

Route 1's Homeless Speak Out on Being Homeless

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Editor's note: This is the second of a four part series on homelessness along the Rte.1 corridor in Mount Vernon and Lee Districts. Part I introduced several homeless people living along Rte.1. In Part II these people speak out about their experiences and offer insights on how homeless people can be helped. Part III describes the nearly 40-year history of attempts to address homelessness along the corridor. Part IV assesses progress on Fairfax County's 2008 10-year plan to end homelessness, including the 100,000 Homes campaign.

Four people who have experienced homelessness along the Rte. 1 corridor in Mt. Vernon and Lee Districts were introduced in Part I of this series. This article examines how they experience homelessness and what they think needs to be done to help people in their situations.

Carol Murphy, 55, became homeless after she was assaulted and suffered a brain injury. She lives on disability. Kimberly MacNamara, 50 who became homeless after an injury and job loss, hopes to return to work as a paralegal. Steven Yokel, who lost his job, home, and car, wants to return to work to support his girlfriend and baby daughter. Crain Thomson has found a home with friends and a niche helping the homeless at Rising Hope hypothermia center.

All have found shelter at the Ventures in Community Hypothermia Outreach Program (VIC-HOP) at Rising Hope Church, which can accommodate 24 people per night in sleeping bags on the floor from December through March. Some have also stayed at Fairfax County's Eleanor U. Kennedy Shelter on Rte. 1 at Fort Belvoir, four miles south of Rising Hope, which provides beds and some permanent year round shelter. Both are overseen by New Hope Housing, a nonprofit organization begun in 1977 to address homelessness along Rte. 1.

From surprise to anger to hope

The homeless people interviewed reacted to their homelessness with varied emotions: surprise, anger, hope, and in some cases a fighting spirit.

"It's tough to be homeless," Yokel said. "I am not used to this lifestyle. It is hard to ask people for money. You have to swallow your pride. Homelessness makes you a humble person."

"There is a stigma attached to the word 'homeless,'" said Murphy. "People think you must be on drugs or a drunk if you are homeless. I am working on my associ-



Photos/Mary Paden

Lorenzo Thorne, a musician, and Kimberly MacNamara, left, are now engaged. Both stay at the Kennedy Shelter in the overflow trailer. Above, Mary Hamilton, coordinator of Community Ministries at Rising Hope, helps clients with material and spiritual needs from her basement office in the church.

ate's degree in applied sciences for administrative justice at the NOVA Woodbridge campus to work with kids in the juvenile system and I have a 4.0 average.

"People don't realize how humiliated and embarrassed we feel because of the way society treats us. People will walk way out in the street to get around us when they hear we are homeless. They think we are the lowest scum."

She railed with some colorful language against men who had suggested she become a prostitute to make money and against people who told her if she couldn't make it here to move somewhere else.

"Why should I leave? I was born and raised here. I paid taxes all my life. I bought and sold two houses and raised five sons. I have no family left, my parents are dead, the boys are gone — three are in the military. My siblings are scattered and we were never close."

"So many people make assumptions about the homeless," MacNamara agreed. "Many are intelligent people who have had a series of unfortunate crises or have made a bad decision."

Even some of the workers at the Kennedy Shelter treat the homeless with disrespect, MacNamara said. "One of the many problems is a lack of compassion. Sometimes I am treated like an errant child at Kennedy. Like I put myself there by choice, that I am responsible for my poverty. Why would you work at a shelter if you didn't want to be compassionate to people? Some of the staff are great, but some have acted like I was really imposing on them if I asked for something basic like toilet paper."

Anger and ideas

Murphy, who said she was assaulted by a drunken guest at Southern Motel, where she was a man-

ager, is angry at Southern Motel for not having workman's comp to pay her medical bills; at her assailant, who got a three-year sentence and was told to pay her \$7,000 in medical expenses, which she doubts will happen; and at the Fairfax police for not prosecuting him for one of his many prior assaults. She is angry at the county for not providing more affordable housing and the federal government for providing benefits mismatched to the needs of the homeless.

"Food stamps!" she said. "What can you do with them? You cannot use them for a hot meal. We don't need groceries: we don't have any place to keep or cook them. The things we need are a place to sleep, a place to keep things, showers, a place to wash our clothes, transportation money, and hot meals."

Murphy has advocated for the homeless. "I have testified to [Lee County Supervisor Jeff] McKay and I was one of four people from Virginia sent to a homeless conference in Oakland California, for three days several years ago. Everybody had good ideas but they all wanted to vote and caucus to make decisions and by the time they did that, nobody remembered what had been said."

MacNamara has found a silver lining. "Rising Hope has saved my life spiritually and literally," she said. "I can get up with a smile and know that I am loved as God's child. At first I was angry at God. I thought 'Why Me?' Now I am starting to see there is a purpose in everything."

"I was widowed 11 years ago and now I have found a man who loves me and we are engaged. My finance, Lorenzo Thorne, is a brilliant musician with five CDs out. He plays the drums at Rising Hope's Sunday service. I am truly blessed. We both stay at Kennedy in overflow."

Respect, self-esteem needed

Although Rising Hope does not provide case work services and although its facilities are humble, it seems to offer homeless people a level of respect, self-esteem, and hope that government services may not.

Rising Hope Pastor Rev. Kerry Kincannon said that 80 percent of his congregation has been homeless at one time or another. "The homeless do not have to worry about feeling ostracized here because people treat them with respect and try to invoke their fullest potential. We encourage folks to help us do what we do there. For example we had to steam clean some chair cushions today and we had about 12 people working on it—six of them were people from the hypothermia center. We encourage them to find a way to give back."

"We get to know people on a personal level," said Mary Hamilton, coordinator of Community Ministries at Rising Hope, who has a small office in the church basement. "We are a Christian organization. We don't push it on people, but we pray with clients if they want and we pray together as a staff. The other agencies that we work with along Rte.1 point out that Rising Hope has the special niche of giving people hope and inspiration."

"Hope makes people stronger within and able to cope with their difficulties."

Finding work

MacNamara is optimistic about finding work and a home with her finance: "I want to work. I am good at what I do. I was trained by a wonderful attorney and I have not had trouble getting work before. I have a glowing letter of recommendation from my previous boss and good personal references."

Yokel is also looking forward to

finding a job: "I love working. I love my trade. I am a glazier. I am a good carpenter and painter and I can lay brick. I took job core training for painting and masonry. I can work with glass, I have installed doors and windows and store fronts. I worked on the Fairfax County Courthouse. I did glass in the entryways at the Beacon Hill Apartments and I have installed security glass at banks. I can also cut glass."

Murphy is disabled and cannot work, but she volunteers at Rising Hope regularly and advocates for the homeless. What should Fairfax County do for homeless people? Open North Hill, she said, referring to an affordable development that has been in planning for years. Open really affordable housing. Nothing has been built around here, though it has been promised.

Thomson mentioned a client from the shelter who had moved into a subsidized one-bedroom apartment for \$400. "We definitely need low cost — really low cost — housing," he said.

The long climb back

From her desk surrounded by donated items for her clients, Mary Hamilton mused, "My friends ask if I get depressed in this job. 'I do not, because I always meet people who have transferred themselves out of terrible situations. Like a woman crack addict who now has a full-time job and a husband and family and is self-supporting. Or a woman who spent a long time in a mental institution who is now paying rent and holding a job, or a woman volunteer who spent 20 years in prison and had all sorts of difficult life situations but is now in an apartment and doing well.'"

Next week: The 40-year struggle to end homelessness on Rte. 1.