

Home in the Streets. Agencies work to get homelessness under control. Page 18

TULSA METRO'S ONLY INDEPENDENT NEWSWEEKLY • FREE • MAY 20-26, 2010

**URBAN
TULSA**

Weekly

VOL. 19 NO. 50 • WWW.URBANTULSA.COM



SUMMER BREWS

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TIME FOR OUR ANNUAL ISSUE. PAGE 20**

Finding Home on the Streets

Broken families, misfortune cast lives asunder and into the hands of service agencies

BY STACY PETTIT



MICHAEL COOPER

John Ross is a master of disguise. Sitting in the commons area of the downtown Tulsa Community College campus, he and the other students on the second floor have a picturesque view of the streets of downtown Tulsa.

To his fellow classmates, the maze of pavement below does not ignite any particular feeling within, but Ross has a much stronger tie to the crisscrossed gray streets. Although he reads the same books, listens to the same lectures and does the same assignments as the other students, Ross has a better understanding of these streets than the other students will ever be able to learn.

When class is over and the other students head to their homes to do homework, Ross begins his journey to the homeless shelter, his temporary address for the past two years.

"People should understand sometimes ... the people that are homeless have no family, no friends, no hope, no food, no clothes," Ross said. "Those least people are still people, and they have a story and a reason why they ended up there."

As Ross tells his story, there are sparks of joy in certain pages. But when he begins to talk about his wife's death in 1981, the pages begin to tear to pieces.

"I started self-medicating myself with drugs," he said. "I maintained being able to hide my drug use for a long time."

Soon, Ross was introduced to the drug of choice among many Oklahomans at the time — meth.

"After about eight years of use, meth was my downfall," he said. "It just became an overwhelming addiction, and I lost my job, my car, my house."

Meth is also what led Ross to possession convictions in Oklahoma City and jail time, he said. With no friends or family to turn to after being released, Ross became acquainted with calling shelters and streets home. After getting a job for an ice cream company, home would often be inside the frigid ice cream truck.

After moving back to Tulsa with the expansion of the ice cream company, Ross's probation officer told him about the Salvation Army Center of Hope for the homeless. Ross began working his way through the tiered programs at the Salvation Army that teaches basic life skills until he reached the advanced program called Project Able.

This program requires a two-year commitment, and those in the program must be clean and sober, earn some sort of income, and work and go to school part-time or work or go to school full-time. Ross began rebuilding a life, putting the torn pages of his story back in place. He is now attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings and studying toward his associate's degree in liberal arts with an emphasis on film at TCC. This is all while still staying at the temporary housing at the Center of Hope until he graduates from the Project Able program and goes on to find his own housing.

"People on the streets ignore you or try to look the other way," said John Ross, a homeless full-time student. "People shouldn't be scornful of the homeless because they are people. No matter how downtrodden or beaten they are, they really do appreciate any help that's given to them."

While at TCC, Ross began writing a paper for a class about volunteer opportunities in Tulsa. This paper quickly spiraled into an essay about the work done at the Center of Hope and the difficulties of the homeless population. Then a group of friends began helping him convert the paper into a documentary, which included interviews from some of the volunteers and homeless at the shelter. The documentary, which has since been shown at Circle Cinema and other venues throughout town, puts a face to the homeless issue in Tulsa.

"People on the streets ignore you or try to look the other way," he said. "People shouldn't be scornful of the homeless because they are people. No matter how downtrodden or beaten they are, they really do appreciate any help that's given to them."

Ross hopes to continue making documentaries through Cardboard Box

Productions, his production company named after the box he lived in while in Oklahoma City. He hopes he can be a voice of hope for the homeless in Tulsa, he said.

"Sometimes it's hard to deal with some of the issues they have, but if you're willing to help yourself, there's agencies like the Salvation Army that are there to help you."

Ending Homelessness

Even though Michael Brose hears about the varying tragic stories daily from the homeless in Tulsa, he is surprisingly optimistic about the issue of homelessness. As the executive director of the Mental Health Association of Tulsa, Brose believes the problem of homelessness cannot only be alleviated but can be solved.

"Historically, Tulsa has a great homeless shelter system, but really, if we're going to end homelessness, the movement has been away

Methodist Church downtown. People are accepted into the program regardless of whether they are clean and sober or not, but they are not permitted to use while at the facilities.

"If you don't have a place to live, if you don't have an address, you can't get anywhere in life," Brose said. "When you provide this place for someone to live, they begin to engage in treatment and accept treatment."

Residents in the program are provided with case managers, mental and physical health care. But Brose said a major part of rebuilding lives off the streets includes healthy relationships, becoming a part of the community and finding a place of worship if they so choose.

A survey conducted among house residents in the MHAT housing showed that 82 percent said matters of faith are important to them.

However, reintegrating people back into the community sometimes proves to be difficult — not because of the homeless person but because of the views of the community.

"It's a very common urban legend that these people like living homeless and like the lifestyle — they choose to live that way," Brose said. "These people didn't like it the day they became

homeless. There's such fear toward the homeless from the general population. There's nothing to fear here."

MHAT's form of "housing first" is rapidly becoming accepted as the most successful model across the country. This method, which includes access to services, is especially beneficial for those who are dependent on substances or are mentally ill. Brose said these two problems are often closely tied.

"Originally, many of them lost their place to live because they had a mental illness and were untreated," he said. "They began to use substances to try to medicate themselves."

Out of the 1,058 homeless surveyed who were staying in shelters, institutional facilities, detox facilities, transitional or supportive housing, 205 reported to have a mental health diagnosis and 202 reported to abuse substances, according to a Point-in-Time Survey conducted by Tulsa City and County in January 2010.

Out of the estimated 4,100 people who turn to shelters in Tulsa every year, more than 70 percent stay temporarily and can transition back into a home, Brose said. But a small percentage cannot get out of the rut of homelessness.

"That very small percent of chronically homeless eat up about 80 percent of all the funds that go to serve the homeless population," he said. "It's much less expensive for a community to provide a safe, affordable, decent place for them to live and connect them to the services they need than to leave them chronically homeless on the streets. Not only is it inhumane to leave a person on the street, but it's also poor public policy."

Several studies' numbers back this claim. In 2008, two Seattle studies showed the city saved \$3.2 million in emergency social and health programs by housing 160 homeless alcoholics and drug addicts in supportive housing.

The MHAT housing units are paid for by philanthropic sources, state allocated money and the residents who stay at the units. They pay no more than 30 percent of their total income in an attempt to teach them how to pay for housing.

The chronically homeless population is surprisingly small in Tulsa. According to the Point-in-Time survey, 266 people reported to have been homeless for one year or longer. Brose has made it his goal to create enough housing for these chronically homeless. MHAT is now part of the "Building Tulsa, Building Lives" program to raise \$30 million to create 511 units of affordable rental housing to end chronic homelessness. This program includes many partners. One partner seen as a surprise to some is Youth Services of Tulsa.

"The future homeless in our country is kids who have been released at age 18 from foster care," Brose said.

In fact, more than 10 percent of those surveyed for the Point-in-Time survey reported to have previously been in the foster care system. Of these, 40 percent exited the foster care system at 16 to 18 years old.

With so many different faces to homelessness, the ambition of virtually extinguishing chronic homelessness might seem implausible, but the changes Brose has seen throughout the past decade have him pushing to make the goal a reality.

"It's a very spiritual thing to watch someone living on the streets of Tulsa, Oklahoma, recapture and reclaim their life," he said.

Fewer Jobs, Fewer Homes

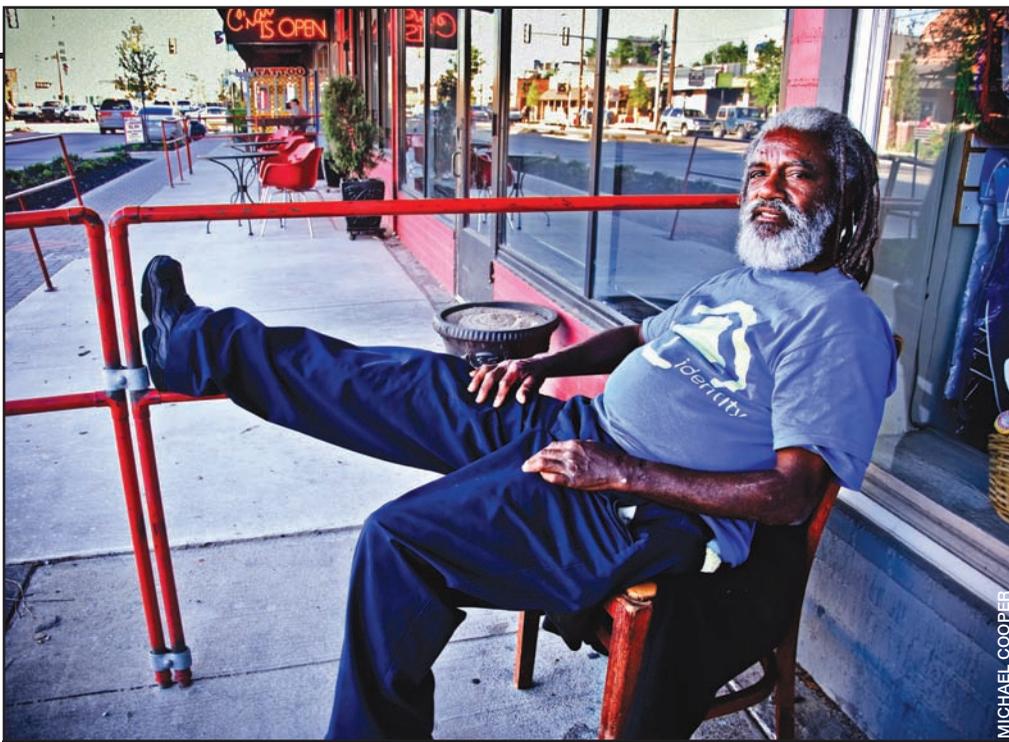
A line of people wait for the glass doors to open as children play on the well-worn playground next to the building. At the Salvation Army's Center of Hope homeless shelter, the line of homeless people waiting for meals has been getting longer since the recession hit Tulsa.

"We've seen a huge increase in people who are feeling the effects of the economy," said Major Roy Williams, area commander for the Tulsa area. "Last year during the summer months, when normally our shelter and feeding go down, we were having winter numbers."

In fact, the number of homeless counted in the Tulsa City-County Continuum of Care Point-in-Time Survey has skyrocketed since 2005. When the participating agencies took the annual count of the homeless in 2005, 826 people were counted. This past January, 1,058 were living without a home.

The multiple dorms open nightly have been overflowing with people, Major Williams said. Now, the bunk beds are not the only places the tired homeless population is sleeping. Mats are placed in hallways and in the cafeteria to alleviate the rising numbers. Baby cribs and children's beds are also holding the byproducts of a faltering economy. High chairs and booster seats are scattered throughout the cafeteria during meal times, leaving a constant reminder that the recession has taken its toll on everyone, big and small.

A single woman with four kids, a married couple with six kids, a married couple with two kids under the age of three — all common residents at the Center of Hope. A life living from paycheck to paycheck added with a shaky economy can often be a devastating combination.



MICHAEL COOPER

Numbers Don't Lie. Out of the estimated 4,100 people who turn to shelters in Tulsa every year, more than 70 percent stay temporarily and can transition back into a home, Brose said. But a small percentage cannot get out of the rut of homelessness.

"You just see everything ends up compounding," Major Williams said. "That's why we're seeing just huge numbers."

In January 2006, the Center of Hope saw a total of 7,001 people use the shelter for nightly lodging. This past January, 11,319 people slept at the facility throughout the month. That is an increase of 226 people per night from 2006 to 365 people per night in 2010.

Nellie Kelly believes the homeless issue is much bigger than many are led to believe with numbers. As the executive director of Lindsey House, a transitional housing facility for single mothers and their children, she has noticed the homeless who come to her facility often are overlooked.

The Point-in-Time Survey often cannot include families sleeping in cars, in motels or on couches and floors of friends and families' homes. The survey counts people staying on the street, in jails and prisons, and in shelters and transitional housing. Lindsey House, which opened in February, now has nine families staying in its newly renovated apartments. Only one of these families would have been included in the survey, because they were staying in a shelter.

"Who is Lindsey?" Kelly asked. "Lindsey is every child who slept on the floor. Lindsey is every baby given a bath in the sink of a roadside park. It's every mother who got dressed in her car. Those are the families that we cannot forget when it comes to homeless assistance."

The families that come to the Lindsey House might have been laid off, had a sick child and growing medical bills, or got divorced and unable to adjust on one income.

"They find themselves stuck," Kelly said. "They have a lot of debt and bad credit. On top of that, to not have a space for your children to lay their heads down at night is very stressful for a mother."

Even with the Point-in-Time survey not counting every homeless person in Tulsa, it gives an idea of the number of families without a home, Kelly said. According to the survey, 124 children were without a home, up from the 87 counted in 2005. Of those 124, more than 75 percent of the children were under the age of 9. In fact, many of these children were just beginning to learn how to walk and speak their first words. This past January, 49 homeless children counted were three years old or younger.

Kelly hopes that the Lindsey House can help some of these children by providing a warm bed for them to sleep in and by helping their mothers budget, pay off old debt, earn GEDs, and get and retain jobs.

"We're looking for people who want to change and are willing to get better but just need help getting there."

Evicting the Homeless

Hundreds have been flooding the John 3:16 Mission homeless shelter looking for a warm plate of food and a soft bed to sleep in. With 110 beds,

the mission is always in a state of overflow, said Rev. Steve Whitaker, executive director of the mission.

Whitaker has tried to expand the bible studies, meals, recovery beds and life skills programs offered at this faith-based shelter, but he quickly landed in a battle due to NIMBYism, or the "not in my backyard" mentality, he said.

"Tulsa is ripe with NIMBYism," Whitaker said. "My experience is if you try to expand in the city of Tulsa, you'll end up in a legal battle. There is a need for us to find a place where we aren't going to get beat up and we can help people who are at risk."

The John 3:16 Mission has now been in litigation over attempts to expand for three years. After the mission tried to build next to the shelter to add more recovery beds, the organization was sued by local business owners.

"If we understand that our community produces homeless people, we have to give opportunities to those people to normalize and get them the help they need," he said. "It would be a whole lot better if the city would be more proactive about meeting the needs of its most downtrodden citizens."

Whitaker uses the example of the newly opened ONEOK field to explain how he feels the mission has been neglected.

"They pulled out all the stops and carved out the ball diamond in just over a year," he said.

But when the mission attempted to rebuild the infrastructure around the shelter, Whitaker was told he would have to hire a city contractor to rebuild damaged sewer lines.

"There is something unjust for John 3:16 to have to take money from its coughers to rebuild sewer lines," he said. "Rather than doing our work, we are in court slugging it out."

Now, with the redevelopment of downtown, Whitaker hopes the city treats the homeless who use many of the facilities downtown fairly.

"Gentrification in itself is not wrong," he said. "It revitalizes lapsed communities, but there must be gentrification with justice. Kicking around homeless people is unfair."

Whitaker remains optimistic about the kind of care homeless can receive at the mission. John 3:16 Mission uses faith-based therapeutic programs and focuses on changing a person from the inside out, he said. Whitaker hopes that some day, he can encounter even more lives changed as John 3:16 Mission wins the battle over NIMBYism in Tulsa.

"We've seen remarkably horrible things happen in the lives of these people," Whitaker said. "In a place like John 3:16 I get to see these lives change in a remarkable way." **UTW**