

A GLIMPSE INTO THE LIVES OF WASHINGTON DC'S HOMELESS

by Dolph Hatfield

The Urban Institute has estimated that there are about 3.5 million people living on the streets or in shelters in the United States. Personal problems have brought many of these individuals to the streets and shelters. Low-paying jobs and the high costs of housing and health care have brought others.

As my wife, Mary, and I have been become acquainted with many of Washington, D.C.'s homeless since about 2001, I thought it might be insightful to share several of their lives with others. Such insights will hopefully counter some of the rather unpleasant thoughts that many of us share in how we think about the homeless.

My initial interaction with the homeless, however, was through William Wallace Brown. This impecunious, gentle man attended St. John's Episcopal Church at Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., where I am also a member. For more than 10 years, we sat in consecutive pews on Sundays and formed a strong and enduring friendship. Mr. Brown moved onto the streets of our Nation's Capitol in the late 1970s to protest the theft of his home by an unscrupulous lawyer. Although he was a quiet man, Mr. Brown captured the attention of many whom he encountered. He made numerous friends while he lived on the street and others he met at St. John's. When he died in October, 2000, his friends at the Church saw to it that he was buried on the grounds of St. John's, also known as the Church of the Presidents. Mr. Brown's burial service was covered by several articles in the Washington Post, on the NBC Evening News with Tom Brokaw and the NBC Early Morning Show with Katie Couric.

Meeting the homeless

After Mr. Brown's death, I wanted to maintain an association with the homeless. On numerous trips to visit Mr. Brown on the street, I had noticed that several destitute individuals slept on the steps of St. John's. I stopped by the Church one evening shortly after Mr. Brown's death and introduced myself to several of the homeless. We had a pleasant, ten-minute conversation. They seemed pleased that I had dropped by and welcomed my offer to visit again.

I then began dropping by St. John's about two evenings a week and my wife often accompanied me. We passed out snacks that consisted mostly of fruit bars, peanut butter crackers and bottled water. Occasionally, we would take McDonald's coupons to distribute. We have learned that soft foods are preferable to those that are hard as many of the homeless have dental problems. The McDonald certificates are a favorite because they can be used to get coffee and a warm breakfast.

Early on, I noticed that a Salvation Army van comes by the Church each evening with dinner (soup, stew, sandwich, hot chocolate or the like) for the homeless. The Salvation Army is one of the major food sources for the destitute in D.C. These provisions are a Godsend for the dispossessed who would likely starve without the assistance of this organization and several others that provide food in the mornings, at noon or in the evenings. There are many other wonderful organizations in D.C. that provide assistance including food, clothing, medical care, counseling and bus and metro passes to individuals who are either not able or not inclined to take advantage of the city's welfare services.

The winters of 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 were harsh by Washington standards. Due to the inclement weather, not everyone on the street could meet the Salvation Army van for the evening meal. It was obvious on those evenings when someone had missed the van as they would

immediately eat the items I gave them whereas they usually kept them for a snack at a later time. On one occasion, when the temperature was below 15oF and the wind-chill pushed it below zero, I met a gentleman whose beard had frozen to his face. When he reached for some crackers that I offered him, his flimsy coat came open. All he had on under his jacket was a tee shirt. I called the Emergency Hotline for the Homeless. The person handling the lines said that their trucks were picking up those at risk from the freezing weather and that they would be sure to take this individual to one of the shelters. It was a fortunate encounter as this gentleman would likely not have made it through the night.

I am acquainted with many of the homeless who slept on the steps of St. John's Church or in the vicinity. I have had the good fortune to know the following five individuals quite well.

Everyone knows Robert

It seems that virtually everyone living on the street within several blocks of St. John's knows Robert. He is affectionately known as "The Mayor". One afternoon, I went to look for Robert to alert him that food would be available in the evening from one of the city's private clubs that sometimes donated food to the destitute. Since the homeless do not stay around the Church during the day, I started my search for Robert at the nearby park, McPherson Square. Although Robert was not there, I met George, a gentleman whom I knew only slightly. George said he knew Robert and would tell him about the food, and as many others as he could. I also went into Lafayette Square, across from the Church, and into Farragut and Franklin Squares that are on I Street just east of McPherson Square and west of St. John's, respectively. None of the regulars who slept on the steps or around St. John's were in any of these places. But I spoke to individuals in both of the latter Squares who knew Robert. They said they would tell him to meet me at the Church that evening.

Because Robert is known to so many, he has provided my entrance card into the Squares near the Church. This has been important since the homeless are reluctant to accept food from strangers. When the private club provides more food than the folks at the Church can consume, I now go to the other parks mentioning that Robert suggested the extra food be brought to them. It is always readily accepted.

Robert is one of the most remarkable homeless individuals that I have had the pleasure of meeting. He has taken on the responsibility for keeping alcoholics, drug users, loud or trouble-making individuals away from the steps at St. John's Church. He also often takes on the responsibility for cleaning up the trash left by others around the Church. In the mid-1960s, Robert fell and severely injured his head. He was in a comma for about three months and has subsequently had problems with alcohol. He is 57 years of age and has no family to care about him. Although he has conquered his alcoholic problems and would like to get off the street, his chances of doing so seem slim.

Sam, a kind and gentle man

Sam is 56 years old and had worked for a tire manufacturer in Detroit for 23 years. He lost his job about 10 years ago when the company downsized their staff. Sam then went to work for the U.S. Park Service as a security guard and was assigned to a remote area in Big Bend National Park. He was relocated several times over the next 9 years and was finally released along with many other Park Service security guards in January, 2002, as a result of the reduction in staff that occurred after the 9/11 terrorists' attacks. Sam became severely depressed and came to Washington, D.C. He found his way onto the steps of St. John's Church in July, 2002.

Sam hated living on the streets. He has four children in Detroit, but was estranged from all except for one daughter. He did not tell her that he was unemployed and living on the streets. My wife and I made sure that Sam always had a telephone calling card to stay in touch with his daughter.

Sam is unquestionably one of the nicest people that I have met. He is pleasant to everyone he meets. When he received extra food or McDonald's coupons, he always shared these items with those who were hungry. Sam often called me at home or at the office, and most of his calls were to let me know about the needs of others.

The Georgetown Ministry Center is one of several establishments that assists the homeless in a variety of ways. This organization afforded Sam a psychiatric evaluation that confirmed that he was suffering from severe depression. The Georgetown Ministry Center then helped Sam obtain social security disability insurance that made it possible for him to move back to Detroit and rent an apartment near his daughter. My wife and I put Sam on the bus for Detroit in November, 2003. We stay in touch and he is doing very well. Sam is volunteering at a local hospital and is taking business management courses at a nearby junior college. He has been promised a job by a local establishment when he finishes his course work. This good fortune could not have happened to a kinder or more thoughtful man.

Jake, so gifted and talented

Jake is 43 years old and has been homeless for almost three years. He is friendly, highly intelligent and very articulate. Whenever I took friends to meet the homeless, Jake was one of the first individuals I sought out as he is a wonderful conversationalist.

Jake had a difficult childhood that still haunts him. His mother was placed into a mental institution when he was quite young and his father was an alcoholic. He lived in several foster homes. Some of the families were loving, while others treated him horribly. As a consequence, Jake cannot stand the slightest pressure from anyone. He worked in research and development in designing highly specialized technical equipment for a spectrophotometric firm and also as a computer analyst until was 40. When the pressure got too much for him, he quit his job and moved to D.C. He lived in his jeep until he could not afford the gas and upkeep. He then began living on the steps of St. John's Church.

Jake wanted to build and enter a robot vehicle in the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) sponsored race that took place in the Mojave Desert on March 13, 2004. The prize was \$1,000,000. None of the 14 entries traveled more than a few of the 200 required miles to finish in the first year of competition. Jake knew the shortcomings of each of the 14 entries and maintains that he could have built the winning vehicle. After speaking with him in considerable detail about the race and his proposed design, I have no doubt that he could have built a vehicle that would have been competitive in the DARPA race.

About a year after Jake and I first met, he began sketching for the first time in his life. His drawings are outstanding. We have shown samplings of Jake's drawings to a few of the local artists and their comments have been very positive. Stoff Smulson, who managed one of the local art galleries called Decatur Blue, saw one of Jake's sketches of a ballerina and said that the hands of the ballerina would rival those drawn by the Great Masters. Between Jake's artistic and computer abilities, he has the skills to achieve a great deal in life.

One of the D.C. outreach programs helped Jake obtain social security disability insurance that assisted him in getting off the street. His IQ was tested during the interview period of obtaining social security disability and Jake ranked in the upper 1-2% or genius category in assessing

mechanics and technology. He now lives in an apartment in D.C. We see each other about weekly and Jake stays at our home to watch the house and take care of our pet whenever we are away. He often sends me drawings, ideas he has about many technology advances that I feel would indeed rival the great talents and minds of our society. I am so very hopeful that someday he will be able to completely be free of the many issues that haunt him from his early life so that he will make the major contributions to society that he is fully capable of doing.

Frank and the DEA

In the beginning, my conversations with Frank were always brief. He expressed appreciation for the food and clothing we gave him but had little else to say. As I came to know Frank better, our conversations got longer. It became apparent that he has hallucinations about his involvement with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and with several prominent sports figures. One holiday season, Frank said he wanted a baseball cap with the DEA logo on it for Christmas. When Frank received his cap, he began telling me how he had a role in starting this organization and continued to work undercover for them. He also told me that he was a friend of Michael Jordan and had helped Tiger Woods get his start in golf.

Frank was 46 in the summer of 2004, is very intelligent and well-spoken. He has a brother and sister who live in upper New York State, but they apparently do not get along with Frank nor do they have any desire to help him move off the street.

Frank suffers from bipolar disorder and requires medication. Once, since I have known Frank, he had to be institutionalized. Frank was arrested by the Park Police for jumping into the street and acting as if he were shooting at people in passing cars. He resisted arrest that resulted in his being charged with a misdemeanor. He was taken before the D.C. Superior Court and the judge ordered that he be sent to St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Once he had been stabilized with the appropriate medication, Frank was taken back to the Superior Court. The judge ruled that Frank could not be released until his trial date as the Court had no guarantee that he would continue taking his medication. The judge, therefore, placed him in the D.C. jail. Frank could not be returned to St. Elizabeth's as the hospital had declared him mentally competent. When I visited Frank at the D.C. jail, he was shackled and caged behind a large glass partition. In contrast, the other inmates were placed into a large room where they were separated from their visitors by a thick glass plate. After about two months in jail, Frank was taken back to Court to face the charges of resisting arrest. The prosecution was not prepared for the trial. Thus, the charges against him were dropped and he was released. Frank was discharged on an extremely cold day in January in nothing more than his jump suit and a flimsy coat provided by the D.C. jail. I met him as he was released and urged him to accept temporary housing offered by one of the establishments that works with the homeless. Frank refused. He said he wanted to be back on the street with his friends. My wife and I bought him a heavy jacket, called the Emergency Hotline for blankets, fed him and then left Frank at the Church in weather in the low 20s. I checked on Frank several times a week for the first few weeks to be sure he was staying warm and fed. I consider Frank to be harmless and a very decent individual. Everyone who interacts with Frank for any length of time likes him including his doctors and other health care workers as well as those who work with the homeless. He is not capable of being employed and, without family support, his future does not seem to be a very bright. I imagine Frank will be on the street for the rest of his life.

Ed and the U.S. government

One of my initial acquaintances of the folks who slept at or around St. John's Church was Ed. Ed has a magnificent vocabulary but talks incessantly about filing briefs against the government on various environmental issues. Intertwined with these ramblings are comments about his communication with beings from outer space and his birth in the belly of a mastodon. There is no question that he is incapable of working. However, he is harmless and a very thoughtful person. I was touched on one occasion when Ed gave me one of the devices that he made for communicating with beings from outer space.

Ed is in his late 50s and, unfortunately, he does not have any family that cares enough about him to keep him off the street. He does not appear to be so mentally unstable that he should be institutionalized, and therefore, his only alternative would seem to be life on the street. I suspect that Ed, like Frank, will be on the street for the rest of his life.

Other homeless

These are the stories of only five of the homeless whom Mary and I have come to know. There are many others whose paths we have crossed. For example, Betty is in her late 40s and has been diagnosed with melanoma and breast cancer. Regardless of repeated attempts to get her to return to the doctor, she refuses to do so. She is an artist and her paintings, primarily of floral arrangements, are superb. Bob is an elderly gentleman who is an avid reader and enjoys spending his days at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library. But his small social security check does not provide him with sufficient funds to live in an apartment. Tony is quiet, is very respectful, and stays to himself. I have gotten to know Tony well and he, like so many of the others, is not capable of working. Ken is from Laos and Shin is from Hong Kong and despite several years of trying to make it in this country, both have given up and are living on the street. John is an extremely nice individual who works and has a strong desire to get off the street. Unfortunately, he does not earn enough money to rent an apartment. Lori is about 45, and while she is a pleasant person, she appears to suffer from paranoia. She has hallucinations about the government trying to assassinate her that prevent her from functioning in society. Morris is slightly retarded and maintains that his mother and her boyfriend left him in downtown D.C. to fend for himself. Just before hurricane Isabelle hit D.C. in mid-September, 2003, my wife and I made a quick trip to St. John's to ensure everyone had sought shelter. We found Morris shivering on the Church steps, fully exposed to the wind and rain. We rented a motel room on New York Avenue where he stayed until the storm dissipated. When I visit St. John's and Morris is there, he often follows me around like a small child, asking if I have seen his mother.

On one occasion when Mary and I were having our home remodeled, the overseer of the work began answering our phone and taking messages. One of the messages was from Lee. The message was relayed to Mary that "Lee called and wanted you and Dolph to know that he and Graham were staying at 20th and L Streets". Mary did not tell our message taker that Lee and Graham were staying on (not at) 20th and L Streets. Another message was from Don, and when Mary heard it was Don, she told our message taker that it was good to hear from Don as we had been worried about him and wondered how his was doing. The message taker replied "Don is in jail and asked that Dolph to come visit him!" We indeed receive many calls from our closest homeless friends with all kinds of requests and messages to let us know how they are doing. So many of the homeless are capable of working but cannot find jobs that would make it possible for them to move off the street. For example, Rob is another of those individuals who loves to work and is one of the most considerate and nicest people we have met on the street. Rob takes a

bus and then the Metro on a daily basis to travel to the suburbs to do construction work. He spends two hours traveling to work and two hours getting back “home”. His travel costs are about \$15/day and he makes about \$40/day at work. Hardly enough to get off the street and barely enough to keep himself and his lady friend fed and clothed. Many others have mental handicaps that prevent them from working, but they are not so ill that they require hospitalization.

Many of the homeless are victims of alcohol and/or drug abuse and, although there are numerous counseling programs, many do not seek help or fail to complete the programs. For example, Don, Nick and William have been beholden to the “white witch” (street slang for cocaine) for many years and have been through the rehab programs repeatedly. It is such a waste and heartbreaking to see them throwing away their lives. We have not given up on them, although many of the rehab programs feel after three attempts, it is usually useless to go on. All three of these individuals are very gifted and talented and can still make a contribution to society if they can get their addictions corrected. Don is currently in rehab for the third time and William for the fourth time. They still have our total support to get themselves straightened out. Nick has been before “the beast” (street slang for the Judge) and incarcerated on numerous occasions. He has been through rehab for a fourth time, but is now drug free and starting to move in all the right directions. We feel fully confident that Nick is going to make it this time.

The stories about the homeless, their problems, and why they are on the street are endless.

Keeping informed

Street Sense is a newspaper that is published monthly that focuses on the city’s underprivileged. The vendors are homeless and receive \$0.70 of each dollar paid for the paper. Street Sense provides one of the best means of keeping those living on the streets in D.C. informed about available shelters, outreach centers, soup kitchens, emergency food sources and medical resources. The paper includes wonderful stories that involve or affect the homeless. Another source of information for and about the homeless in D.C. is on the website www.community-partnership.org/facts.html.

The future

I have met more than a hundred of the homeless and have come to know many of them on a personal basis. As in all walks of life, not all of these individuals are pleasant, and some can be very difficult. Most, however, are genuinely nice people, and are courteous and respectful to each other and to Mary and me.

A friendly hello from a stranger and a few minutes of conversation can make for a better day in the life of a homeless individual. However, counseling, jobs and secure housing are required to eradicate homelessness in this country. Meanwhile, greater awareness and involvement by all members of society can help to elevate the plight of the homeless.

Word count: 3,902 of text.