

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

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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 never 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.

from shelters," Brose said. "We need more safe, affordable, decent housing."

Brose has been implementing this "housing first" method since the mid-'90s, pulling hundreds of mentally ill homeless off the streets and out of homeless shelters in Tulsa. The old widely-accepted method of making the homeless get clean, sober and on proper medications before helping to find housing was not working, Brose said.

"That's a failed policy," he said. "All the services that exist out there for people are so hard to deliver to them on the street and are so much more effective and efficient when they're used in the context when somebody has a place to live."

MHAT opened its first supportive housing facility at the old YMCA downtown in 1995. The organization now has 392 total units dispersed throughout the community — near TU, on 36th Street and Harvard Avenue, on Yale Avenue and Admiral Place and near Boston Avenue United

