

{SPEAK UP!}

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING COMMUNITY ADVOCATES, 2014



{Foreword}

In Los Angeles County, tremendous strides have been and are continuing to be made toward the goal of ending chronic and veteran homelessness. Those working in the field are very aware that the solution is available and has been borne out in study after study. But it takes more than ‘facts’ to change the hearts and minds of people, especially in a society that has historically viewed homelessness as unsolvable and the individuals experiencing homelessness as hopeless.

While Los Angeles has learned that supportive housing is the solution to homelessness, ambiguity remains regarding how success is defined for supportive housing residents. Is success simply not returning to the streets? Is success a meaningful role in the community? Our beliefs about what recovery looks like and what supportive housing residents can accomplish is not clear. Far too many decisions about how to address homelessness are made without the input of those impacted. As an industry we believe that homelessness is solvable, but we are more ambiguous about the individuals who have experienced homelessness and what their futures look like once they are no longer homeless.

In September of 2013 CSH launched the Supportive Housing Community Advocates program in partnership with A Community of Friends, Housing Works, Skid Row Housing Trust, the Coalition for Responsible Community Development/Clifford Beers Housing, Survivors’ Truths, and with generous support from the United Way of Greater Los Angeles/Home for Good and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. This pilot project is designed to support formerly homeless residents of permanent supportive housing to effectively advocate for themselves and their communities. The year-long curriculum combines monthly educational trainings on topics such as housing policy, advocacy, storytelling, narrative development, and public speaking with individual coaching sessions, as well as numerous opportunities to advocate at local, state, and federal levels.

In addition to building skills, the participants are

encouraged to reexamine their relationship to housing and to articulate the challenges of overcoming homelessness. Stories of lived experience are critical to reframe public perception and build the public and political will necessary to end homelessness. The community advocates’ stories touch on different struggles, but they all illustrate the isolation of homelessness and the ultimate solution provided by supportive housing.

Through the community advocates’ stories we not only learn what works in solving homelessness, we begin to understand what life after homelessness looks like and the tremendous potential of the men and women who have made this journey. The connections between the community advocates experience, public policy and the broader social debate, allows the advocates to revitalize public dialogue. By understanding the human side of ending homelessness, we open the door to new allies and partners to share our common belief that homelessness can be ended. We also open the door to long time believers to see that not only can we end homelessness; we can harness the potential and energy of the people with lived experience of homelessness to be our partners in this movement.

{Sabrina}



My favorite food growing up was possum stew. I lived with my grandma and she was a cook on the train. Women were not railroad employees in those days so she was ahead of her time. The landlord of the house where we lived was in a car accident, on the highway next to our house. She hurt her leg, badly. My grandmother's quick thinking and nursing skills saved the woman's life. The woman was so thankful that she gave my grandmother the house and land where we lived.

Growing up in Florida was good and bad. My family was good. School was bad. The white kids in my neighborhood were sometimes fun to play with outside of school, but at school was a different story. Back in those days, when integration started, I was one of just 6 black kids sent to an all-white school.

When I was 13 years old, I met a man and married him so that I would feel grown up. He was a lot older than me; he was 45. I had five children was getting

more and more into the street action. Because I loved my kids so much, I wanted to keep them together as a family and keep them out of the system. So, I took them home to my grandmother who raised them, just like she raised me.

When people feel alone, it's easier for them to get caught up in the street life. If no one cares for you, you have a hard time caring for yourself or believing that anything you do matters.

When I got into drugs, I went from friend's house to friend's house and motel room to motel room. Those motel rooms got to be expensive. I had no job, no regular roof over my head, and I was doing drugs. So

it was not such a good time in my life. I had moved to California to try to reunite with my biological father and I missed my home, family, and children back in Florida.

My life started to get better when a friend from the street told me to check out LAMP in Downtown Los Angeles, on Skid Row. At LAMP; I had a place to live, people to talk to who would help me, and I was able to get clean. The people at LAMP helped me to love me more. I got a job at LAMP working in the laundry room, first it was for one day, then it was for 2 days and

{Sabrina}



then it was for 3,4,and 5 days. I was still using drugs and would sometimes call in sick, but they always let me come back.

After 8 months, they made me the manager. I was scared and ended up relapsing into my old behavior, hanging out with the wrong people and continuing to use drugs. I lost my job, and myself, again. Eventually, I reconnected with Mollie, my advocate at LAMP. She helped me come back to the program and never judged me. She used to tell me “There is something good in you and we are going to get it out of you.”

She never gave up on me and that’s how it should be. I was successful because my case worker stayed connected to me; she would call and check up on me and showed me I was cared about. This helped me feel good about myself and I became interested in helping other people in similar situations. Giving back to others helped me to see the good in myself. Little by little I began to care for and love myself.

When people feel alone, it’s easier for them to get caught up in the street life. If no one cares for you, you have a hard time caring for yourself or believing that anything you do, matters. Giving back to others reminds me, and them, that there is a way out. You can do it. WE can do it. You are not alone and people care.

{Michael}



Michael is 50 years old and has two children, both boys ages 19 and 26. Significant losses in Michael's life that led up to his living on the streets include but are not limited to drug and alcohol addiction and ensuing criminal activity that typically follows, the death of a family member, job losses, and divorce.

Michael became homeless around 1995 and it was not until 2008 that he would find the support he needed to receive permanent housing. By this time he had been on the streets for more than 13 years. Michael describes being on the streets as a 'very grim, very dark existence... full of negativity.' He recalls feeling hopeless, contemplating suicide, and the thought - that he could live better in the penitentiary- crossing his

"I have freedom and liberty to interact with positive individuals and organizations. I have been given a positive foundation that began with a home I can call my own."

mind. "That's how your thinking becomes...standing in line with guys you don't know to try and get a shower or wash your clothes...trying to decide whether to use your last few dollars for gas or laundry..."

Michael started to get counseling in 2003, but with nowhere to go and surrounded by so much negative activity, it was difficult to manifest any lasting changes. He was on his own and had no support until he began receiving services from a mission in downtown LA. There he found the care and concern he had been searching for and was able to begin to acknowledge the emotional pain that contributed to his situation. He'd suffered several emotional set-backs including, his mother's death, his divorce and the loss of his children. He managed his feelings through chemical and alcohol use. Once he began accepting and addressing these losses he was able to move past the pain that contributed to his self-destructive behavior.

Michael believes that he has been given the second

{Michael}



chance he needed to thrive. Supportive housing services provide a positive foundation so that he can once again find purpose in his life. He is no longer suicidal. “I have freedom and liberty to interact with positive individuals and organizations. I have been given a positive foundation that began with a home I can call my own.”

Today, Michael is giving back to his community as an advocate for supportive housing. He lets those who are suffering, as well as the community, know that “change starts with them.” With a willingness to embrace the idea of supportive housing and all of the benefits that come with it, lives can truly be changed.

Michael’s life has indeed been changed. He has had several jobs since moving into his apartment and he is proud to say one of his first was with the Obama campaign, in 2008. He is clean and sober and active in his community. He has a place to call home and is no

longer on the streets. He has freedom and a positive vision, which all stem from his ability to reach out his hand with another person there, waiting to accept it and help.

{Aleah}



My name is Aleah Guillory.

I am 26-years-old, born in Oakland, CA, and raised in Los Angeles. I grew up in a two parent household, with a younger sister and a younger brother. My childhood was great; lots of traveling, theme parks, nice restaurants and tons of family events. I was never exposed to poverty or homelessness. With my mother being an elementary school teacher and my father working at a law firm, I attended great schools and always maintained my grades. I played sports and participated in extra-curricular school activities.

While growing up, I had one goal for my future - to become a hairstylist and to open my own salon. A month after graduating, from high school, at the age of 18, I became pregnant with my now 7-year-old son, Xavier. I would not let that stop me. I attended community college and also maintained a part-time job. Being a single mother, I knew I had to prepare myself. In the

end I had to turn to welfare to provide for myself and my son.

In 2009 my life was put on hold. I had to pack up myself and my 3-year-old son and move to Oakland, to care for my grandmother after she had a stroke. My grandmother and I had a great relationship. She was my rock; my second mother. I could talk to her about any and everything, and she would not judge me. So, when I got the call to move to Oakland, I did not hesitate.

In February 2010, just two days before my sons 4th birthday, my life changed. I watched my grandmother die, right before my eyes. That had to be the most painful thing I have ever gone through. From there, my left went downhill. I gave up on my family, my son, and myself. I turned to the streets. I had no clue what I was going to do. All I understood was that I was in pain and I was hurting.

{Aleah}



I started drinking to ease my pain. That was the only way I knew how to cope with my grandmothers death. Around August of 2010, I was introduced to the Jeff Griffith youth center and also My Friend's Place, where I began accessing services.

But being homeless was not easy. Sleeping on the streets, in front of churches, the greyhound station, sides of schools, sides of buildings, anywhere to get some rest. Only having so much money in my pocket, I needed more money to support my drinking habit and also my use of ecstasy. So I became part of the streets; Robbing people, breaking into cars, selling drugs, even begging for change. At this point in my life I didn't care any-more.

I had plenty of chances to return home to my son, but my anger, my hurt, my pain, my drinking and my drug use would not allow me to. I would visit and even spend the night, but I always returned to the streets. In January of 2011, I was arrested for assault. I spent 3 months in County Jail, on my first offense. I was released in April 2011, with a felony charge and 3 year's probation. Once again, I returned to the streets. I began receiving therapy services at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, Transitional Age Youth Program with the help of My Friends Place. I thought I was getting better but, at the same time, I wasn't sure. I stayed in several transitional housing programs but, I always wanted something more permanent.

December 31, 2012 was the best day of my life. I had the privilege of moving into the 28th street apartments, which is partnered with the Coalition for Responsible Community Development and Clifford Beers housing. Since moving into my new home, I completed the Marinello School of Beauty and was awarded a certification in cosmetology. I get my son every weekend and holidays and I still receive weekly therapy sessions. In April 2014, I completed my 3 years of probation.

Today, I can honestly say that I am a happy person. And I am living a happy lifestyle, being with my family and friends again.

I am a Supportive Housing Community Advocate with CSH and was given the opportunity to attend Lobby Day in Sacramento.

All the support I have received from 28th street apartments has shown me that I do have a purpose in life and to never give up.

If anyone were to ask if I regret anything, I would simply say. "There is nothing I regret. It was all just a lesson. Being homeless was my downfall to rise to the top."

{Dorothy}



I was born and raised in Southern California. As a child, I was secure and happy. At age 12, my parents started their divorce and the following three years were unbearable. We, as children, were dragged through a nasty custody battle. It was a traumatizing reality for me. I felt like my whole world was ripped right out from under my feet. I became very rebellious. I ran away often and began experimenting with drugs and alcohol.

It began with marijuana and beer and escalated to heroin and whiskey. Then came my first hospitalization in a mental facility. I was suicidal and depressed. I would spend much more time in these places. I was unable to hold a job due to my sensitive mental state. I learned to survive through self-medicating, as I had no health insurance. In 1991 my mother passed away, followed by my sister's death, also in 1991, and my father's death, in

1995. All three died from cancer. I was helpless to help them or myself because of my addiction. Suddenly, I found myself with no home to return to and the beginning of my homelessness. Now I am a young woman pushing a shopping cart through your neighborhood. I am sunbathed, on the streets with my dog, sleeping in business storefronts. I am now an addict on the streets, stealing food to eat and longing to once again be a part of her community.

During the 2011 homeless census I was found sleeping on a sofa outside Goodwill, in the donations area. I had not looked at myself in the mirror for years. I was tore up. My teeth were rotted out and my skin was filled with rashes and bites. I could not bear to see who I had become. I was now considered chronically homeless and most likely to die on the streets within a year. Because of people reaching out to me, I was saved

{Dorothy}

from myself. I was taught, through being loved, to love myself.

I have a wonderful home today for my dog and I. I am safe, secure, and happy to be alive. I am 17 months clean and sober- huge considering I spent 40 years in my addiction and never believed I could get out from under it.

Today I reach out to the unseen on the streets the way you reached out to me. I offer the gift of understanding. Today I don't have to hide. I live my life in full view without being ashamed of myself. Today I am just like those of you who helped save me. We are in the business of bringing the unseen back into view, offering up a second chance to the hopeless, and placing value back into the souls of those who- like myself- were once lost.



{James}



Can you grasp the moon?
Can you grasp yourself by being a reflection of who
you are? How do you grasp yourself?

Growing up, I lived in a dysfunctional household.

My dad wasn't there for
our family; he was always
drinking and doing drugs.
My mother took care of me
and my brother but couldn't
afford being a single parent.
She didn't have enough

money to care for us. She was aggressive and verbally
abusive and at times made me feel like "I couldn't."
From the ages of 11-23, I was homeless on and off.
My mother taught me not to care about materialistic
things. She taught us that money was nothing, that I
was nothing.

*The more I slept on the concrete,
the sharper my senses got, the more
things became real....The street was
my mother, my father, my shelter.*

Being homeless, I couldn't afford to stay out of trouble. I was a "street squatter." The more I slept on the concrete, the sharper my senses got, the more things became real.

As a teen, I had animal
instinct. I was on the
prowl like a pack of wild
dogs, about to attack and
lose control. I was in the
darkness like an animal. I
felt so alone. I was stripped

away from my youth. I didn't get to go to prom, play
on a football team, and do the regular things a teenager
does. I had to chameleon myself and blend into different
scenes to survive. I stayed in and out of Juvenile
hall from the ages of 14-17. In order to stay alive I had
to rob, cheat, steal, and manipulate just to eat. It made

{James}



me realize that in this life you change, die, or get left in the dust. But I knew I had to come out and transcend. I had to adapt.

I let go of all frustration. I wasn't going to let anyone tell me what I CAN'T do. The street was the only thing that heard my cries. The street was my mother, my father, my shelter. It was my choice to make a change and listen to the resources. I found My Friend's place which connected me to my therapist. My therapist connected me to CRCD and I had so many more options available. I live at the 28th street apartments now.

Now I have something to cherish. I transcended. I want to reach out and empower other youth to listen to the resources available.

Can you grasp the moon? I believe I can. And so can



{Troy}



I was born in St. Louis, Mo., to good family, but both of my parents died before I was 10-years-old. My sisters and I lived with my grandmother after that. I did well in school and for a short time that kept me going. I was good at sports but I couldn't stop getting into fights. I drank and smoked pot to cover my pain, but anytime someone mentioned my parents, it was an automatic reflex. My grandmother died when I was 13 and a part of me felt I had to leave. At 14, I traveled to California and met street hustlers and old gangsters that taught me to use my anger and my determination to survive.

I survived those losses at an early age, but not in the right way. I didn't have anyone to teach me the right way. I made it, but I made it out of anger and violence.

I wound up in a maximum security prison with life-long criminals, guys a generation ahead of me. They told me I was like them and this made an impact on

me. I realized then, that the things I had seen and done in my youth had made me heartless, even evil, and I didn't want that. I began reading spiritual texts and understanding how my early life had shaped me. By the time I was approached in the county jail, by Volunteers of America's Just in Reach project, I was tired and ready to change.

Housing allowed me to focus on changing my life. When you're on the streets, and in and out of institutions, you learn to survive above all else. Criminal activity is a large part of that survival. People who are

barely surviving will prey on others.

I know I'm supposed to be dead, and if I'm alive, it can only be because God has a purpose for me. There's a

generation gap in the ghettos; today's generation didn't have their parents around because they were in prison or dead from street violence, and the kids turned to

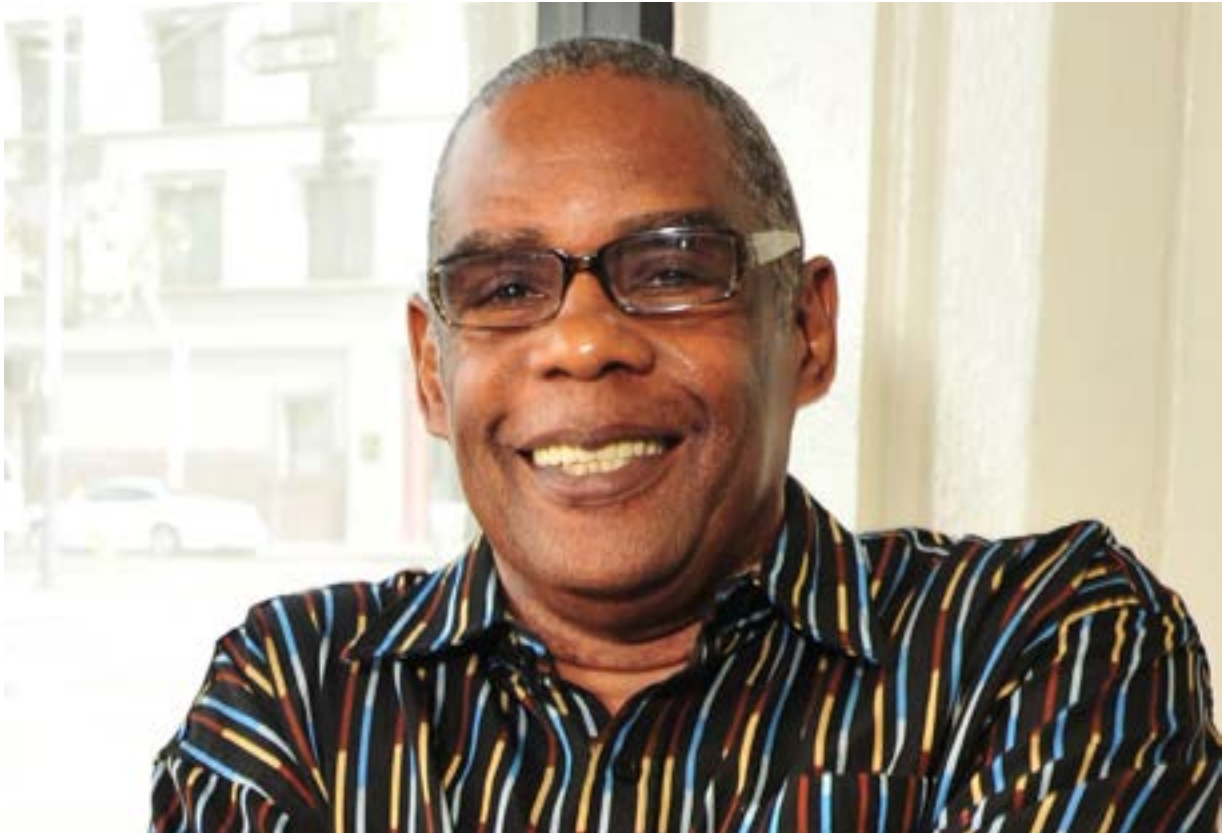
"I want to help educate youth, help them to have better lives and create a better future."

{Troy}



gangs to raise them. I want to help educate youth, help them to have better lives and create a better future. I still have bullets in my head and the left side of my body, but I also have an apartment, a family, and a daughter in college. I am grateful for the chance I got to change and I want to help others do the same.

{Lawrence}



*"A flower blossoms each day
never knowing its destiny
and so is life with as many
question marks"*

That quote caught my eye
one lonely night in jail at
the age of 21.

Growing up during the 1960s in Ohio, I found self-worth through the streets & juvenile detention centers. I developed the mindset that I needed to be Hip, Slick and cool just to survive.

That was like a lock on my mind that caused me to make a lot of bad decisions along the way.

It led to incarceration, drug use and eventually various states of homelessness. For those of you that don't know, homelessness is a state of living with no stability or peace in life.

*The Trust met me where I was at
and we worked from that point on,
together, to recover the man God
created me to be.*

Even though I wasn't suicidal, in despair and desperation, I called a suicide hotline one cold, January day because I heard they could guarantee housing and food for me. Over the next 48 hours at that hos-

pital, I realized as clear as day, I was at the low point of my life and I hit rock bottom. I was taking up someone else's spot in that hospital and using up the resources of people who were mentally ill or truly suicidal. It made me sick to my stomach that I had sunk so low.

That was when a light went off in my mind. Change needed to happen! I was willing to give up using that Hip, Slick and Cool mindset... well, maybe not the Cool. I had to humble myself to God that I had previously rejected. I was ready to submit and take some direction. I turned to God and focused on the path my creator set for me.

{Lawrence}



I had to make some amends to those people I had harmed along the way. I enrolled in programs, I exercised and I stopped using drugs. This was not easy in anyway. But most importantly, I needed to be willing to accept help.

"A flower blossoms each day never knowing its destiny and so is life with as many question marks"

Thank God for the Affordable Housing and thank God for programs like Skid Row Housing Trust. I was able to get on my feet and begin to be a contributing member of society. I am now a minister li-censed by the Church of Pathway to Praise and working in the Rooms of Recovery as a secretary for the Monday night meetings. But I am most proud to now be coming up on 2 years clean and sober.

The Trust met me where I was and we worked from that point on, together, to recover the man God created me to be.

Life is a pretty amazing thing and I often think back to when I was 21- years-old in that jail cell.

{Le’Vonna}



My name is Le’Vonna and I am going to tell you a story about a challenge I faced, the turning point and the outcome.

The rules at the mission are non-negotiable – In by 8pm, lights out by 10pm, lights on by 5:15 am, out of the building by 6:30am.

Every morning the overseer of the AM shift would shout at the top of her lungs - “LADIES, GET UP! YOU KNOW YOU HAVE TO BE OUT OF HERE BY 6:30 OR ELSE YOU WON’T BE ALLOWED TO COME BACK IN AT 8 TONIGHT!”

I pulled her to the side and asked her why she had to wake us up like that. I asked if she could greet us with a ‘good morning, ladies, you know you must be out of the building by 6:30 to be able to return at 8. So, hope-

fully while you’re out you can take care of business, look for housing, take care of your health...that sort of thing...and have a nice day.”

I then went out into the world and took care of my daily business, exhausted by the time 8pm arrived. I got in line to register to go to the mission and was told I couldn’t come in until I spoke with my case manager, Miss Thelma, the next morning at 8am.

So now I’m walking around all that night, no jacket, standing at the bus stop, buses passing by creating a cold wind. I see people hanging out doing what they do. “Crystal, beer, weed, cigarettes...” and I have to be out here with all that? It’s midnight and what comes to mind? I forgot my insulin was still at the mission. I just sat at the bus stop waiting for 8am to come.

{Le’Vonna}



8 am came and I went to see Miss Thelma. She told me I had to leave because I was disrespectful. I said I wasn't being disrespectful, I was asking for a little bit of respect for me and the other ladies so we can start our day off positively.

She said "You have to go!"

I got my insulin and went back on the streets for two days. I saw Hayward and he asked me where I was staying and I said "right here." He told me "just hold on and I'll see what I can do to get you into the Russ." Two hours later, I was in the cold winter shelter program, for three months. Ninety days-worth of work putting in applications, at Skid Row Housing Trust, LAMP Community, A Community of Friends, the Golden West, and following their instructions.

Not only that, I started taking care of my health, saving my SSI money, addressing my mental health, and attending groups to learn more about myself. All this work paid off because a week before the three months was up, LAMP community contacted me and said I qualified for their Hilton Project, because I was more likely to die on the streets, due to my diabetes and mental health issues.

A week after that, they told me there was an opening at the Saint George apartments. I looked at the room and took it.

I finally had a place to live and be serene.

{Lawrence M.}



Lawrence Michael McGee grew up poor in Chicago; where neighborhood gangs terrorized communities and blistering winters challenged the soles of feet that suffered from bare bottom shoes. “I wanted to fit in and be cool, tough and feared.” But it was difficult to “fit in” wearing hand-me-down clothes, ugly prescription glasses, and shoes that require cardboard and plastic to be worn outside. Lawrence remembers the shame of carefully making sure that no one saw the bottoms of his shoes by sliding his feet carefully on the floor and never crossing his legs where his feet would be in full view.

As Lawrence became a teen, he looked older than his true age and this helped him gain respect and acceptance from the gang members in the neighborhood. Lawrence’s ambitions were focused on finding opportunities to make money. He had newspaper routes, carried groceries for neighbors and had a job in as a

“True happiness comes from caring about others. There is such joy that comes from honestly being available for someone other than you.”

shoe salesman. These efforts enabled him to afford better clothes but he also had to contribute to his household. He started selling marijuana to supplement his income.

Lawrence was looking forward to an opportunity to move to Los Angeles where

his brother promised him an apartment, a car and a job. When he arrived, there was no job, no apartment and no car. The deception hurt Lawrence and triggered feelings of betrayal. Years prior when Lawrence was 8 or 9 years old, his brother molested him; a secret of shame he carried for years. Although it was difficult, Lawrence used his survival skills to be independent and make a living on his own until he would return to Chicago a few years later.

Upon his return to Chicago, Lawrence met the woman who would become his wife and soon after, he became a father. He worked at a local steel mill as a plumber journeyman but couldn’t deny the attraction of making

{Lawrence M.}

more money by selling drugs. The drug business eventually led to the disintegration of his marriage.

Lawrence became addicted to heroin and lost everything. He returned to Los Angeles and tried to hold down a job, but his drug addiction got the better of him. He attempted treatment through his employer but was unable to maintain his sobriety. The shame of relapsing became too much to navigate and he ended up on skid row. His addiction to crack was so consuming that he became "comfortable" there.

Lawrence has vivid memories of the mass of blisters on his feet, the pants that didn't have a recognizable color, his one dirty t-shirt and the absence of underwear. He only wore one contact lens because the other had grown a colony of barnacles. Lawrence reflects, "I was broken ... crack takes everything away from you."



"I wanted my mother to be proud but there is nothing to be proud of when you are shooting dope into your arm." Although Lawrence had a nagging fear of failing at sobriety, he was also scared of success. Yet, that fear did not stop him starting to "do the work" in a 12 step program. Lawrence explained that, in his heart, he could never let anyone do to another what he did to himself – not even his worst enemy. Lawrence considered himself a "real addict" who was willing to sacrifice everything - including those he loved - for the pipe.

In between homelessness and getting permanently housed, Lawrence lived in sober living residences like the Weingart Center. He had a bed, a dresser, and shared a community washroom with 8 other men. Initially hesitant about returning to work and relapsing, Lawrence eventually felt stronger and pursued a job

opportunity listed at Chrysalis.

A friend told Lawrence about an opportunity, for housing, with A Community of Friends. In a couple of months, he was approved for permanent housing. Lawrence exudes pride as he describes his meticulous bachelor apartment where he has a California King bed, large screen television and a sizeable bath-room. He explains that having a residence helps to create order in his life because everything is in place and organized.

Lawrence has enjoyed over a decade of sobriety and is currently pursuing a degree in Christian ministry and counseling. He has shared his story in various venues and finds that discussing his life, including being a sexual abuse survivor, has helped many men who can relate to his experience. Lawrence is currently working towards creating a men-

torship program, Master's PITT (Plumbers in Transitional Training).

His dream is to purchase a multi-unit apartment and mentor men in transition while they learn the plumbing trade in sober living quarters. "True happiness comes from caring about others. There is such joy that comes from honestly being available for someone other than you."

{Wallace}



My name is Wallace Richardson and I am 61 years old. And for the first 57 years of my life...I had a home. And then...I didn't. But, let me begin at the beginning.

I was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma. When I was 6 weeks old my family moved to California and I've

been here ever since. My parents divorced when I was around 7 years old and my siblings and I ended up living with my dad. This was mostly because my mother was deathly afraid

of his violent temper and let him have everything – the house, the car and us. Life with my dad was a challenge and often painful- both emotionally and physically. He was a gambler, a womanizer, a drug addict ...and he never missed an opportunity to beat the daylights out of us. I recognize now that he probably did the best he

could...and I'm grateful for the love of music that he instilled in me... but it was tough growing up in that atmosphere. Not surprisingly, I adopted many of the negative behaviors I saw in my father. I smoked pot, drank some, gambled a lot – but I always worked and never resorted to illegal means to feed my habits.

And I always had a roof over my head.

Beginning in the year 2000, my world began to crumble. My father – with whom I had made my

peace years earlier – died. We had worked together in construction for some time and when he passed away my link to many of those jobs was cut off. Then, my wife of 20 years asked for a divorce. She kept the house and I went to live with my mother. Life at this time was stressful and I sought refuge in drugs and

Trust me, until you've been there – until you have actually been homeless - you cannot begin to imagine what this is like.

{Wallace}

gambling. Soon my little nest egg began to disappear on the poker table. In 2010 my mom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and 30 days later she was gone. I realized that I was not going to be able to keep up with the rent on our home so, instead of waiting to be evicted, I moved into my truck.

At 57 years old... I was homeless. For the next 18 months, all 6 feet 2 inches of me slept in the 5 foot cab of my truck. It was miserable. I suffered the humiliation of having to relieve myself in the alley and having to put t-shirts over the truck windows to get some privacy. I kept myself clean and fed as best as I could but I was depressed and lost - I was really drifting. The one silver lining was that my gambling and drug use came to an abrupt end because I had no money to support the habits.

Trust me, until you've been there -- until you have actually been homeless -- you cannot begin to imagine what it is like. At least I had the shelter of my truck; so many others I encountered had only the hard, cold cement to greet them at night. I actually feel I was lucky because prior to being homeless I had given a ride to a friend in need of social services -- so when I hit rock bottom I at least had a sense of where to turn for help. But even so, it was like navigating a maze and I kept running into roadblocks. For example, I went to apply for General Relief and while I was waiting to get approved I was given a voucher for a hotel room. Several months later I was told that my GR application was approved but that this meant I was no longer entitled to a voucher. So, I was homeless again. Fortunately, I eventually met a case worker who then made it her mission to help me. She pointed me in the direction that led to permanent supportive housing at the Vendome Palms Apartments, where I've been for the last 2 years.

Now I feel like I've been given a second chance and I'm taking advantage of all the services available to me. I'm learning computing and I hope to earn a Bachelor of Science degree. I'm making something of myself and I want to give back and help others who are in the same



position I was in. More than anything I want a house with a garden where I can dig my hands into the soil, plant something and watch it grow. Through supportive housing, I have been able to lay a new foundation for myself. I look forward to building on that foundation.

I think that we can solve homelessness -- but first we need to make sure our homeless brothers and sisters know about the services that are available to them and make them accessible.

We also need to listen to what members of our homeless community tell us they need... so we can help them help themselves

{Ruby}



I was born in Amarillo, Texas, the 7th of 9 children. My family moved to California when I was young. For as long as I can remember, I was more interested in finding my purpose in life than anything else-- I had friends and played sports, but above all I was always wondering, "What am I doing here on Earth?"

In high school, I had a boyfriend, and without fully understanding what we were doing, I got pregnant. When my daughter was born, I fell in love with her and she was my life for a long time. In 1986, my sister- who had been my closest friend and supporter- passed away from cancer. It didn't dawn on me that she had passed until her funeral service, but then I could feel the anger and grief really start to take over. I see now that my later addiction was a symptom of all the bitterness and hatred I was already carrying in my heart.

My daughter was old enough to live on her own, at that point, and I started drinking at clubs and chasing men. I was introduced to cocaine and immediately became addicted. I stopped making payments on, and eventually lost, our house. I still had a good job but I spent all my money on drugs and drinking. For years, drugs and alcohol were the most important things in my life, more than home or family.

In 1997, I was arrested and sent to an outpatient rehab program but I wasn't ready to quit. Addiction isn't an illness you can let go of because someone else wants you to-- I had to want it for myself. I had to get to the point where I was so sick and tired of the person I had become-- violent, angry, bitter, unforgiving-- that I just couldn't live with myself that way.

On June 11, 2000, I reached a point where I had finally, truly had enough. I called out to God and said "Lord,

{Ruby}

I don't know what you've got in store for me, but it has to be better than what I've created for myself." An incredible peace came over me. I had a 10 dollar rock of crack, 2 cans of beer, and half a bottle of gin and I flushed them all down the toilet. (I think of June 12-- my first full day sober-- as a second birthday).

I was sober 18 months when I got my apartment through A Community of Friends. Right when I walked in, I felt the presence of God in that apartment, and knew this was where I belonged. I've lived there for 12 years now.



Not everyone who lives in supportive housing appreciates the help, right away. Many people are still using drugs and drinking. But having a place to stay, the real person can eventually come out. They can keep their things in one place and not have to bring everything they have everywhere they go. They can take a shower, and keep food in the refrigerator. They can go to the bathroom in peace, not on the sidewalk.

I do the walk for homelessness every year. This year, my whole family walked with me. It's so exciting. The number of people who walk has doubled since I started. I got a blister on my ankle doing the walk, but I thought, "What's a blister, compared to someone who's sleeping under a bridge?" Being able to walk and help others is worth a little irritation on my heel. That blister was healed the next day.

When I was 6 months sober, I was asked to speak at a 12 step meeting. I realized on the way over that I had never done this before and didn't know what to say. After I got up and said "My name is Ruby and I am a blessed recovering alcoholic" my life just came pouring out of me. It was like fireworks inside of me! I felt such a joy. I realized that this was the purpose I had always been looking for; to give others hope that their lives can change.

I got to speak at the state capitol. The building was so beautiful, I started crying. I never would have thought that I would be in a place like that. The legislator was so moved by our stories, he said "I have put up a blinder to avoid seeing homelessness, but hearing your stories, I won't be able to ignore it now... you're really advocating for all those who don't have a voice." I felt really good after I left there, even though I had gotten sick on the plane.

The more I do this, the more it becomes a reality... being a voice for somebody else.

This is really about other people. When I speak, it's out of gratitude.

For years I was an alcoholic. No compassion, no direction. Because of supportive housing, my life is like this now.

I wanted to feel different and here I am; feeling different and living, differently.

{Theresa}



Theresa is 50 years old and spent 30 years of her life considering the streets her “home.”

Until seven years ago, Theresa didn't know her full name and had never known her social security number.

Born in Indiana and raised in Chicago, Theresa left home- at the age of 12, to escape an abusive situation – and never looked back. Her experiences, though common to many young runaways, are not the experiences anyone, let alone a 12-year-old girl, should have to endure. Though her memories are not crystal clear, she knows she was introduced to prostitution very soon after leaving home. Over the next 30 years, her emotional and mental pain created a set of circumstances she felt she had little control over. In the end she found herself alone, cut off from the world most people existed in, addicted to drugs and alcohol, at times in jail, hopeless and helpless.

One day, at the age of 42, Theresa found herself at a turning point; she was getting older, her ‘friends’ were no longer around, and she realized she was never going to get to the life she wanted unless something changed. She managed to get herself arrested for the last time and while in jail, decided to do something different. She had been eligible for drug treatment diversion, in the past, but was never able to access services because she didn't know her social security number. This time, when she was released, the judge gave Theresa a referral to a downtown mission. There, she was able to work with a case manager who, eventually, found her birth records. This small act of service began the process that would culminate in housing. Theresa moved into supportive housing, with Skid Row Housing Trust, after four months. Over the years, she has stitched together a life she is proud of. Housing gives her the stability to remain clean and sober, get therapy, and be of service to others.

{Theresa}



Theresa has every one of her rent receipts in an envelope and she sometimes takes them out and counts them. She is proud to have paid her rent for the past seven years, something she never could have imagined before. She is grateful for what she calls the “little luxuries” of having a roof over her head: cooking for herself, taking showers whenever she wants and a laundry basket, rather than a shopping cart, to put her dirty clothes in.

Theresa recently celebrated eight years of sobriety; she is in a healthy relationship and is attending classes at LA Trade Technical College. “I am a productive member of society because someone made a decision that helping me get off the streets was a priority. My goal today is to pay that forward.”

{Otis}



Otis Woods lives in the 18th street apartments. He grew up in South Central Los Angeles. He was exposed to addiction and suffered losses in his family at an early age.

Homeless from the ages of 17-25, he cycled in and out of care facilities, jails, and couch-surfing, when he could. He got help from therapists and social workers, along the way; but, without housing, he could not maintain any stability.

Otis describes homelessness as being in a kind of jail “...you’re isolated...you don’t really fit in with society and it’s always in the back of your mind that ‘you’re not

*Reaching for the stars
Reaching for the stars
Fighting the urge to do wrong
Being of the game, has me trying hard
It’s that or go home.
I ball hard when I am here
And count my blessings
And score driving the lane
Not playing the lame.*

good enough’...it’s very lonely.”

When he finally got into housing he says it was like unwrapping a gift. He was finally able to breathe. He now had the freedom to think about what he wanted and what he could do. He could make plans. He could rest.

Housing helps Otis to stay on track with his mental health treatment and provides him the opportunity to interact with others in a positive and supportive way.

He wants to help others to find the motivation to get help, because he understands; he has been there.

{Otis}



{Deborah}



My name is Deborah.

I am 45-years-old and I am not the same person I was a year and a half ago. I am dual-diagnosed and I've struggled with mental illness and substance abuse issues, since I was 11. Nobody understood that I had a mental illness; they assumed I was just acting up when my behavior was violent or destructive. By the time I was 13, my mother placed me in an institution for children with behavioral issues. This only compounded my problems.

I turned 17 just after my 1st daughter was born and soon after became homeless, for the first time. My addiction progressed and -at 18- I also began my journey through over 20 programs. I had all 4 of my daughters by the age of 22. My mental illness causes me to act out compulsive behaviors and not think

about the consequences. I didn't know I had a mental illness so, as my addiction progressed, my mental illness got worse. I lost my kids, got them back, and lost them again. I lost hope. I attempted to commit suicide and for the first time a doctor spoke with me about my

mental health and put me on medication. I stopped taking them because I couldn't feel and I didn't want people to think I was crazy. I definitely was not in acceptance at this time.

My kids were gone and I didn't want to live so I went

downtown. I had been homeless a lot by this time, but I always stayed with somebody or in motels. Now I was in a whole other world; I lived to get high and got high to live. I began to rob people, with my boyfriend at the time, and this is where a lot of my rage came out. I also did a lot of other things I didn't want to do, but I did

Some people struggle longer than others, but we all deserve a chance to make changes. I have grown more in the last year and a half than I have in 30 years.

{Deborah}



heal, my family is able to spend time with me, and I am slowly becoming a positive member of society. Some people struggle longer than others, but we all deserve a chance to make changes. I have grown more in the last year and a half than I have in 30 years. We are not hopeless.

them to survive and stay high. I was assaulted 4 times while I was downtown, the last time I didn't think I would make it out alive.

I left downtown after that final assault, but continued to go in out of jail. I caught my last case in my 40's and realized I needed help with my mental illness, if I wanted my life to change.

When I got out, I went to cornerstone mental health and they got me a doctor who got me on the right meds. They got me into LA Family Housing where I shared a room with 5 other women. I began therapy and they helped me get on SSI which meant I could stop committing illegal acts and could afford to live in supportive housing. They helped me put in an application for the Osborne apartments. I stopped getting high a couple months before I was accepted and, as I did, I started suffering with PTSD and started withdrawing. When I finally moved in, I cried when I saw the bathtub. After taking showers when, and wherever, you could - words just cannot describe how I felt. Everything was not perfect when I first moved in. At night I began to be afraid due to PTSD. I got a service animal, named Cutie, that's rather large and makes me feel very safe.



Supportive housing saved me. My life has changed so much since being given a home. I have the privacy to

{Tony}



In the 1960's song, "Son of a Preacher Man", Dusty Springfield confesses "being good isn't always easy no matter how hard I try." As a real-life son of a preacher man, Tony Darrell Osborne can attest to the truth in this lyric. Throughout Tony's 55 years, he has struggled between a picture perfect life and a tarnished reality. Tony and his four siblings grew up in Seattle, Washington with a Pentecostal Pastor and First Lady for parents. To the congregation and the community, the family was the Christian ideal but behind the closed doors of the Osborne house was domestic violence and trauma. As Tony's mother implored him and his siblings to forgive their father, the children became angry and resentful about the charade they were involved in. Yet this life of fear wouldn't last forever as his mother became courageous enough to flee the abuse and create a better life for her family - ultimately with a new spouse and stepfather who was kind and loving.

As a young adult, Tony participated in school activities and his communication skills served him well. He

continued his academic career into college and worked part-time at a Pike Street record store where, one day, he made an observation that would later prove ominous. A disheveled, downtrodden man slowly walked past the window of the store and as Tony stared, he thought to himself, "That man is really bad off and addicted to drugs." The memory of the man was burned into his memory but it would not be a deterrent for Tony, in the future.

"The building was gutted and built from the inside out." Tony felt it was a metaphor for the work he began doing to recover from his addiction.

When Tony was 26 years old, he became reacquainted with an old friend from high school who worked as a dancer. This friend introduced him to hardcore narcotics and soon thereafter, he would re-enter the double-life he had known

as a child. His job at Amtrak transferred him to Los Angeles and his relationship with the dancer ended but his relationship with drugs was just getting started.

In Los Angeles, Tony established two lifestyles but he underestimated how much his life with drugs would submerge his marriage and career. His addiction

{Tony}



seeped into the seams of his “normal life” when his wife began using drugs and Tony began stealing from his job to support his habit. Fearing he would be fired, he quit his job at Amtrak and his life continued to spiral downward. At his lowest point, following the drug overdose death of his wife, Tony walked away from everything. He lived for four years in a “drugged haze”, in and out of missions, shelters, and daily motels. Drugs stripped away his spirit and engulfed him in a cycle of depression and despair.

In 2004, Tony witnessed the St. George Hotel being renovated into permanent housing. He was riveted by the building’s transformation and knew immediately he wanted to live there. “The building was gutted and rebuilt from the inside out.” Tony felt it was a metaphor for the work he began doing to recover from his addiction through therapy and rehabilitation programs. After his housing application was processed, he was granted an apartment on the second floor with a view and his own shower.

“My spiritual recovery began when I got off the streets; I got housing and realized I just had to keep living.” Tony has been clean and sober since August 5, 2010. He commemorated 6 months clean by taking his recovery pro-gram chip and placing it on his wife’s grave.

{Terrence}



Everybody needs to be heard, to have someone listen to them.

My name is Terrence Jones. I am 41 years old and have been in housing for just over one year. I realized I've never lived my life until this past year.

Before I got my apartment, I was homeless for over 10 years.

I grew up in Texas and California, with my mother, my stepfather, a half-sister and half-brother. I met my biological father when I was young, but he was not a part of my life. My stepfather was an addict and he never

accepted me because I was not his son. I never felt like a legitimate member of my family. We moved a lot, my parents fought, split up, and got back together many times; it was very unstable.

If I had had a different childhood, I might have stayed in school, played ball and had a scholarship. But my experience pushed me to leave home as soon as I

could. I quit school, stayed with friends, and started working. When I was sixteen, I was in a car accident and suffered an injury that got progressively worse. I have a screw in my hip and, over time, physical labor has become impossible. I was writing music for a while and working with some talented individuals, but I was

not able to maintain the lifestyle. I had no support system and made poor decisions when it came to friends and relationships.

Becoming homeless is a process; you start staying with friends or family – just for a little while - till you can put something together. Before you realize it, you're there and it seems like

you've always been there. You never say you're homeless. You tell yourself, it's temporary; I'm just having a rough patch. You keep a cell phone and try to stay clean and wear clean clothes. Everyone on the streets is telling themselves, mentally, that they are going to get off the streets, that they have a plan; it's how you survive each day.

Homeless for over ten years, Terrence has now been in his apartment for just over one year. He still struggles with adjusting to life but believes that having housing allows him to "...live his life and figure out who he is and what he has to offer...for the very first time."

{Terrence}



up the next day, and try to do better. When you're homeless and you make a mistake, you lose everything and have to start all over again.

Having a house protects you-- when you're homeless, you can always end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Everyone should have a place to stay, and it shouldn't be on the side of a freeway.

I can deal with life so much better now. Even if I can't afford to see a movie or get something I want, I still have a place to go HOME to. Even if I can't afford to do laundry, I have a sink to wash my clothes in. It's independence I've never had before. For the first time in 40 years, I actually feel like I'm living. I'm learning who I am for the first time in my life.

It's bad; not bathing, taking bird baths in a restroom. The first three days you don't bathe are the hardest. I used to try to set up near a 24-hour grocery store, so I could go to the bathroom inside. I don't mean to sound arrogant, but I didn't want to go to the bathroom outside. Falling asleep, on the streets, is hard too. That's where drinking comes in handy, you drink to pass out. Before I was homeless, drinking was recreational, but when you're on the streets, drinking becomes a way of life.

I didn't trust Housing Works when they first approached me on the street. Some programs say they want to help you but they take your GR check and if you make a mistake, they'll take away your bed. I had people charge me to take a shower. So, it took a while for me to accept their help. First, they got me into treatment, so I could stop drinking. While I was there, my mother died. No one in my family could help me get to the funeral, so Housing Works got me there. After that, I realized that they really were in my corner. They got me into my apartment and continue to help me, even when I make mistakes, or slip up.

When you have your own place, you can go out and if you make a mistake, you can go home, go to bed, wake

{Advocates}



{Advocates}





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