "That boy goes to my school." It just really affected him, changing his perception of who a homeless person can be. He even spoke about Birthday Blessings at his school and got his class to donate some money for the shelter parties.

We try to get organizations and groups to sponsor and help out with parties, partly for financial reasons, but mainly so they, too, can have the same life-changing experiences as me and my son. Unfortunately, I think most people have a perception of homelessness that is absolutely wrong. Many see homeless people as scary, dirty, any of those stereotypes that we see, especially in movies and other media. When actually, oftentimes they are families that have just gotten down on their luck.

–As told to Nicole Dynes

WE ARE ALL THE SAME

Amber's Story

She is 26 years old.

I remember hearing my mother cry, though she did her best to hide the tears. She never wanted me and my little sister to feel afraid, insecure.

"The water will only be off for a day," she'd say, forcing a smile. She would give us some crackers or popcorn and wrap her arms around us.

I overheard some of the phone calls: "Can I just pay the past-due amount?" she'd ask the utility company.

I was poor—but growing up I didn't realize it. I didn't realize we were different from anybody else. Homelessness was not a word I ever heard someone say to describe us. We never slept in a car, on a park bench, or under a bridge. Now, at 26, I realize we were often on the verge of homelessness.

I was just 9 when our house burned down. My dad died in the fire. My mom was pregnant with my little sister. It may sound harsh, but my dad dying in that fire was likely for the best. He was very abusive. If he hadn't died, I don't know what would have happened to my little sister. I didn't want what had happened to me to happen to her.

We lost everything in the fire. My grandmother lived close by and helped us some, but she had very little. My mom cried when we had to go to the food bank. As a little girl, I didn't know why that was so upsetting.

When you're poor, you feel bad about yourself. One of the biggest hurdles people living in poverty must overcome is asking for help. My mom did not want to ask for help. If you've never been poor, really poor, you don't understand that. You think people don't want to be self-sufficient.

We struggled to make it on my dad's Social Security check. My mom had health problems, and we struggled. Some years, birthdays and Christmas were celebrated—but there were no presents. Instead, my mom doled out love. For my sister and me, snuggling together on the sofa, watching a video with mom, that was as big a deal to us as a trip to the circus was for other kids.

My mom began taking us to church after my grandma started going. I loved the music, the preaching, and the warm smiles people gave me. I didn't realize it was a church founded to minister to the poor and disenfranchised. I thought everyone was the same. I had adult women who showed an interest in me. They came to my school programs. I didn't realize until later that some who were part of the church—and who still belong—are well-off financially. I never saw a difference. Now at age 26, I realize that was a true gift of unconditional love given to me by all the adults in my life.



–Photo by Taylor Grennay

When I hit the teen years, all was not so rosy. The realization that we were not like everyone else took hold of my mind and heart. I became very judgmental of others. I decided if I couldn't have or be like everyone else, I would just go through life with an angry chip on my shoulder. I was mad all the time, quit going to church, and nearly flunked out of high school.

One day in math class I watched the girl next to me yell and cuss at the teacher.

"Is that what I look like to other people?" I asked myself. It was a turning point. I began focusing on school and even won awards for my vocal talents. I graduated from high school and earned two associate degrees. I now work full time, and I'm buying my own home. My goal is to be a teacher.

I'm back at church, singing and worshiping with the people who gave me unconditional love. I greet those who come from under the bridge or a shelter and pray with those who are one paycheck from homelessness. I give them clean clothes from the church's clothing bank or serve them breakfast. We are the same in God's eyes.

Today, I know my place is not to judge. My role is to empower and encourage people. I have learned joy is not an emotion based on circumstances. You can teach yourself to be joyful—but you have to know what it looks like. I grew up poor. I know what that's like. I also know what joy is.

–As told to Jennifer Boen

BICYCLES

Matthew's Story

He is 46 years old.

Homelessness isn't a disease or a political issue—it is a real-life problem that people struggle with each and every minute that passes; people whom I call friends. The line seems so thin for those of us who do not have to worry about being homeless at this moment in time. There are guys I know who are couch hoppers—staying with friends and relatives, going from couch to couch while they can, without overbearing their hosts. Some of the guys I know go days without food, sleeping in shelters when they can. When I first came to Fort Wayne, I came from a big-box church and thought, “What’s wrong with these people?” I’ve come to learn that the question isn’t about fixing homelessness or homeless people. It is about fighting the social and psychological stigmas we as human beings all have for one another—by putting a face to it.

Ten years ago, I started fixing bikes for the needy. It started with picking up parts and broken bikes and repairing them for those who needed it. After a while, I started trading new bikes for people’s broken bikes. This provided a gateway to get to meet people and help impact their lives. The transient lifestyle that comes with no permanent residence makes it difficult to connect sometimes. Other times, you meet people who are simply amazing. One such man, who has told me time and time again that he is homeless by choice—and has been for 14 years—is enduring these hardships to connect with people more than I ever could. He opens doors for people like me who want to reach out and help those who are either depressed, paranoid, or addicted to drugs. As word spreads, more and more people introduce others to places that can help them. The problem isn’t always with supply and demand—it is about the hoarding mentality.

Oftentimes, when people are desperate—which, when you have nothing, feels like every minute—they have a hoarding mentality. People really are decent at their core, but when you have so little, it is hard to give it away. All too often have I heard, “Hey, my friend is over there—could you go and give him a bike?” I try to encourage them to give what they have, as we will replace what they have in efforts to begin to break this mentality that there won’t be enough.

But I’m not here to judge—I’m not perfect either. One individual who had earned a bike by helping repair and learning to repair and I were at the same strip mall one Saturday. While I parked to go into a restaurant with my family, I noticed he had gone into a nearby store—a liquor store. My first thought was of complete anger—this guy was using a bike we had helped him get so he could buy booze! Right then and there I thought about stealing that bike back

from him. But who was I to make his life choices for him—to buy or not buy things like alcohol? This is simply the reality of the situation.

My wife has said it best: depression is the ultimate form of self-absorption. When you are homeless, it can be so depressing—especially when you feel as though you are the only one affected. These men, women, and children—human beings—are just trying to survive, and oftentimes, it's on their own. That gets lonely.

Life changes with each choice people make. The first step in helping one another comes from not trying to fix one another, but being open and understanding to the situation. We may feel grateful for contrived means, but sometimes it is the little things that will take you back. One man during a Sunday-morning church service prayed out loud, "Thank God I'm sober." The whole church was silent. It really put into perspective how far away having a roof over your head can feel when you haven't had one for a while. The reality is about the relationships we create as human beings, not the resources.

—As told to Joseph Carpenter

THE SMELL OF HOPELESSNESS

Oscar's Story

He is 51 years old.

The main factors that caused me to become homeless were basically alcohol and drugs. I didn't have the best thinking, and I would try to rationalize and minimize my failures by using alcohol and drugs. I had no desire to get help because of my thinking. I was afraid to ask for help because of my insane thinking. The psychiatrists and therapists wanted to go back to my childhood, and I didn't want to let anybody in, so I was limiting the help that I could get. I didn't want to go back and face my demons. I have been homeless about four times; the longest time was for about six months.

My drug use led to my imprisonment for about three years, with violations and multiple trips to the county jail. After prison, my thinking caused me to become homeless again. I was in a halfway house with gentlemen who were convicted of crimes I didn't agree with, and I thought I was better than they were. So I chose to sleep under a bridge rather than be around them. In fact, I didn't want to be around myself.

I got down to the point where I was starving to death, not showering for days and weeks. I was eating out of dumpsters, and smoking cigarette butts that people had thrown on the ground. I contracted hepatitis C because of my intravenous drug use. My drugs of choice were alcohol, crack, methamphetamines (crystal meth), and cocaine. My family wanted to come and get me, but I wouldn't let my sister get close to me because of the shame and guilt.

When I first used crystal meth, I shot it into my veins. I noticed that my drinking "buddies" would always leave for about two to three hours every evening, but when they returned, they seemed different. My friends looked different, they talked different, and they said they felt different. I wanted that because I felt like I was dying inside.

From the very first time, I began to feel different. I had no cares or concerns. All the pain, the shame, the guilt was gone. It was like I had created a world that really didn't exist. But, in my mind, that world did exist; it was the most comfortable I had ever felt. However, the good feeling did not last. I had to start to support my new habit because the job I had couldn't sustain it. I began to threaten to kill people to support my habit. My family told me about the times that I threatened them and scared them. I could not be trusted. I broke into my own mother and father's house.

I ended up getting divorced from my wife of 16 years. I began to leave and come back into my children's lives, sending them mixed messages. I started making deals with my children. Once I told my daughter that if she went back to



–Photo by Dave Roser

school and graduated, then I would come back home. My daughter went back and graduated, and I kept my promise. However, I ended up leaving her again.

As a homeless person, there is nothing but survival. Survival is all that there is. You do what you have to do to survive, whether it is theft or fighting or bribing. When it is cold out, it is so immediate that you realize if you don't eat or warm up soon, your heart may stop beating. I began to realize just how serious life and death truly are. I was so far gone that I didn't know there was help for me. I began to lose hope; I didn't even know there was such a thing as hope anymore. I ask God every day to place people in my life who can help. I pray that God will send someone to help me make it to another day. If I could just get a job, I could make it.

I want the world to know that there are people who help, but there are not enough. I want the world to know that if you get close enough you can smell the feeling of hopelessness and homelessness. It feels like my soul was dying right inside me. But now I know that there is hope, but there is also death. You will always have that choice to make between life and death, between hope and hopelessness. These choices I believe will always keep me humble.

–As told to George Henry Scott Jr.

I DID IT FOR HER

Joe's Story

He is 59 years old.

7 spent some time in the service. I served in 1972, 1974, 1977, and during my final year in 1981, as a chef. When I was younger, I was hardheaded and stubborn and subsequently lost my chance to retire from the service. I was homeless for a very long time. I was cycling through homelessness and rehab for a drug and alcohol problem. I found myself traveling around, living in Fort Wayne, Ohio, and South Carolina.

Eight years ago I was blessed with my daughter, and I knew I needed to change. Even with all my ups and downs, I found that I could do it. My daughter needed guidance and a positive role model. I wanted to provide and show my daughter that her father was a positive impact in her life. I have custody of her now. She is my priority, so I had to let my addiction go.

The transition was hard, but with pastoral support and church, I found that I was able to accomplish things in my life that I did not know I could in the past. Even now when I feel I am at my lowest, I look up to God and ask for His advice. He has always been there for me. Looking back now, I found that it can be done with Him, no matter how old you are.

She smiled big,

She smiled wide,

She knew her father would be there for her to provide.

She showed me hope,

I showed her love,

I received all my strength from my Lord above.

Time has changed,

I did too,

I will continue to grow and prosper, too.

—As told to Baldemar Silva

HOW I BECAME HOMELESS

John's Story

He is 32 years old. He wrote this account himself.

I am 32 years of age, a freshman at a community college, and the single father of a beautiful 4-year-old girl. I was born and raised in Indiana, but have spent a great deal of my life in South Florida as well. I had a pretty normal childhood. I have one younger sister, and both parents are alive, but they divorced when I was 5. I had some challenges growing up. I didn't graduate high school, but I did get my GED. I met my baby's mother in 2006. We had our daughter in December 2008. Our daughter was removed from our care at the hospital, based on previous cases involving her mother. This was shocking—I expected to just go home with our baby like any other family.

So we started to do what we needed to do to get our baby back in our care. For whatever reason, the baby's mother didn't want to make it through the entire process with me, so she left us. I ended up getting an apartment, enrolling in college, and working. When the baby was 10 months old, I had full custody of her.

We did great for the first few years, from when she was about 10 months until she was maybe 3 1/2. I missed an appointment for her day care, and they immediately cut off my day-care voucher and said I'd have to get back on the waiting list. Therefore, I had to drop all my classes in college, which put me on financial and academic probation.

We were making ends meet. I was self-employed, recycling metal (scrapping), and I was able to have her with me at all times. When my truck started to fall apart, and we couldn't maintain the truck, we eventually lost the vehicle and my means of supporting us.

After that, I made ends meet by selling things I'd collected while scrapping and by selling our possessions (flat-screen TV, laptop, etc.). In July 2012, we ended up losing our big, nice apartment.

From there we moved to a cheaper place, a one-room efficiency. It was too small for the two of us, so I tried to find something better.

My day-care provider's daughter had recently inherited three homes when their father passed away. They needed help getting these homes ready for sale, and we needed better living arrangements.

It seemed like a win-win for both parties. We made out a contract saying I would pay zero rent, maintain utilities, and help their uncle with labor around the house in exchange for rent. I wanted out of the efficiency so bad and so fast that I moved me and my daughter into the new house before we should have. The utilities were not in place. I had electricity and had just called about the water and was working on the gas bill.



—Photo by Esther Smith

There were also some code violations in the house that made it uninhabitable, but neither we nor the landlords knew this before my agreeing to move in. My daughter and I were at the new house one afternoon, just four days after moving in, and I was still working on the rest of the utilities.

We had just finished eating lunch and were chilling upstairs listening to the radio when my daughter says, “Daddy, look!” I look over at three cops with their guns drawn at the top of my stairs. They start yelling and making a scene; my daughter got scared and started crying.

I ask what’s going on. They say they had a call from a neighbor about a suspected squatter living there with a baby who is not his. So here I am in shock and having to prove that I belong there and that *my* baby is *mine*.

After proving what I needed to the police, they looked around, noticed there was no water, and called two local social service agencies. The house was condemned and my baby was taken. From that day I went from being in a home and having my daughter with me at all times, to being homeless on the streets without my daughter.

I have been to jail for minor offenses twice in these six months. I have slept on friends’ floors, and outside at city parks, under bridges, and in tents. Part of the reason that I stay outdoors is because I don’t want to ask anyone to stay with them.

I have been looking for work and places to stay for about six months now with little to no luck. I’ve had to resort to panhandling to get by sometimes. I am currently working with two local agencies to obtain a job and housing. I also see my daughter three times a week during supervised visits. When I get stable income and housing, they’re looking to reunite her with me. I get discouraged at times, but refuse to give up. My daughter needs me, and I need her.

When I was young, I dreamt of playing football for the Dolphins, or maybe being a pro wrestler. Never did I think I’d find myself in this situation. But I prove that it can and does happen to anyone, and it doesn’t always happen because someone is on crack or lazy.

HELPING THE INVISIBLE BE SEEN

Miss Sally's Story

She is 45 years old.

The short article that follows is a compilation of information I gathered after talking with Sally about Street Reach for the Homeless and Dinner and Duds. Sally's mission is to serve food and provide essential items for the homeless, the precariously housed, those residing in transitional shelters, and the urban poor. She serves 100 to 125 people a week in the winter, and in the warmer months, she serves 180 to 190 people. Her project is funded by donations and her own pocket, and she has donation sites throughout Fort Wayne, New Haven, and Harlan.

Sally began her outreach after participating in the Homeless Count in 2012. She saw a group of people who fell between the cracks, and she felt the need to step forward. She asked herself: "How can I help them wherever their life's journey is? How can I encourage them to find hope, to become a functioning member of the community?"

I will never ask you why you stand in that line.

She started by having a "door-to-door campaign," explaining, "If you were under the bridge, I went under the bridge. If you were in the woods, I went in the woods."

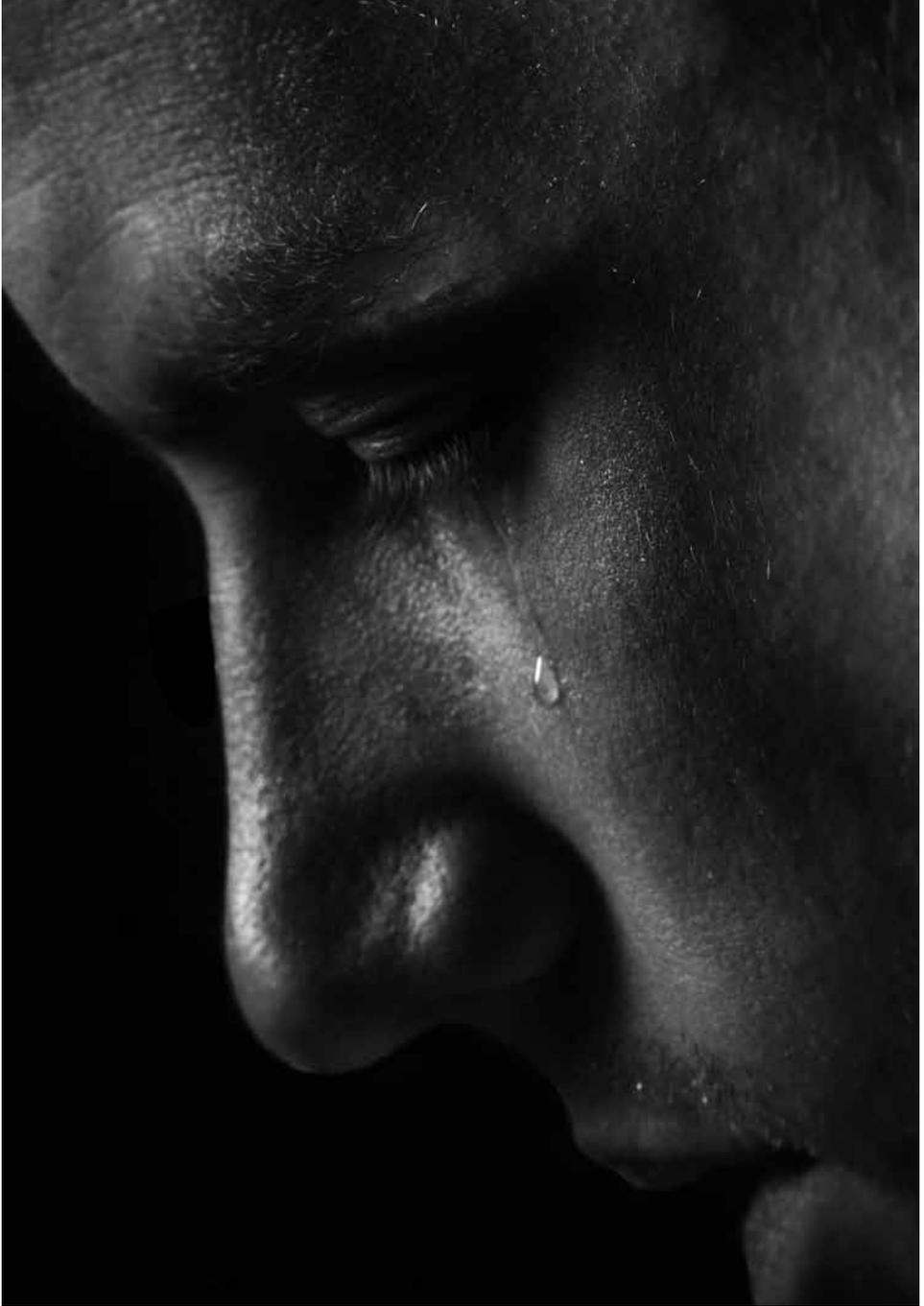
I asked Sally whom she helps—can anyone come? Her voice is filled with passion, and what seems to be an unstoppable energy. Her response: "Anyone can come to my line."

She did go on to describe those in line more specifically: they may be "precariously housed, unsheltered—living under a bridge, in an abandoned building, part of the downtown urban poor, and in warmer months, an increased number of women and children.

"I will never ask why you stand in that line. In the winter, I will only ask where you sleep, in terms of inside or outside, to make sure you get the blanket that best fits your needs."

Soon after starting what she called Street Reach for the Homeless, she asked one of the gentlemen she met what would happen if, instead of coming each week to them with a snack bag, she brought a full dinner, clothes, blankets, sleeping bags, and more to a single site—would they come to her there?

The rest, as they say, is history. Street Reach for the Homeless turned into Dinner and Duds. For nearly one year, Sally has been providing a full, hot, balanced dinner every Monday and Thursday night. She also is known for her white van filled with supplies, from tents and tarps, to clothes, to hygiene items, to blankets and comforters. All gathered to help with their "true test of survival," living on the streets of Fort Wayne.



—Photo by Matt Thomas

I then asked Sally about her experience with the men, and what it took to gain their trust (98 percent of the people in her line are men; in the summer, there are about 95 percent men, and the rates of women and children increase slightly).

“The second I get out of the van ... the number of hugs ... when I say to them, ‘it’s so good to see you,’ I mean it. I really am glad to see them. And their thank yous are genuine, and I believe that I am in this place for a reason—I never

knew anyone in the Fort Wayne homeless count, and why did I do it—if it's God led, I will be God protected. I believe these men would do anything to protect me, and I would protect them. I do not fear for my safety, and I have not ever in the course of a year. I get nothing but respect from these gentlemen—almost all of them call me Miss Sally."

About how she earned their trust: "I think the fact that I treat them with ... with dignity ... and if I say I'm going to be there, I'm there. For a year, I have been exactly where I said I was going to be. The fact that even though I promote Street Reach for the Homeless on Facebook, I never once reveal what your name is, where you're staying, or where we are doing the dinner under the stars. Privacy is part of dignity.

"As the months have gone by, I have seen the issues—and I have become a vocal advocate. We have people out there who are the most at risk—the most humble of our homeless—who are simply falling between the cracks. And they deserve our attention."

I will never ask you why you stand in that line.

About the power of family style: "The whole point of doing the family-style dinner is that homelessness is lonely—just to be able to have conversation is important—it now is truly a street family. When I watch one of them help another, it melts my heart.

"I only serve one portion of the meal. They help me: someone pours the drink; someone is in charge of the hand sanitizer—it's letting them 'own' something on the streets, it's them making it happen. They carry it out of the van, they clean it up, they know that women and children go first. This aspect is teaching them manners, teaching them social skills."

Sally's journey with these gentlemen hasn't ended with food and clothing. On New Year's Eve, as 2012 turned to 2013, she stood before them and asked if anyone was ready to get off the street. And for those who raised their hand, Sally will be there—meeting with them at the library, helping them find the resources they need to get off the streets. For some that means beginning with tasks many of us take for granted: applying for a copy of a birth certificate, a social security card, an identification card—taking the steps to exist on paper.

After hearing this part of Sally's story, I must have blurted out, "It's as if they don't even exist at all." Sally responded: "Yes, it is."

Her work is one of true compassion, showing the men in her line that they aren't invisible.

They deserve our attention.

—By Sarah Sandman

CHOICES AND CHANGES

Neil's Story

He is 38 years old.

Well, I lost my job, and that was a trigger effect. Now I knew about the local shelter—last volunteered there 'bout 15 years ago. And there was hope. Sometimes it is your fault: my madness, my addiction, mental illness, and my trauma, but lots of homeless people do have a choice. It's all about choices and changes, and about changing your own self. You do not have to be homeless. That is a lie from the Devil.

Some people aren't as lucky like me because I am a functional addict. I worked at a manufacturing job for 15 years. The factory laid me off, and I didn't even have enough money to live off of, and not enough to survive off of. Here at the local shelter they gave me another toolbox, and in that box, they put Jesus, and Jesus says you don't have to be in the position that you're in.

The shelter put me in the extended stay 'cause I had always been workin'. Unemployment hadn't run out, so still I looked for jobs. Then my character defects came in, and out on the streets I went and used cocaine. 'Cause I used, I had to stay out of the local shelter for 30 days, but I didn't have to sleep outside. So I went to the filling station for 30 nights and sat on the bench inside from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. Then I went back, and because of my history, I went into the long-term program. It was good that being in an addiction program I lost my identity, 'cause see, my identity was a functioning crack addict.

I took a chance to get into the extended program, and I said if I don't have a job by March 25, I'm gonna go back into the program and take it seriously. I looked and looked for jobs, but no one would hire me. Then I argued with God, and he said to go into the extended program. And in my prayers I know that's what God intended me to do. Fortunately, I did not get a job so I went into the program. I have now been clean and sober for 11 months, and have been practicing religion.

Now I realized that you don't have to lose your identity. If you follow the guidelines you put together for your recovery, you can be yourself with a lot of grace, and with praying every day and reading Scriptures and devotions, all things are possible through Christ. The local shelter gave me strength to where I don't want to get high no more, and my goal is to be gone in September.

When I leave the local shelter, I want to get certified for small engine repair, and I want to start a job. Out there in your madness, you don't think about it, but I have been taught to notice my old way like: behavior, addiction, mental illness, and trauma. So we need to be still and know that He is God. You gotta be still—you gotta make choices you can survive with and be a productive citizen. If I ever get rich, I'm gonna open a house called "Under the Bridge House," where I will use puppets to preach and teach people.

—As told to Michael Skeeters

NOTHING ELSE MATTERED

Dwight's Story

He is 60 years old.

I was a juvenile delinquent, and I never knew my biological dad. All I know is my dad was Polish, but my mother could not pronounce or spell his name. My stepfather was a roofer. Whenever he was off, he was at the bars, so I believe that I basically raised myself. My mother was always in and out of mental institutions, and as I remember, we moved around a lot when I was a child. My mother also had two sisters who were always in and out of mental hospitals and a brother who was discharged from the Army for a nervous condition.

I graduated with a bachelor's degree in behavioral sciences in 1973. I was using drugs (any drug that was available) and partying in college. After college I continued to use and booze, and that caused me to become homeless. I have been homeless twice. The first time I was homeless was when I was 21. I was using drugs and alcohol, and I was going through psychotic episodes. I was in Nevada, and I caught a bus to California. I got married in 1982, and I was married for 23 years. I had another anxiety attack about a year-and-a-half after my wife filed for a divorce. I was so devastated that I tried to commit suicide by taking a bunch of pills.

I ended up in a crisis unit in Florida. I went from 235 pounds down to 110 pounds. I was dehydrated and malnourished. I was admitted to a three-month inpatient locked unit. When I got out, I had a friend invite me to Illinois for a job. I was working one day, and while I was waiting for some documents, I went into the bathroom and took a hit of crack. I then kept the company van for the weekend.

My drugs of choice were alcohol and crack cocaine. I was a binge drinker. Using crack in tandem with my mental illness caused me to become homeless for a second time at the age of 59. Whether or not I had money, I would hang out at a friend's house waiting for the next high. Once I started using crack cocaine, nothing else mattered, not even the alcohol. Most times we would hang out all night and sleep all day, whenever we did sleep.

I came to realize that I kept having psychotic episodes and I kept getting evicted. I was a functional-dysfunctional type of guy. I mean, I was barely making it in life. It got to the point where I could not take care of my basic human needs. I wasn't showering, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, and I couldn't even take out the trash. At one point I was sleeping in truck stop restrooms. I have even slept in a garbage dumpster.

In my last house (a doublewide trailer), I remember that the lights went out. I was months behind in lot fees. It was hot, I wasn't taking out the trash, and there was no food. There were flies flying around the house, and so finally my ex-wife and children left me. She passed a year-and-a-half later in Pennsylvania.



-Photo by Jenne Sprunger

My friend told me two weeks after that because they didn't know what I would do. I was once again devastated.

I can remember that my children were so mad at me because I tried to commit suicide. Since my wife has passed, my children have not talked to me much. I was suffering from anxiety attacks so severe that I couldn't even go to my own son's wedding. I even tried to go to a religious community in California; they called us "Jesus freaks." I moved around to a lot of different places as an adult.

Life is tough. Living with a psychotic parent is hell. I think that I escaped my childhood by going away to college. I wanted to stay and take care of my mom, but I had to run away. After college and after all of my psychotic episodes, there was a certain homeless shelter that saved me. Now I have hope. I'm starting to feel like I'm free. People can become homeless for different reasons. Not all people are homeless because they use drugs or drink. Mental illness can and does cause homelessness. I'm glad that there are people who are willing to help the homeless. I'm glad that people are willing to provide a safety net for people. Although there are some people who don't mind being homeless, I believe that most want to be independent. Finally, I believe that people are good-natured, because more often than not, people you meet on the street are willing to help others.

–As told to George Henry Scott Jr.

THE HAMBURGER GUY

Eddie's Story

He is 55 years old.

unday nights are a little crazy at a hamburger joint downtown. I call it “organized chaos.” My phone won’t stop ringing. Somebody needs a ride or to tell me they’re running late. I don’t pick up, but they’ll get it figured out. I got to get my car fixed, and my daughter’s with me tonight. My little sidekick. It’s the first time she’s come out with me in three weeks.

It started about four years ago. God said to start investing time in my son.

I asked, “How?”

God said, “Take them a hot hamburger.”

“Take who a hot hamburger?”

“The least of these.”

Two guys who walk with us come through the door. I say, “Hey, how’s it goin’ brother? We’ll get going in a minute.” We met in recovery group. As they say, where our misery used to be, our ministry is now.

I went out for a while with another street team. They gave out hygiene kits and prayer, and the guys weren’t real receptive. My son and I started giving out bottles of water and hot hamburgers. Now he comes in when he can, but I’m out every Sunday night with my truck. I’ve only missed two Sundays in four years. We give out food, tents, and sleeping bags. I meet people where they are and sit with them in their homes—their homes are on park benches, under bridges. It’s just about being there for them. Letting them know they’re not lost or forgotten.

The manager comes over and tells me she’s off for the night. I give her a hug and say, “You hanging in there?” She nods. She’s a single mom, and she struggles at times, but she helps us out with some free hamburgers or apple pies sometimes. One Christmas, we were able to bless her. We collected two or three hundred dollars just within our little group.

A few years ago, I was camping with a guy I call “Deep Pockets.” I told him about what we were doing, and he decided to sponsor us. Seventy-five dollars a week to buy hot hamburgers. My pastor checked out what we’re doing, and now we’re under the umbrella of the church. We’re an official 501(c)3, and we can accept donations.

Another couple and their kids come in. “It’s great to see the whole family out!” I give the little girl a high-five. “She’s as outgoing as her mother.” They both smile.

Everybody wants to judge people. They think homeless guys are drug addicts, alcoholics, mean, and angry. The A-number-one thing is this: They are human. They are just like you and me. God put my little heart in the very same place He puts yours. These guys are business owners, husbands. They are people in a season of life that got hard. Some people want to fix them. To that I say, "Oh yeah? You think you're going to fix somebody?" What people don't understand is that we are blessed by the friendships we've made every day. We minister at the same time we are ministered to.

My daughter is picking at her sandwich. She's getting antsy, too. "Daddy, can I go give James a hamburger?" James is sitting in a corner booth with his book bag, talking to the family. "Sure, baby. Finish your sandwich. We're going out soon."

One night, we ran into a homeless guy who was drunk and crying because his son died and he couldn't make it to the funeral. He didn't want anybody to fix him. He needed someone to listen, and we were there for him. Another night we found a man with a rope tossed around the bridge ready to kill himself. And we just listened.

You're miserable? I get it. I've been miserable. I made a lot of other people miserable for a long time. I'm here today because one day somebody listened to me. I want to be that person to give hope. Growing up, I never had anybody tell me about Jesus. I never had a person who spoke Life to me. I tell them this, "You can't change five seconds ago. But you can change now, to make five seconds from now a little better."

In four years, we got five people into homes. Imagine if each of those five people start doing what I'm doing. Imagine if even just one more guy makes it off the street.

Sometimes Sunday nights here do look like chaos. What you don't see is all the planning, the messages and phone calls that happen throughout the week. Every Sunday, it comes together in the parking lot when we form a circle, grip hands, and turn our hearts to God. We pray that we'll do what Jesus wants us to do tonight, that we'll meet whom Jesus wants us to meet, and that we'll be where God wants us to be.

My mind is in a frenzy. I know it won't stop until about 10 or 11 o'clock tonight when my head hits the pillow and then the Lord will either say to me, "You done good," or He'll call me closer and we'll pray.

—As told to Bethany Pruitt

—Photo by Alle Lemmon



HEALING

Michelle's Story

She is 45 years old.

7n August 1993 I was homeless. I cannot remember how long I lived in this state. Yet, I do remember life was hard, full of pain, and there seemed to be no hope for a change. It was as if I were stuck on a never-ending merry-go-round, which continued to turn faster and faster, with no expectation of slowing. I had a friend who allowed my children and me to crash at their home. It wasn't the best place to live, but it fulfilled a need, and it made it easier to do the things that I liked to do. It was safe. It was my hideaway, the place I could escape and be free without fear of prying eyes. It was perfect. You see, my friend and I were addicts; my drug of choice was crack cocaine. My homelessness was not from my losing a job or my inability to obtain affordable housing. My homelessness was a direct result of my usage of illegal drugs.

During this chaotic time in my life, getting high was my only priority. Yes, there were bills, kids, family, and many other aspects of life. Unfortunately, they were secondary; nothing was more important than my next high. While my children did not live in filth and squalor, they were definitely neglected. Month after month I would abuse and sell our food stamps. It was not unusual for me to fill the cabinets with just enough food to get by. If I had any additional money coming into the household, it went to drugs first, and then to necessities.

Although I already had two small children, I became pregnant with my third child. Despite my pregnancy, I was still unable to get myself together and stop using drugs. I truly wanted to stop, but the desire to use was stronger and more real than the child I carried in my womb. Therefore, I continued to relapse over and over again. I had always heard about addicts hitting rock bottom. Yet, I never understood how hard the rock at the bottom really was until I landed smack dab on top of it.

On August 19, 1993, I gave birth to my daughter, Rosaline. My state of mind at that time was unfathomable. In the heavy throes of addiction and labor, I was unable to call for help because I wanted to continue to get high. I remember watching myself give birth from far away. I thought I was going to die. I knew what I was doing was not right. As I gave birth to my daughter in the same place that I smoked crack cocaine every day, all I could think of was that I wanted to get high just one more time. The thought made me sad.

Once we arrived at the hospital, it was obvious to everyone I was an addict. As I began to come down from my high, it was as if I were seeing clearly for the first time. A nurse told me Rosaline and I both tested positive for cocaine. I was not surprised, but I was ashamed. My beautiful little girl—what had I done? I will never forget what happened next. A woman walked into my hospital room at precisely 4:15 p.m. and told me my two sons were in the process of being

removed from my care. Five-year-old Nathan went to live with my cousin, while my year-old, Julian, was placed into emergency foster care. As my daughter and I both lay in the hospital suffering from withdrawal, a wave of helplessness and hopelessness engulfed me. I decided then that I had to change, and it had nothing to do with the trouble I had just gotten myself into. I wanted to live. I wanted to live for my children and for me.

The courts created a treatment plan for me, and I willingly complied. Step one involved my entering into an addictions program. I remained there for 90 days. In November, I entered a homeless shelter program. I learned about recovery. I learned how to be productive. I learned about self-sufficiency, and I learned that I could never walk down the road that I had been delivered from again. In February 1995, 15 months after entering the shelter doors, I graduated and moved into transitional housing through another local social-service agency I had been working with. On March 17, 1995, my case was closed, and my children returned home to me for good.

I thought I had it all together. I was working hard, my children were home, and I was drug-free. Life was not easy, but I was able to maintain. Yet, on June 4, 1995, devastation came knocking at my door once again. My precious Rosaline was visiting with a relative for the weekend. During that visit she was badly burned. She died 10 days later. She was 22 months old.

If there were ever a justification to use drugs in order to escape reality, the death of Rosaline was it. Although I was devastated and heartbroken, I was determined not to fall prey to my addiction again. I had two small children at home who still needed their mom. After everything I had already put them through, I owed it to my boys to stay focused. I understood that going back to drugs would not bring my precious daughter back; therefore, using could never become an option.

After Rosaline's death, life was difficult, to say the least. I often found myself living from paycheck to paycheck. Nevertheless, determination was my motivation. I would not allow myself to be homeless again because getting high was more important. I continued to fight hard in order to change my life for my children and me. Even though my income was stretched thin, I refused to go back to my former lifestyle in order to supplement my finances. Selling drugs would only lead me back into active addiction, jail, homelessness, or possibly even death. I preferred the struggle, compared with the alternative.

As I healed, I began to change my focus, and I decided to help other women who had issues with addiction and homelessness. That is when I truly began to see transformation in my life. After working for several years at some of the same homeless shelters that helped me, I decided to attend college and obtain my degree. In 2011, I received an associate degree in general studies. In May 2013, I will earn a bachelor's degree in human services.

Life is good, and I have been clean for almost 20 years. My boys are healthy



–Photo by Hillary Ritchart

and happy. They have given me six wonderful grandchildren. I have maintained stable employment in addition to going to school full time. I am thankful for the people who have impacted my life positively and have helped me to get to where I am today. Throughout all the trials I remained drug-free. I realized a long time ago, if I ever made the choice to pick up a crack pipe again, I would not be able to tell my story. Telling my story is too important, and it's much bigger than I am. Someday, someone will need to hear that life can be good after the death of a child, and that it is possible to have a real life after living through homelessness and years of addiction. I want to help someone just as I had been helped when I reached the lowest point in my life.

The ending to an addict's story is always the same: jail, institution, homelessness, or death. I had already been to jail, to an institution, and homeless. The only thing waiting for me was death. My path has not always been peaches and cream. Even so, I love life on this side of the street, and that is where I plan to remain. My ending has yet to be written, but I know it is much greater than my past.

–As told to Gina Brooks

THE MAN IN THE LAST PEW

—for the man with the same name as mine

It's a little thing for me to live through these cards.
They show the places that make my mind smile—

places I'd live in if I knew magic, or didn't have
the job of owning all of the dreams of my past.

Christmas cards are easier to live in. I've collected more
than 3,000 cards since 1985. The reds and the blues

that glitter have a different meaning when I
can put my hands on the edges of their frame.

People make me scratch my head. People take more
time to show off true colors. And people forget people

are not all hard. When in state's hands, I thought
I would miss people, but the medicine made me

only depend on the movies in my mind, scenes where
Mama sat in our living room, while I read how the words

of the Bible move in this life, without the worry
of her suffering. Suffering comes like daylight

in to my bedroom, now, taking me out of the darkness,
in to creaky pews of Mission Church on Pearl Street.

I bring with me Mama memories—the birthday
and Christmas cards I hand out to the worn faces

I have come to smile at my comeback to the world.
I could be a mad dog about it all, but I have food, the

warmth of my apartment, and how God put new
light in my head. The new moved out the old,

and no institution will tie down my dreams, now. I accept
all my nightmares, and all bright daylight shining too.

—By Curtis L. Crisler



-Photo by Emily Thornburg

AFTERWORD

Homelessness.

It's a word that strikes up emotions, instills fear, and sets forth stereotypes. Yet, one-third of society is one paycheck away from being that word.

Perhaps it's the word itself. When we allow ourselves to equate people to a word, we package all of the stereotypes we've learned over time into syllables and forget about the person. Doing so makes it easy to draw conclusions from statistics we've read in a paper or heard from a friend, but what if we actually learned the story behind the person? How might we move beyond a series of letters strategically placed together to understanding the lives of our neighbors? Our homeless neighbors.

You just took one of the first steps.

Combined, the mosaic of stories in this booklet weaves the fabric of the Fort Wayne community: homeless and non-homeless; business leader and educator; caring neighbors, and neighbors who need a friend. This is a snapshot of the lives of those who live within miles of you. This is your community's story.

As you are Facing Homelessness in Fort Wayne, four other communities are on their own journeys through The Facing Project. Atlanta is Facing Sex Trafficking; Rome, Georgia, is Facing Hope; South Bend, Indiana, is Facing the Future; and in our hometown of Muncie, Indiana, we're Facing Autism. Many other projects across the country are waiting in the wings.

The common thread is each city is using grassroots efforts to tell the stories of their neighbors through the arts. From this, the goal should be a better understanding of the community's story—including creating different approaches to solutions, bringing new people to the table, and wiping away those statistics and stereotypes.

Ultimately, our hope is that these stories within this booklet challenged your perceptions.

Every community has a story to face, but it's what comes after these stories that is critical. What will be the next chapter in Facing Homelessness in Fort Wayne?

Perhaps you'll be part of the story.



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