

Weather

Today: Cloudy, rain, drizzle.
High 54, Low 42, Wind 10-20 mph.
Monday: Mostly cloudy,
showers. High 56, Wind 8-16 mph.
Yesterday: Temp. range: 55-66.
AQI: N/A. Details on Page B2.

The Washington Post

115TH YEAR No. 143

SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 1992

Samaritans Could No Longer Just Pass Him By Network of 'Friends' Is Determined to Make a Difference for Homeless Man in D.C.

By Sue Anne Pressley
Washington Post Staff Writer

For a long time, nobody knew who William Brown was. He was just that big older man standing on the porch of the United Mine Workers building at 900 15th St. NW sitting on a bench in nearby McPherson Square playing jazz on a boombox. But gradually, in a city where it is easy sidestep the homeless, people began to take notice of the grandfatherly Brown. Maybe it was his way of making eye contact and saying "Good day" to the passing workers, or maybe it was because he never seemed to ask anyone for money.

Judy Scott became acquainted with Brown as she stepped into the Mine Workers building each morning. Dolph Hatfield met Brown at the church Brown took to attending near Lafayette Square. Things changed for Jeanette Smith the day she stopped to ask him about his sign, a collage of headlines about lawsuits and hostages and President Bush.

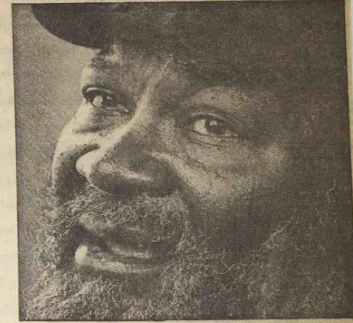
The more they talked to Brown, the more they became convinced that he was a special case, someone society had failed, someone who perhaps they could help—if he were willing. Almost without realizing it, they said, they began to feel responsible. And before long, the group of unconnected

strangers began to think of themselves as "the friends of Mr. Brown."

"Lots of people have gone beyond the normal thing for Mr. Brown," said Smith, of Vienna, who worked at a downtown trade association and passed him twice a day. "There were weeks when I'd get calls from people two, three, four times a week—'Mr. Brown gave me your number. What can I do to help him?'"

The case of William Wallace Brown Jr., 60, formerly of Alexandria, illustrates the sensitive and sometimes frustrating aspects of dealing with a homeless person: Is it possible to help him?

See HOMELESS, A20, Col. 1



William Brown has found friends and assistance.

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SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 1992



William Brown sits with his music on steps of the United Mine Workers building on 15th Street NW.

They Could No Longer Just Pass By Samaritans Try to Make a Difference for Homeless Man

By Sue Anne Pressley
Washington Post Staff Writer

For a long time, nobody knew who William Brown was. He was just that big older man standing on the porch of the United Mine Workers building at 900 15th St. NW or else sitting on a bench in nearby McPherson Square playing jazz on a boombox.

But gradually, in a city where it is easy to sidestep the homeless, people began to take notice of the grandfatherly Brown. Maybe it was his way of making eye contact and saying, "Good day" to the passing workers, or maybe it was because he never seemed to ask anyone for money.

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See HOMELESS, A20, Col. 1

Samaritans Extend Hand to Homeless Man

HOMELESS, From A1

sible to make a difference? Can anyone really change another person's life?

Brown's friends certainly have tried.

In the past year, they have spent hours trying to sort out his legal affairs. They have brought him sleeping bags, warm clothing and hot food; spent Sunday afternoons listening to music with him; and helped him manage his only income, a monthly Social Security check of \$400.

Recently, when Brown was in Alexandria Hospital for a month with back surgery, his friends visited him, took him candy and spending money and consulted his doctors about his condition. Dismayed at the prospect of Brown's returning to the streets after his release, they've been helping him to rent a temporary room and are redoubling their efforts to find him a nice place to live. Through it all, they have

"Lots of people have gone beyond the normal thing for Mr. Brown."

— Jeanette Smith

discouraged any recognition of their efforts; their only concern, they say, is "Mr. Brown."

Why they are willing to go so far for someone unrelated to them, someone who is obsessed about past wrongs and may not be able to put his life back together, is, they believe, easy enough to explain.

For one thing, they are convinced, as Brown is, that he was cheated out of his family home some 15 years ago by lawyers who took advantage of him, his financial troubles and what was then his alcoholic state. There is a court injunction against a former Alexandria lawyer for \$50,000 owed Brown in fees, penalties and interest. And though Brown's friends doubt he will ever get his house back, as he hopes, they know how much the money, if collected, could mean to him.

There also is something they find touching and compelling about Brown's story—how his mother died in childbirth, how he lived in his Alexandria house for years with his father and his aunt until their deaths, how he worked for a long time as a construction laborer and a power lineman, how despite his misfortunes, he managed to conquer his alcohol problem and hasn't had a drink in 15 years. After losing his home, he had stayed at various places in Northern Virginia and the District until two years ago, when he took to camping out near McPherson Square. He never liked shelters, he said; they were too dirty and dangerous.

But beyond those specifics, Brown's friends believe that by trying to help one person like him, they are railing against a world where the homeless are not individuals, but annoying figures to hurry past each day and avoid.

Maybe there is a little middle-class guilt involved in their efforts: Smith found herself on holidays, surrounded by family and good food, wondering whether Brown was alone. On cold nights in her warm Rosslyn home, Beverly Jacobs, another worker who passed him each day downtown, would think about the time she gave Brown a new pair of gloves and his hands were so frozen he could not put them on.

Dolph Hatfield was drawn to Brown one Sunday morning at St. John's Church near Lafayette Square. He had noticed that the obviously homeless man attended each Sunday, quietly taking a seat in the same pew. At that service, however, he watched as a worshiper refused to take Brown's extended hand during a "Pass the Peace" greeting in which all were encouraged to shake hands with their neighbors. Hatfield followed Brown outside after the service and apologized, and the two became friends.

On another Sunday last September, Hatfield felt a similar dismay when the Secret Service agents accompanying Bush on one of his occasional visits to the church refused to let Brown attend the service. In that moment, everything Hatfield felt about society's treatment of the poor was crystallized.

"Unfortunately, the Scripture reading that day was the parable about the rich man and the poor man coming to the assembly and that one should not favor the rich man," said Hatfield, a research scientist at the National Cancer Institute. "Mr. Brown comes to church every Sunday and the president comes every fifth or sixth." After Hatfield complained to church officials and the White House, Brown and Bush have attended the same service several times without problem.

Because Brown often camped out on the porch of her office building, Judy Scott, a lawyer with the United Mine Workers, could not help but get involved, she said. For the past year, she has worked quietly to untangle the complicated story of how Brown lost his home. She sees him as a proud and dignified person.

But she also knows how stubborn he can be with what he sees as his principles—Brown has said repeatedly that he wants to stay on the streets to make the point that his home has been stolen and should be returned to him. It is hard to convince him that it might be best to give up that notion.

Maybe Brown's friends can make a difference in his life, as they hope. Or maybe, as they sometimes fear, their best efforts will fail. But whatever happens, they said, it is not their place to judge him. They cannot tell him what to do.

"He didn't ask me to intervene in his life," Scott said. "So who am I to say, 'Mr. Brown, it's time to move on?'"