Four people who have experienced homelessness along the Rte. 1 corridor in Mount Vernon and Lee Districts were introduced in Part 1 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. C Bain 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 Hypothemia 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. Ist 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-

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 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 manager, is angry at Southern Motel for not having worker’s comp to pay her medical bills; at her assaulter, 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 offers 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, helps clients with material and spiritual needs from her basement office in the church.

The long climb back
From her desk surrounded by dozened 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.