

LAZARUS SPEAKS



STORIES OF HOMELESSNESS

MATTHEW MANINT



Homeless persons tell their stories of loss, hope, and how they survive in the city of Biloxi, Mississippi. Devastated by Hurricane Katrina, Biloxi has a large homeless population but no shelter.

Living in the woods, sleeping in cars, or squatting in abandoned buildings, these thirteen homeless men and women struggle to retain their dignity and their will to push forward to a better future.

This volume draws upon the story of the homeless Lazarus of St. Luke's gospel. Lazarus suffered and died in silence. Though he speaks no word in the gospel, Lazarus finds a voice here.

Matthew Manint resides in Biloxi, Mississippi.
He is a consecrated man who follows the spirituality of Blessed Charles de Foucauld.
Charles's inspirations were the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth and being a brother to all

Front Cover - "*Lazarus and the Rich Man*"
Detail from Codex Aureus of Echternach (11th century)

Tamanrasset Press
Biloxi, MS



Copyright © 2014 by Matthew Manint

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

Tamanrasset Press
325 Hiller Dr.
Biloxi, MS 39531

First Edition 2009
Second Edition 2010

Third Edition

ISBN 978-0-557-31838-4



“There was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen; and feasted sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar, named Lazarus, who lay at his gate, full of sores, desiring to be filled with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table, and no one did give him; moreover the dogs came, and licked his sores.

“And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom. And the rich man also died: and he was buried in hell. And lifting up his eyes when he was in torments, he saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom: and he cried, and said: ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, to cool my tongue: for I am tormented in this flame.’ And Abraham said to him: ‘Son, remember that thou didst receive good things in thy lifetime, and likewise Lazarus evil things, but now he is comforted and thou art tormented.’”

The Gospel of Luke

Chapter 16, Verses 19–25

Douay-Rheims Bible

Table of Contents

On Lazarus.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Jim..... <i>“I never thought I’d be here.”</i>	10
Karen..... <i>“I don’t have nobody...nobody.”</i>	17
Mark..... <i>“It’s a particular society.”</i>	28
John and Bill..... <i>“He might have wanted to die....He did.”</i>	34
Russ..... <i>“I believe that things are gonna work out fine.”</i>	43
Steve..... <i>“I’m kind of just lost in a blackout.”</i>	51
A Visit to a Homeless Camp.....	58
Mike..... <i>“We’re all human.”</i>	62
David..... <i>“I’ve lost everything I’ve owned four times.”</i>	72
Martin and Don..... <i>“Jesus was a homeless person, man.”</i>	79
Michael..... <i>“I’m above water, I got my nose up. I can breathe.”</i>	92
A Final Story.....	101
How You Can Help.....	105

On Lazarus

There may be some readers who are unfamiliar with the New Testament story of Lazarus. We may react in horror at the severity of the story. However, Lazarus can invite us into the world of the modern homeless person. He is a humble figure who perishes right outside the home of a rich man. In a larger sense, Lazarus is an archetype of human suffering. Lying outside the walls, he suffers in silence like so much of humanity. He is dying and unnoticed by the very man against whose gate he languishes.

I was first introduced into the hidden world of homelessness in the coastal town of Biloxi, Mississippi. Here I was shocked to realize that hundreds of individuals were suffering right outside my gate, so to speak. I probably passed several homeless persons every day, but did not realize that they were in such a plight. I pray that you, dear reader, might also have your eyes opened through the stories in this book. I hope that you might see the parable of Lazarus not as a condemnation of wealth, but of casting our eyes away from those who suffer.

We are all guilty of being the rich man. None of us can completely fulfill the demands of charity to our brothers and sisters, so we must cast ourselves on the mercy of God. Yet we have all been Lazarus also. All of us have suffered from some need that was ignored by others, and we have thirsted for the justice of God.

This book is a collection of personal stories of homeless persons, specifically those of the Mississippi Gulf Coast a few years after Hurricane Katrina. In an inti-

On Lazarus 4

mate manner, every one of these men and women has deeply felt the sufferings of Lazarus. Perhaps, should their stories be known, people would see that the only difference between themselves and homeless persons is *shelter*. Perhaps their stories will prick consciences and become a source of an outpouring of charity and conversion for all of us.

In the parable, Lazarus is silent. He now speaks through these 13 men and women, all of whom have lived, at least for a time, under his holy mantle.

Introduction

This is not a book about homelessness. This is a book about *homeless persons*. Homelessness is a condition and a societal phenomenon. Homeless persons are those who endure this condition.

A myriad of articles and books have been written about homelessness, but far fewer about those who are homeless. My intention is to offer you the stories of 13 homeless men and women and to let them speak about their lives, their hopes, and their disappointments. Above all, their stories will demonstrate that the only factor that makes them different from you and me is *the lack of a home*. They may suffer addictions, be afflicted with mental illnesses, and exist all over the moral spectrum, but these traits are also found in all of society.

It may seem trite to state that homeless persons are merely those without a home, but careful notice of how people treat them will show the true attitudes of society. Homeless people are a target for abuse, acts of violence, and mockery. In recent years, gangs of youths have attacked homeless persons, even killing some of them. Many sources of entertainment portray homeless persons as dirty, addicted, insane beggars who make a great butt for jokes. Some homeless individuals have acted in ways that enforce this stereotype, but that is true for all groups in society.

When groups of people are abused or discriminated against, their assailants often feel an underlying fear. Usually the fear is stoked by lack of knowledge and a perception that the group is threatening. Thus, the group becomes a caricature, mak-

ing it much easier to abuse them without remorse.

Sadly, many do not perceive that every homeless person has a life story. Every homeless person has regrets, aspirations, family members, and a soul. Perhaps, in some small way, these 13 stories will challenge all of us to action. Unsurprisingly, many homeless persons with whom I spoke were simply happy to have someone interested in their lives. A few had not had a meaningful, deep conversation in years. All of them were absolutely respectful and polite.

The idea for this book came from my working at the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Biloxi, Mississippi. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (whose members are known as “Vincentians”) seeks to have its members grow spiritually through offering assistance to those in need. A Frenchman, Blessed¹ Frédéric Ozanam, founded the Society in 1833, selecting St. Vincent de Paul as its patron. St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660), who is often called the “Father of the Poor,” was a tireless worker for the bodily and spiritual needs of all. According to the Society’s Rule, the primary goal of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is to increase the holiness of its members. In a beautiful passage, the Society’s President-General Adolphe Baudon wrote the following in his Circular Letter dated January 1, 1877:

It is laid down in our Rule, and it has been always understood among us, that in uniting to serve our masters the poor, as St. Vincent de Paul expresses it, our object is not only to relieve material misery, a very laudable purpose in itself, but to aspire, especially, through the practice of that most sublime of virtues, “charity,” to render ourselves better and more fervent Christians, and to make our poor enter on the same path, if we have the hap-

¹ An honor granted by the Catholic Church to an individual whose life exhibited heroic holiness. It may be a stage on the path to sainthood.

piness of succeeding.

Once a week, I spend part of the day as a caseworker for the homeless. Arriving at the two-story former convent which is St. Vincent de Paul's headquarters, I make my way through the small crowd of people waiting outside. Two lists are set out: one for homeless persons, one for those with homes. As people file in, they fill in their name and what they are requesting on one of the lists. In addition, two other lists are taped to the wall above: one is for those who need to do their laundry, and the other is for those who need showers. These two simple services are a major reason for the cleanliness and health of many of Biloxi's homeless persons.

I begin at 9:30 a.m. with the first name on the homeless persons sheet and spend the next several hours seeing clients. As I locate the next person on the list, I make a point of shaking his or her hand and being as professional as possible, no matter what the person's condition. I can usually pick up on who has been drinking or is mentally disturbed, but it is important that I not treat that person any differently. Of course, if someone is obviously drunk and making others uncomfortable, I ask him or her to come back when sober. After leading the client back to a private area, I try to spend a few minutes in small talk. In fact, these chats are what really sparked my curiosity about what homeless life is like.

For most clients, I am able to supply them with a bag lunch of two sandwiches, two hard-boiled eggs, and one or two pieces of fruit or cookies. Most clients are very good at requesting laundry and showers only when they really need them. In special cases, we will supply bus tickets, both local and to other cities. The real need of all of us is spiritual, so I always pray a Hail Mary for the client I just assisted,

and I will even pray with him or her if I sense that the person is open to it.

As the chapters of this book will demonstrate, the St. Vincent de Paul Society is a true place of refuge for the homeless persons of Biloxi. I asked every client whom I interviewed what he or she honestly thought of the Society, and each one sang its praises. This is truly a testament not only to the Director, Mary Frances Ford, but also to each volunteer.

When the concept of this book first came to mind, I immediately began gathering research information about homelessness. It took only a few minutes for me to decide that this was not the path to take, because I was afraid that it would muddy the interview process. My goal was to be completely open to the interviewees and to allow them to speak for themselves.

After coming up with a list of general topics that I would want to cover in each interview, I put out the word that I was seeking volunteers to help with the project. Within two weeks, I had completed all 13 interviews. In thanks for each interviewee's willingness to spend time telling his or her story, the person received dinner and a \$20 Wal-Mart gift card. I was surprised that the gift cards were a bit of an afterthought for the homeless persons whom I interviewed: several of them forgot that they were even going to receive one. If I were on the streets with no money, I would be *clamoring* for a card! Again, this small observation is one of many that show the interviewees' integrity and dignity.

Living in the age of the Internet, I have been especially careful to obscure specific information from the interviews. Before each interview, the individual was given a choice regarding his or her identification in the book. The person could

choose to be identified by his or her actual first name or a fictitious one. Regardless of the person's choice, specific place names, family names, and other information were modified.

Because I have no real experience as a homeless person, I have attempted to not clutter the interviews with my own viewpoints and observations. Whenever I write about a general trend or observation, I do so only because I have seen an obvious thread of relevance. Some interviews are longer than others, some are deeper than others, but all of them are *genuine*. Taking a cue from that exceptional interviewer of the 20th century, Studs Terkel, I simply give to you what the homeless persons gave to me.

Jim

“I never thought I’d be here.”

Jim was waiting outside of St. Vincent de Paul in his battered, white pickup truck. As I approached, I could see that the bed of the truck was full of an array of tools. (Most of these tools would later be stolen while Jim was in jail on a trespassing charge.) As Jim got out of his truck, he waved to me. A slight, middle-aged man with a kind face, he struck me as someone who was trying to make the best out of a rough situation.

We both sat down at the dining room table and drank our coffee. Jim asked me if he could have my McDonald’s coffee cup when I was finished with it, because he could reuse it in the coming weeks. His request caught me off guard and forced me to reevaluate the worth of even a disposable cup.

I asked Jim about his past and what led him to homelessness. In a manner now common to many of the homeless persons whom I interviewed, he looked off into the distance, took a long pause, and chose his words with care: “I was raised in Arizona and left there hitchhiking. I went to Colorado. It was after I was out of the Navy, actually. I was 22 or 23. Back then, you know, that was the early ‘70s, and we were hippies. So hitchhiking was not as uncommon as it is today. As I was getting into Colorado Springs, I remembered that my younger brother had dated a girl who had moved to Colorado. She and I had talked prior to my coming there.”

Jim moved in with this young woman and set out to find a job. “I got the paper the next morning, and in the paper was this ad for a job at a dude ranch. They needed carpenters to rebuild the barn. It was at Ruby Lodge. [I] interviewed with

the foreman. He took me up on the veranda of this beautiful A-frame guesthouse and showed me a barn that was listing. He asked me, 'How would you fix that?' I said, 'Well, I would take that Bobcat over there and hook chains up to the inner timbers and pull it forward. Then I would brace everything.' He goes, 'You're hired, dude!' That turned into a summertime of me being their head wrangler.

"Long story short, I met my wife there. We were sitting in the A-frame lodge, and in the door comes this family. And I hear this one voice that is . . . different. The next minute, she's sitting four seats down from me. I keep listening to this voice—this incredible voice. I look at her, and it was like this tomboyish-type girl who was speaking out of confidence. I loved her voice. That's the mother of my kids."

I asked, "Where did you two settle down at? Did you have your kids in Colorado?"

"No, she was a student at a university in Louisiana, so I went there. Her dad's in oil. We went up to Oklahoma, and that's where we had our kids." Jim said that his son is now attending Stanford, and his daughter is at a private Catholic university. I asked what brought him from Oklahoma to the Gulf Coast. "The storm," he answered. "I divorced in '94, and for the first few years she had custody of my kids. That was very difficult for me. During the meantime, I acquired a degree in occupational therapy, and I did that for about five years before I got disillusioned with how I was to treat these people." He spoke about the various ways that he was asked to falsify notes and artificially keep people "in the system" and how it eventually caused him to look for other work. I could tell that he wanted to speak more about

his family, so I encouraged him to continue in that direction.

“At one point,” he began, “my ex-wife dropped the kids off for Christ-mas with me . . . and then she never showed up again. She got hooked up with drugs, and I got the kids. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I feel so sorry for my ex-wife because that was so tragic for her. When you have your kids, you have an anchor, which helps you keep the straight and narrow. Although I didn’t always achieve that, I did for the most part. And they made me want to be a better man. I was a good dad.”

I asked if he could expand on what happened after he arrived on the Coast. He replied, “We were sitting at home when the levees broke in New Orleans, and I said, ‘You know, kids, at the risk of sounding a little bit morbid, there’s going to be a lot of carpet being laid down there soon.’ So we started making a plan. I came down in November. When I had lived in Louisiana, I had heard about Gulf Shores [Alabama] and how beautiful it was. But I made the mistake of thinking that Gulfport [Mississippi] was Gulf Shores—which was God’s will.”

Jim and a helper drove all night to Gulfport. When they arrived in the morning, they went to a carpet store that they had previously contacted. The owner soon put them to work, and they took some of their earnings and bought a large tent. Jim’s face became more serious as he said, “More money than I have ever made in my life, I made in the year and a half after Katrina.” Work quickly slowed, and soon the carpet stores were using their local crews instead of outsiders like Jim.

“Why didn’t you go back to Oklahoma?” I asked.

“I got a DUI. I’m not going to leave the state until I have the fine paid off.

I'm not going to run from state to state to state. If it weren't for my DUI, I'd be long gone."

"What's your typical day?"

"I get up about 5. I go to the Chevron, and for 42 cents I can get a refill of my coffee cup. And I get the newspaper. I have to buy the newspaper every day because I'm addicted to the crossword puzzle!"

"Where do you usually park your truck at? How are you able to sleep in your truck?"

"I stay at Wal-Mart, but I sleep in the back of my crew cab. Wal-Mart has been so gracious to me. I know that they have a policy, and they want big RVs to come park in their parking lot. But I think that if they run me off, they can't let anybody stay there. I am always extremely respectful of that privilege." He explained how he tries not to interfere with customers or employees because he feels that he would be encroaching. However, some people show their fear or disdain of him. "I've had customers and employees . . . give me the bad look. There are some people who think they can stare at me like I'm a threat, lower than them. They never speak to me, but their looks . . . Living in Wal-Mart is like watching TV. I sit in my truck, and I see everything from drug deals to domestic violence to fathers having the most loving and nurturing relationships with their children."

"Do you struggle with any addictions?"

"Yes. But you know, I've been an alcoholic since I was 19. I've been up, I've been down. I got a Bachelor of Science degree from college. I've gone through long periods of sobriety. I tend to binge drink for periods of time. I don't know what it is

in me—three weeks I can go without it, and then something in me, you know . . . I get very bored, and it's when I'm bored that I drink. If I have a lot of work, I don't drink. Have you ever read Steinbeck? Have you ever read *Tortilla Flats*? It's just like that. We all sit around and drink. But I can't begin to tell you how it goes sometimes. There's one guy who's like a brute, but all of a sudden, in the middle of this beautiful campfire and everybody's getting kind of drunk, [he] will stand up and start quoting Shakespeare.

“There's so much camaraderie . . . that I just can't describe it to you. I wish that those who pitied us in our homelessness could experience one night of the type of camaraderie that I've experienced in those woods. Poor people just loving each other and having the time of their frickin' lives. We have nothing to be pretentious about, and once that has been taken out of the equation, you won't believe how loving, and kind, and tolerant, and accepting, and ready to help people can be. Steinbeck said, 'If you are hurting, or if you're in need, go to the poor.' When somebody is 17 cents short of a beer, everybody's digging in their pockets.”

He pulled out a battered envelope and began showing me pictures of his two children. I asked him if they knew of his situation. “They know partially,” he said. He quickly steered the conversation to another area, so I decided not to press that topic. Jim brought up the lack of shelters in the area and focused on the plight of homeless women. I mentioned that there is a shelter in Pascagoula, and he replied, “If you're a woman in the Wal-Mart parking lot in Biloxi and you make a call and they say, 'Oh yeah, we'll accommodate you in Pascagoula,' what are you going to do? Don't you find that reprehensible for the people who live between west

Mississippi and Pascagoula? Don't you find it reprehensible for the Catholic Church? For the Presbyterian Church? For the Methodists and the Baptists? To have so little reach that they can't house women in this area? How many untold stories of tragedy are there that the Lord hears . . . that we'll never be able to know because our community has subjected women to 'outdoorsness'? And we'll never hear it, and the paper will never hear it, but those women have suffered it. They will have had to take propositions that they [would] not have otherwise because they don't have shelter. This is basic Humanitarianism 101."

I asked what he would want to tell people about homelessness. The clock on the wall ticked while Jim pondered. "If I had to put it in one sentence? I think it would be this . . . and I'm quoting Blake: 'This life's dim windows of the soul distort the heavens from pole to pole and lead one to believe a lie when one sees with, not through, the eye.' Don't look through your eye at the homeless, but with your heart. When Jesus said, 'Those who have ears to hear and eyes to see,' he wasn't talking about your ears and eyes, but your *heart*. See the homeless with your heart."

"What is the most difficult thing about homelessness?"

"For me, it's the concept of self. I never thought I'd be here. I don't like being here. It's dealing with myself that is the . . .hardest part of my homelessness. I can sleep in my truck alright, and I can come here to St. Vincent de Paul. I'm going to quote Steinbeck here. St. Vincent de Paul is 'a shelter for my stomach and a warm coat against the economic cold.' That's what St. Vincent de Paul is to me. The joy and the camaraderie when I come here are palpable."

Karen

“I don’t have nobody . . . nobody.”

Karen and I planned to meet at the Saint Vincent de Paul building, and we would then decide where to have lunch and conduct the interview. I arrived five minutes early, and she was already waiting for me in the hallway. (One of the things that I noticed about the clients whom I interviewed was that they all arrived early. One gentleman even apologized profusely for being only five minutes *early!*)

We both agreed to have lunch at a local deli. It had been cold the previous few evenings, so Karen was wearing several layers. Her car, which she has been living in, was parked outside. An ‘89 Chevy Capri, it was jammed full of her possessions. The back windows were completely obscured by all manner of clothing and boxes. The car appeared to be in fairly good condition, but it seemed to be tired, as if it were being asked to perform more than it was capable of. On her left rear window were the words “HOMELESS PLEASE HELP GOD BLESS ME.” I looked again at the last word just to ensure that it said “ME” and not “YOU.” In a way, it made this plea to the world even more poignant.

As I studied her car, waiting for her to arrange some of her things, I thought about what it would be like to live in a car for a long period. Over the years, I had slept in cars, but only a night or two. “Misery” would be the word that would best describe sleeping in the driver’s seat of a packed car. You wake up many times, pushing against the restrictive seat and door. In the best of weather, you wake up feeling dirty, disoriented, and exhausted. It’s hard to imagine the wretchedness of

sleeping in the stifling humidity of the coastal summer or the numbing cold of the damp winter, but for Karen it was reality.

Her preparations finished, Karen walked with me into the restaurant, a simple place that served sandwiches and soup. I could sense her meekness as she stood behind me and had a hard time raising her voice enough to place her order. She was middle-aged with long hair, and her appearance did not reveal “homelessness,” at least not to an untrained eye. If one studied her face, he or she might detect a deep tiredness, but would also notice a certain serenity about Karen. This serenity, as she would point out, would be a reason for some difficulties in her life. Her clothing was simple, but very clean and very presentable. She carried herself with dignity, but a soft humility came forth when she placed her order with the cashier. When we sat down at our booth, I noticed that she was wearing Christmas-themed earrings. Of the many things I remember about that December day, the earrings stand out most prominently. They demonstrated a woman who, though mired in a situation that would crush most people, would not allow the difficulties of her life to stifle her joy.

“It’s been a while since I’ve eaten in a restaurant,” she said. “This is nice.”

After we were settled, I asked Karen about her background. Originally from New Orleans, she has four siblings, all of them sisters. When she was young, she quit school to go to work because her parents “weren’t giving me what I needed.” Her family was Catholic, and they went to church as a family, but her mother stopped attending. Soon after, her father stopped taking them, and he would attempt to have “a prayer deal at the house.”

Only one of her sisters finished high school. Another sister finished her GED, became a nurse, and then stopped working after a car hit her son. Karen took the path of marriage, but had to file for divorce because of physical and mental abuse. During this time, she miscarried. She said wistfully, "It was a beautiful wedding, you know; if only the person was right for me, . . . it would have been beautiful." When she described speaking to a priest about her divorce, I could tell that the subject still weighed heavily upon her.

She began to tell me about meeting someone else after her divorce, but stopped herself short by saying, "You don't wanna hear all this, do you?"

"Whatever you want to talk about," I replied.

"Well," she said, "let me just say that I've been married twice, have two kids, and was married 19 years. I knew we didn't love each other anymore, and it needed to end."

"How long ago was that?"

"1998."

"What about your family? Do you have other family around?"

"Well, my family's still in Louisiana. There's not very many people in my family that's left Louisiana. They're kind of stuck there. I don't know why." Her family knows about her situation, but she gives different reasons as to why they won't or can't help her. "If my dad was financially better [off] than he is, he would do something. He's got a very caring heart when it comes to his children, but he's not in that place where he can do anything. My sisters are kinda like . . . I feel like they withdraw from me since I left Louisiana, and I don't know why. They're kind

of hostile, and I don't need it. One conversation I had with my sister, I kind of said something like maybe I needed to be in a hospital, a mental hospital, because I'm so depressed from being in my car. Soon after, she changed her phone number." Her son offered to let her stay with him. Karen thinks that he's saying what he's expected to say, and she doesn't want to be a burden. "I don't have nobody . . . nobody."

Because of the lack of shelters, much of the life of Biloxi's homeless persons revolves around the small campgrounds that they have set up in the sparse woods on the peninsula. Often right next to main thoroughfares, most passersby would never guess that dozens of men and women are camping a stone's throw from the street. Because the population of Biloxi's homeless men is far greater than that of its homeless women, problems arise when women frequent the men's camps. "Guys floating around here," Karen began, "don't have a life. It would be nice if I found someone [who] can help me get on my feet, . . . but there's no such thing. The campgrounds are party areas, and guys tend to drink all day. I've been to the camp, and I drank some tequila, and I didn't realize I drank so much tequila, and I ended up in jail."

"What happened? Do you mind if I ask?"

"I don't mind. They had a bottle of tequila, and I was drinking it like water. I didn't realize . . . I was exhausted, and that's what we go through, that's what I go through, being in my car. In the summertime, I go for walks on the beach, and that's what I like—being in the outdoors. What I was told is I passed out, and they helped me to the tent. When I woke up, I was sick, and I went out of control because my keys and my phone were not in my backpack. I found my phone, and I

called 911 for protection, but I ended up going to jail for public intoxication.”

“How long did you have to stay in jail?”

“24 hours. They just put me in this room, and it didn’t make no sense.”

Karen revealed that she has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, but she is able to get medication from a local charity. Sometimes, she has to choose between making a medication appointment and looking for work. “I had an appointment one day at one o’clock, but I had to cancel because of a landscaping job I needed to check out. But that didn’t even go through! We went to fill out an application and stuff, but nothing happened. And it sounded so promising. That day, when I was trying to find the place, I was running late, and I didn’t have enough gas. And Roger, who was with me, he was so worried about running out of gas, and I said, ‘Man, don’t worry, I know my car.’ I stopped at a gas station because I had to shut Roger up. I went inside and looked around to find somebody who would help me with gas. I saw a table with three old black men sitting there, so I walked up to them and said, ‘Can y’all please help me with some gas? I’m going for a job, and I’m out of gas.’ One of them said, ‘Sorry, we can’t help you.’ ‘That’s fine,’ I said, and I meant it, because I felt very sure that someone would help me. ‘Well, where’s your car?’ one asked. I pointed it out, and this guy pulled out a dollar, and then this guy pulled out a dollar, and then the other guy pulled out a dollar.”

While we were speaking, my mind kept trying to imagine how Karen would live in her car on a day-to-day basis. I decided to ask her what it is like.

“Well, lately I’ve been waking up early . . . real early, because of the cold weather. But usually, when it’s not cold, I am so focused on going to Lady of Fatima.

It's been great. And that's what I do—focus on going to Lady of Fatima. Going someplace and taking a shower, doing my laundry, that's what I focus on in the beginning of the week, because the weekends they're not open. If I have a couple dollars over the weekend, I'll take a shower at the community center. So when I wake up in the morning, I plan on going to Fatima, but I don't want to show up too early. So I sit there, I listen to music. . . . I listen to country and the modern station.

“I think. I do think a lot, and I like to be alone to think. I'm just trying to . . . sometimes I focus on what I'm gonna do next to get me out of this situation. Or I'll focus on my family, my kids, my thinking. That's what's going through my mind. Actually, the people I've been hanging out with have been great. It brightens up your spirit, even if things aren't going so well. They really care.”

I was still curious about where she parks her car at night and if she is the only one who lives in her car. “Well,” she begins, “there are a few friends of mine who stay in a van, and all three of us stay in one little spot at Wal-Mart. We sleep parked in a row.”

“How do you sleep? Do you put your seat back?”

“Uh-huh! I tilt my seat back as much as it will go. My back seat has stuff I don't want to get rid of! It's all I own!” This last sentence comes out with deep, plaintive sorrow. “I've lost my storage in Montgomery. I lost my kids' pictures, all the important things of my life. When you lose your job and you don't have no income coming in, you tend to lose not only your place, but you lose your belongings that you've had for so long. I gave my dog away because I lost my job, and there is no way I could leave her in the car. I mean, I miss her, and I will cry thinking about

her.”

As she began to describe being homeless in Montgomery, Alabama, I asked Karen if that was the first time she had been homeless. “I’ve been homeless in Texas: I’ve stayed with friends that took me in because they didn’t want to see me living in my car. But it is real hard staying with people. It’s just that you feel you’re a burden. What you see and what you hear, you feel like you’re in the way.”

“So, when you’re in your car, does anybody bother you? I mean, surely the guy in the little security truck at Wal-Mart knows you’re there, but does he do anything?”

“Well, Wal-Mart doesn’t really care as long as you don’t drink in your car. I was at Winn-Dixie first. And when I was sleeping over there, I didn’t know I could do my laundry and shower at Fatima. I was basically showering in the back of the Subway building; I had my bathing suit on, and I would wash myself that way. There was always somebody hanging out back there, but I didn’t care. I needed to get clean. I feel awful when I can’t get clean.

“What happened is the guys from Fatima would see my car there, and they would come and talk to me. It was getting me in trouble. Actually, Winn-Dixie and the cops thought I was selling drugs or selling my body.”

I began to see how a woman living in her car would face completely different dangers from those a man would face. Karen continued to describe how the men would gravitate toward her, seeking conversation. This natural desire of a man to draw near to a woman, even when it does not involve anything overtly sexual, seems to be amplified when they are both homeless. Both are living under great stress and

would seek the other for comfort, but at least in Karen's case, this led to trouble because the men would not be able to maintain proper boundaries in the relationship. "You should have seen their faces. They're all excited when they're talking to me and stuff. I guess it makes their day. One guy I was hanging around with was mad because I would talk to other guys and hang out with them at the library. He and I didn't have a relationship, and I said, 'We're just talking! I'm helping them with the way they're feeling because they're feeling bad, and I just get tired of sitting in my car all the time.'"

One night at Winn-Dixie, she was sleeping with her window down, and a friend of hers passed out next to her car. When she woke up, the police were surrounding her car because somebody at Winn-Dixie who saw him lying there called 911. She explained that the man was homeless, but was not with her. They told him that if he could walk, he was free to go. With a Herculean effort, he was able to walk away. But the policeman told Karen that she couldn't sleep there. "'Where do I sleep at?' He said, 'The beach.' And I've been done told 'you don't sleep at the beach.' They'll tell you to leave, too. And it's dark at the beach. I've had guys come up to my car in the middle of the night, asking if I want to party. It's dangerous for a woman."

"How do these men get money to support their habits?"

"Begging. I can name two for sure that do work. One said that the only reason he does work, even for a couple dollars, is for beer. There's a lot of them that's not gonna work—ever. And that's why they're not very good company for me. Because where I'm going, I'm going to the top. That's where I want to be."

We continued to talk about the homeless persons' economy. Karen, who receives \$176 every month in food stamps, told me about the underground market for them. Typically, other people will buy food stamps for half their value, but Karen said that she often gives some of hers to those who, for whatever reason, don't receive them. "I don't mind helping, and I don't mind giving. But at some point, I've got to think of me, and it hurts—because I don't mind giving. What gets me to help them, and freely to help them, is they say, 'We don't know when we're gonna eat.'"

Part of my curiosity about homelessness revolved around the different skills and lessons that a homeless person learns while on the streets. I asked Karen what advice she would give to someone who, for whatever reason, suddenly found herself homeless. "Um," she began, "'try not to be too scared and worried about [your] next step.'" She paused for several seconds. "'Pray. Don't be afraid to cry when you're feeling scared . . . lonely. Focus on the people you're hanging out with, because they can bring you down.'"

With a laugh, she continued, "'Look for churches! And if you are served food by a church, and they're having a service right after, *go to the service!*' I went to the Wednesday night service [at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church], and they served us soup and sandwiches that night, and they had a little service. It's, uh, ad . . . Advent? You know, lighting the candles? And a lot of people didn't even stay. They stayed to eat, but didn't stay for the service. I gave five dollars out of my pocket! I'm a giver, and a lot of times I don't think about me. And I think, 'Shoot! Shoot, what did I do?' But I just gave it to the church.'"

Because Karen had been homeless in several different cities, I asked her about how things might be different if there were a good shelter in the Biloxi area. She said, “Well, the shelter would help with employment, right?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Let’s say there were a shelter, it had case workers, and it wasn’t a situation where you had to wait every day to get a bed, but would have a guaranteed bed for a set amount of time.”

“It would make a big difference,” she replied. “Because right now, as it’s getting colder . . . I have sat in Fatima and watched this one man, I have not [seen] him again. He could not deal with it—being cold. He’s like freaking out! He looked like he’d just started being homeless, and he was fed up with it already. Some people just can’t stand it, just can’t stand being homeless—which is understandable!”

She continued, “In the beginning, sometimes I would sit in my car, just watching people shopping and getting a bite to eat at a Chinese restaurant, and I’m just sitting there with my dog, when I had my dog. And this couple just stopped at my car, her and her husband, and she says, ‘Are you OK?’ I jumped back a bit, and I said, ‘No! I’m *not* OK! I’m not gonna lie to you, I’m *not* OK!’ She asked if I was sleeping in my car, and I said, ‘Yep.’”

Karen said that the shelters that she has seen are no place for women. Drug use is rife. I asked her, in her opinion, what percentage of homeless persons have some sort of addiction.

“Hmm. I want to say . . . 95 percent.”

“What about mental illness?”

“About 40 percent got a mental illness. It might have something to do with . . . because they’re trying to stop an addiction, or they’ve been withdrawing from it. Or it may be because that’s just the way they are.”

“Karen,” I began, “let’s say that you could go on the national news and tell people about homelessness. What would you want people to know about it?”

She leaned forward. “Don’t take what they have for granted. Because they could lose it and not even expect to lose it.”

“Those are wise words,” I replied.

“Because, basically, be prepared. It can hit you, and you won’t know what to do. It is so easy to lose your house, your car. Whatever you’ve got that you can pawn, you’ll be pawning it. I owe money right now, but I’m not focusing on it right now. I’ve got enough to worry about without making myself sick. Just don’t take life for granted.”

She looked down at her hands and continued. “I mean, I cried. I cried when I lost my job, because *I knew*. I cried because I knew how hard it was to get a job. It’s scary, actually. I mean, I think I’m blessed because I’ve still got my car running. I’m not living in the streets yet. But I’m scared. I am scared that’s going to happen.

“But you know what? I do pray. I do have a relationship with God. A lot of times, I lose my faith. I lose my faith, and I worry myself sick. And sometimes you can see it in my face. But when I’ve got my faith, I’m OK.”

Mark

”It’s a particular society.”

Mark was the youngest person whom I interviewed. Probably in his early 20s, Mark wanted to meet at Burger King for lunch. He was hesitant to order too much food, but I was able to talk him into a decent meal. He was of average build, tall, and had well-groomed blond hair. He was clean-shaven, and his features lacked the deep creases and leathery complexion of long-term outdoor living.

I had assisted Mark several times before at St. Vincent de Paul, and he was always polite and quiet. He never wanted to speak too frankly about himself, but I could tell that in a one-on-one situation, he would open up.

We began by discussing his background and family history. “I’m from Louisiana, actually, and I was born there. I come up halfway decent. Just, I don’t know . . . something happened in my family. I got old; they got tired of me—kicked me out.”

“How old were you when that happened?”

“I was about 19. Once that happened, you know, I just stayed with friends . . . brothers. Finally, I made my way on the street. I’ve been out here for about four or five months now.”

“Where were you before?”

“I had family up near Hattiesburg [Mississippi]. I’ve been in psychiatric wards, and they know that, so they would let me stay with them. But after I stayed with them for a while, they got tired of me staying there, so I figured I would move.

I figured a shelter would be the best place. That's how I ended up here, actually, looking for shelters. And the only one around here is Gulf Coast Rescue Mission, and I messed up by fighting there one night, and I went to jail. And when I got out of jail, you can't come back for like 60 or 90 days."

"Can anyone stay at Gulf Coast Rescue Mission?"

"Yeah, pretty much. You just can't work; you work for them, and you have to go to a 15-minute service."

I asked Mark what it's like to have a mental illness and be homeless. He said, "It's hard to work. The mental illness is like a demon, you know? And if you catch that demon, then that demon can prevent you from getting a job and getting off the streets very easily. It's very hard having a mental illness. . . . It really is."

I asked if he was able to get medications. "No, I . . . well, they really suck, to be honest with you. I have tried to take them. I have tried to take them. I've been in psychiatric wards, and you have to take them, and they're not worth taking."

Mark told me that he is staying with a few other homeless men on the same golf course mentioned in the chapter, "A Visit to a Homeless Camp." He was hesitant to tell me too much detail about his living arrangements, but I assured him that I had no interest in learning the location of his camp. We talked about the strategy of keeping one's camp hidden, especially from other homeless persons. I asked him whether he had any problems with theft. "Not at all," he replied, "not at all. I mean, one day someone messed up my tent, and that's all that happened. That's it. Like I said, they [his campmates] don't do drugs, you know. I've never seen them do drugs. If they do drink, they keep it to themselves. You don't see them walking around

with a beer. If they drink, it's often in their tent or by the beer store, *maybe*, for a few minutes. It's not the way you would think it would be. Like I said, it's a particular society."

"When you became homeless, were you always in Biloxi?"

"Well, the first time I was homeless was in Alexandria [Louisiana]. Over there, they have a Salvation Army shelter, and they give you five days' free stay. I stayed there for like 10 days, I think, and that was my first experience on the streets." Mark paused, and I noticed that "I'll be Home for Christmas" was playing over the PA system, lending our conversation a somber air. "It's actually pretty rough around that area. I got tired of it because I almost got in a knife fight, you know. I had to pull a knife on some people, and we danced around a little bit. I didn't have nowhere to stay, and they was pretty much all over the neighborhood, you know? I couldn't get away from them. So I just went to the hospital and went to the psychiatric ward. My cousin actually came over there and picked me up, as they said I could come over here and stay. So I stayed over here for like a year. But after the year was up, . . . I got kicked out."

"How did the shelter in Alexandria operate? Did you have to show up each evening?"

"Actually, you come in at 5 [p.m.], and you leave by 8 [a.m.]. You get three meals a day, and they feed anybody. It's a pretty nice setup; it's just a bad neighborhood."

"How would things be different on the Coast if there was a good shelter for the homeless?"

“It would help out a lot. It always helps. They always help.”

I told Mark that I was interested in hearing his opinion of what a good shelter would be like. He laughed, smiled, and replied, “Just a bed. Three meals a day and a bed. Just give somebody a home.”

Because he had mentioned his cousin, I asked whether the rest of his family knew of his homelessness. “Nope,” he said, “I haven’t contacted them.”

“Mark,” I asked, “what is the most difficult part of being out on the streets?”

“The most difficult thing is the rain. It’s the rain. Because your tent may leak, and then your blankets get wet, and it’s just cold when it rains, and you’re sleeping in a wet tent. It’s not comfortable. You can actually be homeless and be comfortable *if* you know what you’re doing. If you don’t know what you’re doing and you get kicked out and get on the street, . . . you’re miserable. But the rain and the cold weather would probably be the worst.”

“Do you work anywhere?”

“Actually, the last job I had was at a Waffle House, and it really didn’t work out. I lost my ID and birth certificate, but I finally got all that back. Hopefully, you know, something comes through. Maybe pull something small and make a check!”

“Do you have any plans for changing your situation?”

“I was hoping to maybe get an apartment or something like that. If it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out, but hopefully it does.”

“How do the police treat you?”

“They’re OK. . . . I went to jail a couple of times because I didn’t have nowhere to stay.”

“You mean vagrancy?”

“No, I just would . . . like, one time I went to a Waffle House, ordered something, told them I wouldn’t pay for it. Told ‘em to actually call the cops. They said, ‘You can just go ahead.’ I said, ‘No, call the cops.’ I actually wanted to go to jail. I went to jail and got out after four or five days. But then the hurricane was coming in, and I went to the courthouse in Gulfport; made myself argue with a cop. Just to get out of the hurricane, you know. So they arrested me for trespassing.

“When I got out of jail then, I was walking down here. I walked into a neighborhood. Anyway, when I was coming back out, there was this dude out there with a water hose. I was like thirsty, you know? I had been walking all day. I asked if I could get a drink out of his water hose, and he said, ‘Sure.’ Then the cops pulled up, and they just told me to find a spot off in the woods. (I told them I was homeless, and they figured out I wasn’t going to bother anything.) They told me to find a spot in the woods and lay down. So that’s what I did. Then I moved on the other side of town, over by Loaves and Fishes [a Biloxi soup kitchen], because you’ve got this society and they’ve got their society.”

Loaves and Fishes is located in East Biloxi, while St. Vincent de Paul is in West Biloxi. I asked whether there is any difference in the two homeless communities. “Actually, there are just more people over there. When I stayed over there, you’ve got the Beau Rivage Casino and the Hard Rock [Casino]. Across the street are abandoned buildings. You just find a spot—a patch of concrete or stay right on

the beach.”

“What would you want to tell other people about homelessness?”

“Well, whatever homeless people are given, they need it, for sure. Because it is hard to be homeless.”

“So even if people help out with something small, it still makes a difference?”

“A big difference.”

“What about advice for someone who is newly homeless?”

“Most of the time, you get off of the streets. But, if you can't, find somebody who knows the ropes. If you can't do that, then just learn the ropes. It takes a while.”

“Has your experience had any advantages?”

“Oh, a lot of good camp times, a lot of good meals at Loaves and Fishes. They feed very well over there. They get lots of casino food over there, which just rocks.”

“Mark, any final thoughts?”

“Homeless people ain't bad. I'm sure some of them are, but I don't know any.”

John and Bill

“He might have wanted to die. . . . He did.”

John and Bill wanted to be interviewed together. They had both been coming to St. Vincent de Paul for quite some time. They were both middle-aged and veterans. John was the shorter of the two and had long hair and a beard. He often wore a military jacket. Bill was very outgoing and perpetually upbeat, and he was well liked by all at St. Vincent de Paul.

“So who wants to go first?” I asked.

Bill said, “You wanna go first, John?”

“It don’t matter,” John replied. When he spoke, his voice was so soft that I had to move the recorder closer to him. “My name’s John; I’m originally from Ohio. I was in the U.S. Navy Seabees here in Gulfport—was four years there. Got out in ‘72, honorable discharge. Ended up homeless after the storm. [Hurricane] Katrina come through.”

“Where were you before Katrina?”

“I was in an apartment. I do construction work. Yep, I do remodeling, whatever. As long as if it’s got something to do with a building, I can probably do it. My dad taught me a lot, because he used to build houses all his life, so I learned a lot from him.”

“Do you have any family around? Any kids?”

“No, no family.”

I turned to Bill and asked him where he's from. "I was born in California. I went to Chicago; my dad was a truck driver. My mom was 50 when she had me. I have World War II brothers. I went into the Service. Certain things I did, I did."

"What branch were you in?"

"Army, until I got busted. I got busted with a joint of weed, but they wanted me out of there anyways because I was crazy. I didn't care. I really didn't care, you know? I drank a lot, I drugged a lot. But it always ate at me. It still does. I don't care what anybody says, your conscience will eat at you. I don't know. What do you want to know now?"

"Were you in the infantry?"

"I was, until I got busted. When I was in the Gulf, I was a cook. Corporal. I had a house, a brand-new wife; but I got called up for the first Gulf War, so I didn't get home for two and a half years. She took off with everything. And I was sober while I was gone. Stone sober."

"How did you end up in Biloxi?"

"I got frostbite and stuff like that, and I was in Wyoming, so they moved me down to here [the Veterans Hospital] for depression and PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]." I asked whether he was homeless in Wyoming. "Yeah, I was for a little bit."

I asked John when he first became homeless. "When [Hurricane] Frederick came in '79, I was homeless for a little bit, but that only lasted three months. Trying to rebuild everything, you know, for I could work back then. I went on back to work, got on my feet, got me a vehicle. Just kept going. Katrina was the second one I

had been in. I got here three months after [Hurricane] Camille, and the Seabee base was wiped out. Then I went back overseas to the Philippines.”

“Bill, where were you at during Katrina?”

“I was here. Yeah, right here. I was at the VA because I was working at the VA. For four or five days, I slept in the kitchen and cooked for the people, because there was nothing open. They gave me a little trailer out there. I went over to [subsidized] apartments; they kicked me out the day after Christmas, saying they had to remodel. [Congressman] Gene Taylor stepped in, gave me a trailer for three months, and then they gave me a hotel because of the formaldehyde [in the trailer].”

“There is bad out there. I’ve been ripped off for my blood pressure pills and stuff like that! I’ve been ripped off for my clothes! My tent! We’re supposed to be a Christian society, but you can’t turn the other cheek sometimes.”

I asked John about his experiences with the police. “When I first got here, they didn’t know me because I ain’t from here. They seen me at the VA or when I was walking up and down the streets, in the same places all the time, every day, every day. They just automatically know that you’re homeless. One cop down at the Food Giant [a local grocery store], he said, ‘I know you all is homeless ‘cuz you all will be sitting here [for] four hours, then go sit somewhere else for four hours.’ Because these new rookie cops we’ve got down here will pull you over and give you a hard time. They don’t bother me, but they’ve got to know me. They really don’t bother me too much no more. Probably about the first five or six months right after the hurricane, they didn’t bother nobody. They already knew everything got tore up. I mean, people who even had good jobs and nice homes didn’t even have that no

more, and they're on the street."

I asked John whether he remembered the little tent city that was erected across from Able Body [a day-labor company] after Katrina. "Yeah," he said, "I used to stay up under the I-10 bypass down there. Me and this girl I know. Her and a couple Mexicans, we stayed there a long time."

"Speaking of living arrangements, where do you guys stay at?"

"We stay across the street," John said. "There were about 10 of us until the cops came. A couple guys' tents you could see from over here! You have to act like you're in a war and you can't be seen. When I first got here, I didn't have no tents—I slept outside, over there by the lighthouse, or slept inside the lighthouse. . . . I know how to survive. Survived Vietnam, now I'm surviving this. It's strengthened up my skills, being out here on the streets. Ones I kinda let slip by when you're living in a job, got a house"

Bill added, "Well, during the summer, it's nothing to stay outside. Except for the bugs, you know. I don't want to be in the streets. He don't. None of us do. Everybody's depressed, man"

"Do you think there are things that keep you in homelessness? Do you think drinking contributes to your being homeless?"

"Yeah, yeah, . . . ain't no doubt. If you see somebody who don't drink that's staying out here? I mean, you gotta drink."

"You've gotta drink," John repeated.

"See, he knows about it," Bill replied. "I'm not gonna lie to you, I just drink. If anybody asks, in my opinion, why we drink out here? Come on! To forget.

What are you gonna do? You're living out in the woods; you've got the police chasing you. This is something I wanna put on record—honest to God: You know how they've got race profiling? We're society-profiled. We ain't done nothing! We ain't robbed no houses, we ain't selling no crack. That kind of stuff. To me, that's bull. And then, when the mayor puts up an ultimatum, . . . he said, 'No homeless in Biloxi. It's a tourist town.' It takes people to stand up. They can put me in jail! I mean, come on! I'm on the street; it's cold outside. They give me a bed; they give me clothes. Come on, we ain't no gangsters. Nobody understands. We're bad? Jesus was homeless! It makes me cry sometimes. . . ."

I had heard that Bill had been in jail for a month, so I asked him whether it was rough to go that long without a drink. "Aw, no! It kinda clears your thinking."

"Do you drink mainly beer or liquor?"

"Yep, I drink beer," John said. "I don't drink liquor no more because I've got cirrhosis of the liver and they told me if I didn't quit drinking liquor, I was going to die. I won't quit drinking beer because I like my beer. Used to be, that's what I woke up thinking about: 'How am I going to get drunk today?'"

"Do you get your money through odd jobs?"

"Yeah, I pick up jobs here and there," John replied.

We were all finishing up our pizza, and I wanted to ask John and Bill some deeper questions about their homeless experiences. "What's the most difficult thing about being homeless?"

Bill answered first. "Being judged. To me it is. It's insecurity, you know? Feeling 'I ain't that good.' It digs into you. Once you get into that, it's easy to drink

and all that kind of stuff. You're the first one to listen to us—there is nobody else.”

“So it affects your self-image?”

“Self-esteem, yeah.”

John said, “I would say it's avoiding the police. It's not too bad now, but it used to be really bad.”

Bill leaned forward and said, “Well, hell . . . I ain't a criminal! You just feel like you're guilty about something. You're just trying to survive.”

“Tell me what a typical day is like.”

“Well, lately I've been doing good,” Bill said. “Before that, get up. Where are you going to get your next drink from . . .”

John added, “I get up at 5:30 every day. It's a military habit, I guess. Hang around, wait until somebody opens up so I can get me a cup of coffee. Drink my coffee, usually smoke a cigarette, and figure out what I'm gonna do the rest of the day. Once you get your routine down and you've been out here a long time, it's same-old, same-old.”

“What about things as simple as using the restroom or getting water?”

Bill laughed and said, “It depends on what you've gotta do! You go to the Wal-Mart or the BP. It ain't a problem. *If* you can make it that far—some people can't. You don't worry about it. Water ain't no problem.”

“I've got some of those cooler jugs, those big ones,” said John. He spoke about someone who had cases of canned water that Budweiser manufactured for Katrina relief. This person set up a system with John and Bill where they could come and get a few cases when they run low.

“Have you had any frightening experiences?”

Both men immediately nodded. John said, “One time a cop came up on me and shined a flashlight on me and told me to get up and get out of there *now*. I still think somebody told him where my tent was because I don’t know how he found it. It was like 4:30 in the morning.”

“I had a dude put a knife in my face,” said Bill. “I knocked him out.”

“Has faith been an important part of your experience being homeless?”

“Lately, yeah,” answered Bill.

John said, “It’s always been, because when I was locked up, I used to get Bible studies in prison every Wednesday. In the kitchen.”

“How long were you in prison for?”

“10 years. I got there because I shot somebody that was on my property when I came home for lunch, stealing my tools out of my truck. I told him if he wasn’t off of my driveway when I got back outside, I was gonna blow his head off. So he was about halfway down my driveway, and I tagged him. And then, they locked me up for that—aggravated assault with a deadly weapon.”

“So he lived?”

“Oh, yeah, I wasn’t trying to kill him. He used to work for me and knew where all my stuff was.”

Bill prodded, “Tell him! Tell him about when you used to teach Bible studies.”

“Yeah, when I was in prison I did. A couple guys from Columbus, Mississippi. Black guys, but they were real good friends of mine. They worked with

me on a plumbing crew. Now I taught them how to read because they couldn't read, and I taught them how to read with the Bible. They were goin' pretty good when I left—they was writing their own letters and all that."

"We ain't all dummies out here," added Bill.

"Bill, what would you want people to know about the homeless?"

"It's *bad*. I mean, it ain't going away. Come on, help the brother, don't hurt him! Don't try to dirty it under the table; put it out there! We're all people, man; we all come from somewhere. Help the people. Just *help* them."

"What advice would you give someone who's newly homeless?"

"Get over it!" Bill said. "You're homeless! Get over it! Don't feel sorry for yourself; grab onto what God gives you. And that's the whole thing—God! God gives you all this. Because bitterness and resentments will keep you so stupid. It ain't your fault. And maybe it is! So what? Get over it!"

"Utilize your resources, but don't abuse them," added John. "You need to know where they're at and what they do. Look positive every day. There is people out there who really don't care. They've just gave up. One dude, he was out there by the railroad tracks. He was drinking and hollering that it was hot, and he was in a wheelchair. I said, 'Well, go down this little road over here, and there's a building back there by the railroad tracks.' That's where I was staying at. He went back there and finished drinking his vodka, taking a bunch of pills he just got at the VA. This [other] old man, me and him was staying back there. He comes running up there. 'Hey! Come see what's wrong with this guy! There's something wrong with this guy!' I went back there and called the ambulance. 'He's dead. I figured you'd knew

that by now.' 'Well, I didn't know—his eyes are open!' I said, 'His whole body's not moving, he's stiff. He died a few hours ago.' He might have wanted to die. . . . He did."

Russ

“I believe that things are gonna work out fine.”

Russ lived in a camp with several other homeless men. Like many of the homeless persons I had interviewed, he was clean-cut. A middle-aged man with black hair and a mustache, Russ has been homeless from an early age. Tall and lean, Russ had a quick mind, and his speech seemed to hurry to keep up with his thoughts. Because Russ was so well spoken and gave such a wealth of insight and knowledge, I knew that his interview would be intriguing.

He began, “I was born in Dearborn, Michigan. When I was 12 years old, I got thrown out of the house by my stepfather. He was an alcoholic. I’ve basically been out on the streets off and on since I was 13 years old. I learned to survive. I have done . . . numerous things to survive. I had tried to go home at one point in my younger years. Because my mother was still with the guy who kicked me out, I was not allowed to come back home. My mother was an alcoholic. One day, she finally got the nerve to leave the guy, to divorce him. My mother is a born-again Christian to this day.

“I was saved when I was 17 years old. I’ve done a lot of backsliding, but I still have the Lord in my life. I know that.”

I asked Russ what being homeless in Michigan was like and whether it was common for homeless persons to live in the woods in a northern state. “No, no,” he replied. “I was homeless in Texas, Michigan, and Florida. To be honest with you, of all the places I was homeless, I always had a shelter to go to at night. I always had a

bed at night.”

I was surprised to learn that Biloxi was the first place that Russ had lived without a shelter, so I asked him to elaborate on what shelters mean to homeless persons. “That’s a very good question. I’ll start out by telling you this: it depends on where it’s at. I’ll tell you the problem people have with shelters: normally, when you go to a shelter (except for the Salvation Army—the Salvation Army, I think, has the cleanest shelters in the country), you’ve got a lot of stealing. I’ll give you a perfect example. There’s a shelter in Fort Worth. It’ll hold probably 150 people. They give you a mat to lay on the floor. People kill each other, people fight each other, people take things that don’t belong to them. If I had a choice between that and where I’m at right now, I would overwhelmingly take what I’ve got right now.

“Now I have been in a shelter in Arlington, Texas. I don’t really consider it a shelter, because they have a three-month program. Unlike your regular ‘homeless shelter’ that lets you come in and sleep overnight and kicks you out in the morning, this place wants you to find a job. Once you find a job, you save up as much money as you can. At the end of the 90 days, they will pay for your deposit on your apartment [and] your first month’s rent; they will furnish your apartment. If a person’s really serious about getting on their feet, that’s what they do. There’s a good percentage of the homeless population that doesn’t want to be in the position they’re in. But there is another certain percentage of the population that is happy with the way they’re living. They’re content with it. I’m not one of them.

“I will tell you this: I’ve been back here for about a month now, and my wife is over at Pascagoula in a woman’s shelter over there. She is in training as man-

agement at Dollar Tree. She's going to be living with me at the tent, but she has a job. Me and my wife are going to have an apartment one day. If it was just me by myself, I'd probably stay out there the rest of my life. But I have a wife, and she's better than that."

I asked Russ to tell me about his wife and how they met. He said, "Well, we're not legally married. But we've been together a long enough time that we're common law. Actually, I drug her into all this. When I first met her, she was an office manager at [a temp agency]. She made two grand a week, had her own place, had everything going for her. This was six years ago. Honestly, to this day, what she ever saw in me, I don't know. But I thank God every day that she did, because she changed my life tremendously. When I first met her, I was smoking crack every day, seven days a week."

"What would that cost?"

"I spent \$100 a day on it. For myself. I went into the temp service where she was working. The more we got to talking, we really connected. I was staying at the shelter there in Florida, and she invited me to come and stay with her. But I was still smokin' my crack, and she didn't know about it. Eventually, she quit her job, sold her trailer. We left from Florida, made a road trip from Florida to California. We went all over the country, and that's how we lived for two years. We wound up over at Gulfport and stayed at [a truck stop] for seven months. We lived there for seven months. We went to church every Sunday. But it got to the point where I'd get money and we'd go to the casino."

Russ and his wife left the Coast and moved back to Texas. He ended up working full-time, and they were able to get an apartment. “We was doing great. Doing great. She was working, I was working, everything was *great*. They closed the store I was working at, and I lost my job. She lost her job two weeks after I did.” They tried to find work in North Carolina, but had no luck. In frustration, they decided to hitchhike back to Texas.

Russ seemed to have no problem having to live in tents and truck stops, but he was very protective of his wife. “We were hitchhiking. This guy pulls into the gas station. It was dark. Out of all our travels, I’ve never had my wife outside overnight, and I wasn’t going to let that happen. I said, ‘I hate to ask, but I’ve never had her out in the street, and I don’t want her to be out here.’ The guy gave me \$80—\$80 out of his wallet! He said, ‘You guys go get you a room.’ Just as he gave me the \$80, this lady pulls in behind him. I guess she must have heard us talking. She said, ‘I know where there’s a motel. I’ll give you and your wife a ride.’”

This woman told them that they could spend the night in an empty condo she owned. The next day, she bought them a tent and took Russ to a campground. Without Russ’s knowledge, she gave his wife a ride and took her to the women’s shelter in Pascagoula. “I didn’t hear from my wife for four days,” Russ exclaimed in anger. “I didn’t know what was going on! Well, she called me three days later. They took her phone away. Running into that lady was a mistake. But through God’s grace and God’s doing, [my wife] was able to get a job over there.

“When we first got here, I knew there were homeless people, but I did not believe the amount of homeless people that are out here in these woods, living in

tents. *Unbelievable!* But you know what? The thing is, homeless people . . . it's like they're a close-knit family. They will do anything for each other, they will take care of each other, they're a family."

"Russ, how would you spend a typical day?"

"I get up in the morning. . . . I'll sit there and drink two or three cups of coffee. I go put in applications every day, and, yeah, if I have to, I will try to panhandle a few dollars. We drink, smoke cigarettes every day. We drink every day."

"What do you like to drink?"

"King Cobra. It's either King Cobra or Steel Reserve. That's all we drink back there."

I asked Russ to talk about how other people treat him. Like the other homeless persons whom I interviewed, he had mostly good things to say about the police. He also spoke about nearby stores: "All these stores up here, they all know we're homeless. I'll give an example: I went up this morning and talked to the manager at [a local gas station] and said I needed a couple of crates. She said, 'I've got two of them out back. Come back tomorrow, and I may have a few more out there.' There's good people out there. There's very good people out there."

He told another story of how a man working at a gas station bought him a pack of cigarettes. He continued: "Is cigarettes and beer a necessity? No, it's not. But I'm gonna tell ya, it is part of the homeless life. It's kinda sad that alcohol has to play a part in a homeless person's life, but I'm gonna tell you why that happens. Because if you're homeless, you get depressed. And when you get depressed, you look for something to make you feel better, to bring you out of your depression. And unfor-

tunately, 9 times out of 10, it's the alcohol. It's either the alcohol or the drugs. Now the group of guys I'm back with? Ain't none of us do drugs. We have in the past, but we don't now. That's one thing that we do frown on. We drink our alcohol, yes."

I asked, "If someone is addicted to drugs, how are they able to support that addiction?"

"They panhandle. If they smoke crack, they will do anything they have to do to get their fix. It's sad, but they'll steal. They'll go walkin' through the Wal-Mart parking lot and snatch a purse. I've schemed, I've panhandled when I was on it. But that's one thing that I have never done—I've never stole to take care of my habit. Eventually, there's two things that's gonna happen to you—you're either going to be in jail, or you're gonna be dead. Crack is the biggest thing in the country right now. Your number-one drug of choice out there for homeless people is crack.

"I'm not happy or proud that I'm living in a tent right now, but I'll tell you: I've done a lot of panhandling. I used to walk up to somebody and give them a lie, give them a story. But one thing I've learned to do in the past six months is if you're honest with somebody, they're going to be more apt do to something to help you out."

I was interested to hear what Russ would do if he were given a large sum of money with which to help the homeless population in Biloxi. "What do you think is missing, Russ?"

"A shelter," he replied. "Not a shelter to where you come in a certain time of night and you sleep and you've gotta be out at six o'clock in the morning, no. I would build a shelter to where I've got a 90-day program. You come in, I'm gonna

give you three months to find a job, open up a savings account to get on your feet. That's what I would do. Even though I'm homeless, and it might sound kind of hard, but in the shelter I would have, if you had no intention of getting on your feet or wanting to better your life, you couldn't come into my shelter. If all you wanted was a bed and a free meal, you're gonna have to go down the road and find someplace else.

"70 percent of your homeless people are homeless because that's the way they choose to be. That's the lifestyle that they are accustomed to, and that's the way they're going to be until they die. But on the other hand, you also have your 30 percent that want to *not* be in the situation they're in, but it seems like everything they've tried to do to not be like that . . . They try to walk through a door, and the door gets slammed in their face. Rent is so high. You can't get an efficiency around here for less than \$650 per month. It's bad."

I asked Russ what he would like people to know about homeless persons. Without a pause, he said, "Do not judge a homeless person by their situation. Don't judge somebody by their living conditions. I'm telling you what: there's just as many decent, good-hearted, down-to-earth homeless people out there as there is people who have a four- or five-bedroom house. Don't judge somebody by the way they live. I wasn't even gonna make this comment, but I'm gonna make it anyway: I was brought up through the Church of God, and I'm here to tell you, whether people want to believe it or not, we encounter and talk to and see angels every day. And you never know when you're talking to an angel—you never know. So, you know, just be yourself, and be the way that God made you to be, and don't judge nobody.

They're human beings, too. They're God's children, too."

"What advice would you give the newly homeless person?"

"Be strong. Don't let the idea of being homeless freak you out. Don't let it affect you mentally and get you all depressed. One thing I've learned is that there is help out there. If you want to go through the channels, there is help out there. Don't think all of a sudden your world's coming to an end and you want to kill yourself."

"What do you think about St. Vincent de Paul?"

"If it wasn't for this place here, I would probably be lost right now."

"What's the hardest part of being homeless?"

"Oh, God, give me a minute to think about that. Not having the security and the stability that you would have. . . . OK, you've got an apartment or a house and a job. You know you're gonna get up every morning and go to work. Being homeless, you get up in the morning, [you] don't know what you're doing that day, don't know what the day is going to bring, don't know what you're going to get into. Not having the sense of peace and stability that you would have knowing that you would have a place to go. Because even though we have what we have [in the camp], who's to say one day we come up into town and go back later that day and everything that we have built and got back there is leveled. Gone.

"I live day to day. By God's grace, things are looking up for me. I believe that things are gonna work out fine."

Steve

“I’m kind of just lost in a blackout.”

Steve became homeless because of medical bills. He wore the clothing of someone familiar with the construction trade and was powerfully built. When I met him at the local Burger King, he was sporting his trademark baseball cap and a badly swollen right hand. It turns out that he had fought with another homeless man. This injury added to the pain that he felt from his bad back, but Steve was in a good mood and ready to tell me his story.

“I grew up in Michigan and was born in ‘57. I lived on the lake growing up and went to Boy Scouts.” At this point in the conversation, another homeless man in a booth near us yells out, “You told me you was from Florida, man!” We tried our best to ignore him, and Steve continued: “I used to like fishing and all that and still do. Huntin’ up there . . . kinda got away from the hunting because of the violence. I’d rather look at the wildlife than shoot them. I graduated 12th grade and began doing masonry. At first, I started out with family. I’ve been doing masonry ever since, until the doctor put me off of work last year because falling off a scaffold messed up my back. I try to help everybody I can, and I really like the outdoors.”

The other homeless man, clearly drunk, starts yelling out the names of states. I can see that he has a quart bottle of beer next to him. An employee comes up, quietly speaks to him, and escorts him out of the restaurant. Another employee appears to mop the spilled beer from the floor. The other patrons show a look of relief as the man totters down the street. Unfazed by the excitement, Steve continues

telling me about how he came to the Coast.

“I come down here right after the hurricane because a friend of mine [who] had retired from a mason union in Michigan told me there was all kinds of work. I was doing real good down here. I had seven guys working for me. I was doing real good until the doctor took me off of work.”

It turns out that Steve had health insurance for his employees, but hadn't bought coverage for himself. “Workman's comp for my employees, but it wouldn't cover me. That's the way it worked because I was the owner of the company. But I didn't never think that would catch up to me. Old age is kinda haunting me now. Can't hardly get out of bed when it's raining out. I've lost about 60 percent of the control of my feet and legs. Sometimes my legs go out on me, and I just fall right down. My bodily functions, I'm losing control. So, I've always got to carry extra underwear and stuff like that with me. Every day, gotta take it one day at a time.”

“How long did it take from your stopping work to becoming homeless?”

“About three months. Money goes so quick and my truck blew up, the police impounded it, and I didn't have the money to fix it or get it out. It just comes on you so quick when you ain't getting no paycheck. I was renting a three-bedroom house in Ocean Springs, a real nice neighborhood.”

“So it's been around nine months since you've become homeless. Were you always camping?”

“Yep. I've had to move probably four or five times because of the police rousting us, making us move. Right now where I'm staying at, they could put me in jail for trespassing, but there ain't no other places to go. I'm fortunate: I've never

been arrested here.” Steve was later arrested and jailed for trespassing. His camp was the one that I visited and about which I wrote the chapter, “A Visit to a Homeless Camp.” As of summer 2009, I do not know where he is.

“I see the same bunch of guys all the time, and we pretty much watch out for each other. Sometimes we all pitch in and make a big meal together. Yup, I’ve never been in this predicament before. I could always turn around. I had several companies I could go to work for in Michigan, but when my back’s bad, I can’t do that all the time.”

“Do you have any family left in Michigan?”

“My older brother’s gone, my mom and dad’s gone. I’ve got two younger brothers and a younger sister, but they’ve got their hands full up there, and I don’t want to be any trouble to them. So I figure if I stay down here until it’s warm until I get disability going or something. They’ve done turned me down twice already, and a lot of that is because I can’t get to the doctors I need to get to. It’s like \$250 a visit. I can’t afford it. [If approved,] they’re supposed to go back to when I first applied for it. If they do that, I’ll have enough money to probably get an inexpensive vehicle and a roof over my head. And then, I might be able to start a window-washing business, something like that.”

“Does your family know about your situation?”

“I doubt it. I don’t want to worry them.”

“When you realized that you were going to have to go out into the streets, what went through your mind?”

“Well, it was kinda scary because everything I had, I had to let [it] go. And what I did take with me, it all got stolen in the woods anyway. It’s hard to hang onto anything out there, even clothes. I’ve . . . come back sometimes, and my whole tent would be gone. All my clothes. Some people that ransack tents, they rip the doors, or they take the knife and carve [them] right open, throw all your stuff in the field.” I asked Steve how long it took for him to get into a rhythm of daily life. “Boy, I don’t know if I am. I kinda go by the weather. If it’s raining, you’ve gotta stay holed up all day.”

“What have you found to be the most difficult part of what you’re going through?”

“Trying to keep up on my medication, [to] keep clean clothes, and to get back and forth to try and eat right. I get food stamps, but that don’t last. We go in the dumpster behind Winn-Dixie to get a bunch of food. You’ve got to eat that, cook that right away. Sunday’s usually the best day for that.”

“Have you ever gotten sick from bad food?”

“Yeah, yeah. Spent 10 days in the hospital and lost 70 pounds. Almost died.”

“What about the police in Biloxi?”

“Most of ‘em seem alright, you know? If you ain’t doing nothing wrong and making a mess and not being a public nuisance when you’re drunk, they seem to leave you alone and tell you to keep moving.

“Most of the day is just spent walking around, checking dumpsters, trying to get food together. I usually get up at daylight and usually go to bed about six or

seven . . . a couple hours after dark. Some days, I'll just take a book and go out here by the ponds and sit there and read it all day. I like adventure stories like hunting trips, mountain trips, whatever."

"What do you think about other homeless people?"

"Some of 'em, they just don't try. They're just trying to get drunk. They panhandle for more alcohol, and they don't need it. They're not trying to better themselves—they're trying to exist in a drunken state, which makes them a prisoner of their own self."

"Tell me how other people treat you, Steve."

"Most of them, pretty good. It seems like some of them look down their nose because they don't understand. A lot of homeless are homeless because they choose to be—he's one of them. Where's he gonna go, half drunk like that?" He nodded toward the homeless man who was just evicted from Burger King and was still ambling around outside. "And there are other ones who are forced into it because of situations like this, you know. I don't really like to ask people for money. I'm kinda too proud, because I've worked all my life. If I can rake a yard or do something like that, I feel a whole lot better, and [the money] goes farther."

"Is there anything you'd like to tell people about homelessness?"

"Well, it's really growing. And, uh, I think the laws in society are designed to keep the homeless down, and not to give them a break. Definitely, the medical field is geared against the homeless. You can't get nothing done, hardly. Unless you go to these free clinics, and then they don't have X-ray machines and everything else that's needed."

“So what would happen if you just showed up at the emergency room of Biloxi Regional Hospital and said, ‘My back’s killing me?’”

“They’d just usually lay me down, give me a couple shots, give me some pain medication for a couple days, and out you go.”

“So it’s not a situation where they’ll give you long-term help?”

“They don’t want that at all. They don’t even want to talk about that. Now if you’ve got insurance, they’ll keep you and do more than what you need. But if you’re homeless, they just want to get you out of their hair. They don’t care.”

I asked him what he would like to see done for homeless persons. He answered, “You’d probably have to have some kind of a place where people can rehabilitate if they do have minor surgeries done,” he said. “They would do an emergency surgery on me, and my doctor says I need it, but am I gonna go back to my tent to rehabilitate? I got a buddy, they had to put a new vein from his groin all the way to his ankle. He’s still having a heck of a time. He found a place he could stay, and Rita Baldwin [the director of the Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen] paid for his rent for two weeks; . . . then she ran out of money, and so he was back out sleeping under the viaduct down there. He had these staples all the way up his leg from putting that new vein in, and his leg got all infected. Then he got staph, and then they wanted to cut his leg off. So this medical thing is a big issue with homeless because it just snowballs. I think that weighs so heavily on some of these guys that they give up and stay drunk 24 hours a day. A lot of it’s medical. I’m kind of just lost in a blackout, too.

“Some place to rehabilitate homeless people that have medical conditions, because those are the ones who don’t want to be homeless. They’re there because they’re forced into it. If they can’t function, they can’t function. There’s people with mental problems, too. Met a lot of them out here. They’ve got nowhere to go. It’s hard to get anybody into [an institution] unless you’re really crazy or you’ve got a bunch of family members signing. You can’t just call and say, ‘Come pick me up!’ They won’t do it.”

“In your opinion, what percentage of the homeless have some kind of addiction?”

“Probably 75 percent. Now if you have an addiction, a drug problem, or something, there [are] places you can go. But most of them people don’t want to go. They want to stay homeless. Just barely getting by, doing the drugs or drinking. They give up shaving, they give up trying to stay clean. It’s hard to stay clean out there.”

“What about advice for someone who’s newly homeless?”

“Kind of stay to yourself, and pick the people you hang out with, you know, because if you’re with the wrong bunch, you’re gonna be in and out of jail. Try to stay pretty regular at the churches; spend some time there.”

“Speaking of that, has faith had any impact on you?”

“It keeps me going. There’s some days you just wanna break down and cry and not even get up out of your bed. But then you get hungry. It seems like everything piles up on ya. It sure helps me get along, that’s for sure. Every day. It seems like every day’s a test. And it might be. A thousand tribulations, you know.”

A Visit to a Homeless Camp

A few months into writing this book, I was leaving St. Vincent de Paul after having volunteered for the day. A middle-aged man came up to me and asked, “Are you Matthew?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Well, I’ve got a message for you from Steve [see the previous chapter]. He’d like for you to come see where we live. Hang on one second.” Before I could ask any questions, he pulled a cell phone from his pocket. Flipping open the top, he carefully punched the keys with tobacco-stained fingers. “Hold on, it’s ringing. Here ya go.”

I took the phone as Steve answered. He said that all of the men living in the camp decided to allow me to visit them. As he described the location, I could visualize the closed golf course where they were living. I said that I would visit them the next evening.

The next day, I pulled up next to a baseball field and parked my truck. About an hour of daylight remained, so the weedy golf course took on a golden, impressionistic atmosphere. Finding the entrance hole in a copse of trees, I followed a battered, muddy trail through the brush. Soon, I encountered an overgrown cart path. Even through the thick weeds, I could see a multicolored canopy next to a large oak tree. It looked just like a miniature circus tent. Walking up to it, I could hear men talking and smell fish frying.

Approaching the tent, I asked if I could come in. They all greeted me and asked me to take a seat. The only one available was a small pink lawn chair. Six men were there that day, and their chairs were arranged in a circle around their cooking stove. (Three of them, Jim, Danny, and Steve, were interviewed for this book.) Jim asked, “Hey, have you eaten yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well, here—have a piece of fish.” He gave me a plate with a well-seasoned filet. “This is excellent,” I said. “Where did you get the fish?”

“From Winn-Dixie.”

“Well, you guys are great cooks.”

“Actually,” Steve said, “it came from the dumpster.” He chuckled and said, “I didn’t want to tell you that before you ate it. But don’t worry—it was still frozen.”

“You know,” Jim chimed in, “it’s a shame how much food is wasted by stores and restaurants. It’s just thrown in the garbage. There ought to be some way where the homeless can sign a waiver or release form where we can get the food and promise not to sue.”

Remembering many of the homeless persons’ appreciation of Burger King, I asked, “Are the restaurants good to you?”

“Oh, yes,” Mark said. “Burger King is very good to us. There are employees there who aren’t much better off than we are, but they’ll buy us something sometimes. Pizza Hut is another place that is very good, too.”

As I ate the fish, I noticed that each man had a tent set up near the larger “circus” tent. Outside the tents, in varying degrees of neatness, were collections of tools, bicycles, and other odds and ends. Opposite me was a large tent that one could easily stand up in. “Who has the big tent?” I asked. Mike answered, “That there tent used to be mine, but it was just too big for me. Steve has back problems, and I would see him struggle to climb in and out of his small tent each morning, so we did a trade. He traded me that camp stove for the big tent.”

“Oh, yes,” Steve replied. “That big tent is much easier for me.”

“You see,” Mike added, “we do a lot of horse trading around here. We try to make the things we have work out. We each have our own skills, too, so we’re able to help each other out.”

The sun was setting as we finished dinner, and Mike pumped the stove to build up its fuel pressure. Setting it alight, he placed a kettle of water on top. From a well-stocked larder of spices, oils, and canned goods, Danny selected a can of instant coffee. Cups were passed around, and we each prepared our own concoction of coffee, sugar, and powdered creamer. Sipping coffee, we enjoyed the evening as mockingbirds in the oak tree rehearsed their repertoire of calls. Soon pouches of Top tobacco and rolling papers were distributed, and the men fell into a meditative mood, smoking their rough-rolled cigarettes.

A week later, I was reading the news on the website of the *Sun Herald* [a local newspaper]. I was shocked to see, on the home page, a photo of the same homeless camp. The owners of the derelict golf course had decided that they were going to clear the grounds for air-show parking. According to the article in the March 27,

2009, issue, all six men were arrested for trespassing, but most were released after a week. When the police arrived, a *Sun Herald* photographer was photographing the camp and interviewing the men. A video showed the police informing the men of the situation and allowing them to take important things with them. I was impressed with the politeness and professionalism of the police. In the article, Police Sgt. Jackie Rhodes said, “My personal opinion is if I were ever to win the lottery, I would build a homeless shelter in Biloxi.”

Mike

“We’re all human.”

Mike is one of the most humble and genuine people whom I have met. During the numerous visits I had with him in the past, he was completely respectful, good humored, and kind. Round glasses and a wispy mustache framed his thin face, one that had spent many years outdoors. Mike’s clothing was that of a working man, and everything was clean and in good repair. As he sat at the dining room table, recounting his life, he kept his eyes focused on the table, as if he were peering into the past. His voice was always laid back and soft, even when recounting difficult parts of his life.

When I asked Mike to tell me about his background, he stated that he is from the upper Midwest and grew up near Chicago. “I was into drugs real hard,” he began, “and the only way I could get away from it was to move away from my friends.”

“How old were you at that time, Mike?”

“I was 52.” Later in the conversation, I learned that his leaving Chicago happened in his 40s. “My buddy, I worked for his dad in concrete. We had a friend in Phoenix, so we jumped in a car and headed out, and we got to Colorado Springs. We called his father, and his grandmother was seriously ill, so he jumped on a plane and went back home. And the next day I saw an ad in the paper for concrete.

“I met a lot of good friends and had a good time. It was getting cold, and I said, ‘The heck, I’m going down to El Paso, Texas.’ And I stayed there, got a job

right away, and worked about six months. Carnival come into town; we hooked up with them.”

I had always wondered what carnival work was like, so I asked Mike about it. “Long hours and no pay.” I could see that Mike’s humble, no-nonsense style would take some gentle prying.

“What were the people like?”

“Oh, they were real nice. I had a good time with the people. But it was long hours: 18 hours a day. And when you get done at a certain spot, you’ve gotta tear it all down that night. You get done in the morning, you get in your vehicle, and you drive.”

“Would you have campers you’d stay in?”

“Yeah, they’d have regular sleeping trailers. Air-conditioned, two people to a room. They had the popouts—they were real nice. All you did was buy your own food.”

Seeking to establish more of Mike’s early history, I asked about his life before he moved out of the Chicago area. “In ‘87, I came back because my mom died. I quit drinkin’, so all I did was fish and had a job in a factory. I went back up to take care of my mom’s property and got with my friends again, and there I went downhill.”

“What kind of drugs were you into?”

“Oh, mainly crack and powder cocaine at the time.”

“That’s pretty expensive, isn’t it?”

“Well, I was makin’ \$800 a week. I only did it on weekends. It got to be a habit, and the only way to break it was to get away from my friends. Before, I quit drinkin’, which was a *big* thing for me—I’ve been drinkin’ since I’ve been about 13. At home, my dad give us a couple beers, and [we’d] sit out and talk to him after work, but my grandmother and my dad, they made homemade wine. Go down to the root cellar and fill up a jug.”

“Were you ever married?”

“No, never married. I lived with a girl, like, nine years. We have a daughter up north.”

“Does she know that you’re down here?”

In a nonchalant manner, Mike said, “Oh, yeah . . . uh-huh.”

“What does she think about your situation?”

“Well, not really a whole lot. I’ve always done what I’ve wanted to do, you know? I’m trying to get my benefits from the military.”

“What branch were you in?”

“Army. I did three tours in ‘Nam. Infantry. Mechanized.”

“Was it pretty rough on you?”

“Yeah, but that never bothered me like it did some people. I just couldn’t do stateside duty. It’s a survival game, and a lot of them don’t listen. A lot of ‘em got killed in my outfit.”

Mike had chosen to have pizza while we were eating, and I heard a beep that the oven was heated up. I put our pizza in to bake and then asked Mike when he was first homeless. “When I left home,” he replied. “I chose it.”

I was shocked at this revelation. “You say you chose it?”

Leaning back, Mike said, “Well, I’ve always liked camping. Back home, we’d build forts out in the woods, spend the weekend out there. I always loved camping.”

“Do you know anyone else who’s chosen to be homeless, or are you pretty unique in that respect?”

“Well, most people, they like it at first, but things get rough. Especially when it gets cold. It don’t get cold down here like in Indiana. Yeah, there’s a couple of ‘em that don’t mind it, and I think there’s about seven people in our camp.”

“So, just in general, where do you stay?”

“Well, everyone’s got their own campsite. It’s a real big woods down past Wal-Mart.”

“Do you have to keep it a secret?”

“No! The police know we’re there. There was one out a couple weeks ago because the people from the Coliseum [which borders on Wal-Mart] said that we’re stealing. The fence blew down in [Hurricane] Gustav, and they said that we stole the poles out of the ground. But the police came down and said they didn’t see any missing. We keep that place *spotless*. No garbage nowhere, and he was amazed how clean it was, and he said he never seen a thing like it.

“Yeah, they’ve been out there. A couple of guys get drunk and like to fight once in a while. There was another guy who stabbed another guy. I don’t know if they got out of town, or what the deal was.”

“According to you, what is the most difficult part of being homeless?”

“I think it’s the people you meet. There’s some really bad people, but 90 percent of them are good. That’s why I like to be by myself and read books all day long.”

“Where do you get your books from?”

“Right here at the distribution center. They’ve got 20 boxes of ‘em in there. Loads of ‘em. I’ll be set for a long time. A lot of homeless people read.”

“Do you do any drugs or drink?”

“I drink a couple-three beers a day—it’s all I can afford.”

“Where do you get money? Where’s that come from?”

“Well, I usually find it. Good luck findin’ money. I can spot it a mile away. And a couple guys down there, they panhandle. Plus you’ve got food stamps.”

Mike talked about how lucky he is at finding money and, sometimes, wallets. Most of the time, the wallets have already been emptied of cash. “I take ‘em and drop ‘em into a mail box, because it’s too hard [to be] without your ID, credit cards. I found one up there at Winn-Dixie, as a matter of fact, in the bushes. Someone stole it off a lady’s car. I looked up her name and got her number out of the phone book. She was really grateful. I try to be helpful.”

“Now some of the guys are heavy drug users; how do they get the money to support that?”

“A lot of ‘em steal. I never had any problem until I got right here. I had the woods by myself, and I let this one guy come in, and he let another guy come in. Another guy, another guy, and it got too filled up. I got out. Well . . . I did because I had to go to jail for trespassing [laughing].”

“Was that the first time you’ve ever been in jail?”

“No. Up in Colorado, I did a year up there, because I refused to do Antabuse.”

“To do what?”

“Antabuse. For drinkin’. It’s a little pill, you gotta do it every day. I told ‘em I tried it before, and I got real sick. When I first started, I weighed 188, and when I got done, I weighed 141. In 17 years, I only gained 10 pounds back.”

“Was that from a DUI or something?”

“No, I got in a fight with two cops in a bar.”

“Oh, that will do it, huh?”

“Yeah! The police station was right next door [laughing]!”

“A real short walk, huh?”

“355 straight days, no good time.”

I was starting to get a better picture of Mike’s life and of his travels around the country. I wanted to see whether he had been here during Hurricane Katrina and how he fared. “Well, I stayed with some friends in a trailer. The seas fell right alongside the trailer, and we survived that. They had a shelter down by the school, but it was raining so hard we couldn’t go. I’ve never been in anything like that.”

“I heard that some homeless persons were killed in Katrina.”

“Oh, yeah. Quite a few, because they couldn’t leave. Everybody got a warning, though.”

A memory of a homeless man I knew before Katrina came to mind, so I thought I’d ask Mike if he knew him. “There was one guy that I used to see, . . . he

had a big beard and long hair. . . . Grizzly?”

“Grizzly! Yeah! He died in my camp. The police brought him down because he was so drunk.”

“He just died in his sleep? What happened?”

“It was too cold. All that alcohol he had in him, we put three blankets on him and a sleeping bag. Next morning, he was dead.”

“What did you do at that point?”

“Called the police.”

“Do you know where they buried him?”

“Well, he had family somewhere. They got him, though. Usually, the homeless, they cremate you down here.”

“What do they do with the ashes?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you think about your situation? Have you ever thought about making up a will? I think it’d be good if we partnered with some of the churches. If someone were to die, we could provide him or her with a proper burial.”

“Well, I keep my brother’s number in my wallet.”

“Have you had any frightening situations since you’ve been homeless?”

“Well, people seem to die by me. Five in Colorado, one in Texas, two down here. Another guy was camped right behind me, but we didn’t see him for four days. . . . [We] went over there, and he was dead. We shoulda went there a couple of days earlier.”

“They all died through exposure?”

“No, the other one died due to a heart attack.”

“Have you ever stayed in Gulfport?” (Gulfport is a city that connects with Biloxi.)

“No, I don’t like Gulfport. They say the police are really rough over there, and I don’t want to chance that.”

“How do other people who are not homeless treat you?”

“Oh, real good! I’ve had people come up and give me money and stuff, ask me if I’m a vet. Usually it’s about being a vet.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It may be that they were a veteran, too. I’m trying to get money from the government, but it takes forever. It’ll be coming, though.”

Biloxi has a white-sand beach that runs the entire length of its coast, so I asked Mike if people use the beach as a place to stay. “Oh, sure,” he replied, “especially in the summertime. They’ve got benches down there, and you can lay on top of them. Usually the police won’t bother you as long as you ain’t got no beer bottles. Beer cans are all right, but not bottles.”

“Now, those guys walking around the streets with beer in paper sacks—they’re asking for trouble, aren’t they?”

“Oh, yeah. Why look for trouble if you don’t need it? I don’t understand them people. You can always find a place to drink a beer if you want. It happened right down there at the library. A few of them guys down there sitting on the bench, drinking beers. Somebody wrote into the paper, said they didn’t want to take their kids into the park and let them play there. Why would they do that with the kids out

there?”

“Have you ever stayed in a shelter, Mike?”

“Don’t like ‘em. Never tried. You can’t get in until nine o’clock at night, and you have to leave at five in the morning. Everyone then goes to the soup kitchen or over to the library.”

“So what’s a typical day for you?”

“Here lately I’ve been trying to get back down here and help out.”

“What time do you get up?”

“Four o’clock. I usually get to town at six o’clock, looking for money or whatever I can find. Then I go to Burger King—a lady there knows me since I’ve been in town and gives me free coffee. This morning, she bought me breakfast. A real sweetheart. I sit there and read the paper, work the crossword puzzle. Real nice people.”

“What would you like to tell people about the homeless?”

“Don’t go there if you don’t have to, but I know a lot of people have to—especially with FEMA taking the trailers away [temporary shelters that were put in place after Hurricane Katrina]. But, there’s a lot of people who can work and don’t. If I was able, I’d work.”

“What would you tell somebody who was going to be homeless for the first time?”

“Well, you’ve gotta make do with what you’ve got and do the best you can. It’s not a good life. There’s one guy who’s never been out in the woods, and he can’t relate to it. He’s a young guy, and I tell him, ‘Go get a job!’ But you say that big

word, and it scares him. Why, I don't have no idea. Wouldn't it be nice to have money in your pocket all the time?"

"What do you think about St. Vincent de Paul?"

"I can't say nothing bad about them. Beautiful people. Everybody's nice; sure saved me. Got clothes, food, shower, laundry. We had people like that after Katrina. We moved down near that tobacco store down here, and the guy's property, he said, 'You guys stay here,' and we did. A church group from Oregon, two groups from Washington state come down, took us shopping. Sleeping bags, clothes, everything. Beautiful people."

"Do you have any other comments, Mike?"

"We're all human, yup."

David

“I’ve lost everything I’ve owned four times.”

When David arrived at the St. Vincent de Paul building, he was wearing his trademark bicycling gloves. A short, solidly built man, his bearded face was capped by a black hat. As soon as I turned on the tape recorder, David had a question for me. “Let me ask you something,” he began. “How many of the people you’ve interviewed are vets?”

“Well, probably half of them, I’d say.”

“There are anywhere from 150,000 to 200,000 homeless vets,” he said.

“You’re a vet, aren’t you?”

Rising in his chair with obvious pride, he said, “Yes, I am! I was in the Navy. Submarines. My first one was a boomer [a nuclear submarine], which is a missile submarine, and my second was a fast attack.” He related some of his history in the Navy and mentioned that he is originally from Boston. After a pause, he asked, “I don’t know how far . . . do you want me to tell my whole life story or what?”

“Oh, just a general background. Have you ever been married?”

“No, I’ve never been married; no children.”

“Do you have any family?”

“My mother passed away recently—stroke got her. The only family I have left is my two brothers and a sister.” I asked David if they knew he was homeless and living in Biloxi. “Oh, yeah,” he replied. “Oh, yeah.”

“What do they think about your being homeless?”

He sat silent for some time, then said, "They still keep looking at the past. I'm nothing but a drunk. I'm nothing but a drunk to them. Except my sister. Me and my sister are very close. If my sister wasn't my sister, she'd be my wife. But my two brothers? I'm nothing but a drunk to them. That pretty much sums it up for them. My next-oldest brother told me that the military screwed my head up. I don't think so. The main thing, the military taught you patience, fortitude, and how to get along and live with people. Temperament. A lot of temperament. You try to take 150 people inside a little shell, a submarine, and go out there for six months. You do have to learn how to live together."

"When you got out of the Service, what kind of work did you do?"

"I went into construction because it was available. When I was in the military, I was an electrician. But there were no jobs for an electrician. So I would [end] up being a general laborer first. Which means, put a shovel in your hand, dig footers for concrete. Erecting metal buildings, iron working. Then that company folded. Then I still got into concrete work, but I was moving from place to place to place to place. During this time, I was doing nothing but a lot of drinking; a lot of drinking."

"Do you drink beer?"

"Yeah, beer. You can smell it on me. But I don't drink every single day. I don't have to have it." I asked how he gets money for it. "Well, panhandle. Or ask people. Or collect cans. At the camp, you're talking four to five years of accumulation. That's a lot of cans."

"What do you guys drink?"

“Steel Reserve. Or Cobra bottles. 32-ounce Cobras.” (For the uninitiated or those who don’t regularly visit convenience store beer sections, Steel Reserve is a high-alcohol, cheap beer that is often sold in 24-ounce cans or 40-ounce bottles. King Cobra is, again, a high-alcohol, cheap beer manufactured by Anheuser-Busch.)

I asked David whether his drinking contributes to his being homeless. He said that it does, so I asked him when he was homeless for the first time. He replied, “Can’t figure out where to start. That’s hard. It’s been an ongoing battle in my life. I’ve lost everything I’ve owned four times. I’ve been off and on the streets since I got out of the military. I’m a nice guy. Nice guy. Heart on the sleeve. But people take advantage of that, and you get screwed.”

He said that he was homeless in a city in Florida, so I asked him how homeless persons lived there. He replied, “They don’t have camps there, but they do have missions, and they have a Salvation Army there. Going to labor halls, like daily labor. Minimum wage. And if you pay taxes, you get \$38 a day. So you’re doing nothing but treading water. Here, it’s even harder. It’s a lot harder here.”

“How so?”

“When I first got here, I hit the labor hall, Able Body. I hit it. For the first . . . oh, let’s see, . . . five months, I was making good money. But, you see, I was in transit. I was wanting to go to Las Vegas. I’m going to Las Vegas. I was leapfrogging. \$40 bus, \$40 bus, going from city to city to city. I ended up spending eight weeks in Tallahassee, and there was no work. It’s a college town. And you couldn’t stand on the sidewalks for five minutes without the cops arresting you for trespassing, because Tallahassee City has trespassing on sidewalks.

“I got here in Biloxi in 2007. This is my second winter being on the streets here. I got here in the early summer. And I got work right off the bat. I’m at a good campsite, good people. Party, party, party. Then work dried up. Then I got sick. I got sick, and I spent four months in the hospital, and I just can’t do the work anymore. To make a long story short, my lungs are messed up. In part, because I do smoke, yes.”

“Have you filed for disability?”

“Yes, I’m doing that now. I’m doing everything they’ve asked me to do. Now it’s just the waiting game. I’m not expecting a grandiose amount of money, but I’m wanting something. Because I’ve always planned on having my own business. But I’m not going to establish any business before my retirement age, which is 66. That way, I can use my VA [benefits], and I won’t have to pay no taxes on it. I’ve been a firm believer in paying taxes all my life, and I don’t see any return coming out of it for me. I’m in the middle of a crossroads right now, and I don’t know which way to go yet.

“As far as me living on the streets? It sucks. But I can adjust, I can adapt because of my military background. Take what you have, adapt to it.”

“For you, what’s the most difficult thing about being homeless?”

“The loneliness! You can’t have an equal companion, female, just because you have really nothing to offer. Nothin’. That’s the hardest part. That’s very hard. Just lonely. Lonely. So you surround yourself with people. Good, bad, or otherwise. That’s really the hard part.”

Our conversation turned to spiritual matters, so I asked David what role faith plays in his life. “I’ve walked [away] from two motorcycle accidents, I’ve had three guns pulled on me. There is a guardian angel, yes. There is a God, yes. I do believe in God. I didn’t get my Confirmation because my father got killed when I was a teenager, so we didn’t go back to church. And I seriously considered becoming a priest until I found out what sex was. And I found out you can’t have both. So I said, ‘I’ll take the sex.’”

“Let’s say that someone gave you \$10 million to do something for the homeless. What would you do?”

“Build a homeless shelter for the veterans, right off the bat. Right off the bat. I can’t understand why the VA’s not doing it for the vets. General population, yeah. Why not, if there is room for it? But they were more concerned, after Katrina, with getting the casinos up and running. They can’t take 10 percent a year as a tax write-off to build a shelter?”

“What kind of shelter do you think works?”

“I’d prefer to go with the rehabilitation programs. Missions are just a Band-Aid. They’re good, but they’ll kick you out at five o’clock in the morning, come back at five o’clock in the evening.”

Speaking about the types of shelters brought David back around to his drinking. He again mentioned that he smokes, and I asked how he gets cigarettes. “Well, . . . it’s what they call *panhandling*.”

“Do you roll your own, or do you buy?”

“Yes, on both accounts. Whatever. Or I’ll go around and steal butts out of ashtrays, put them in a container, take the tobacco out of them.”

“What about drug addiction? Is alcoholism more common than drug addiction?”

“Yes. You know why alcohol is like that? It’s . . . how do I want to say it? . . . it’s a pain relief. It’s to make you forget about the problem that you can’t deal with right now because you got no way to deal with it. You’ve got no funds, because it’s all based on the dollar. So every dollar you do make . . .” David tipped his hand to mimic drinking. “Tomorrow rolls around, guess what? Problem’s still there. It’s vicious.”

“How do the police treat you?”

“If you’re not being stupid, with respect. There was one time, on a Saturday, and normally if I’m not feeling well, I won’t get out of my tent. I’ll read books, listen to the radio (I have a little transistor radio), and I heard, ‘Hello! Hello!’ And I said, ‘Yeah?’ And nobody else was around the camp, and here come three Biloxi police officers! ‘Well, we ordered pizza, and, uh, we had lunch, and they gave us an extra pizza. You guys are more than welcome to it.’ I said, ‘Well, I appreciate that,’ and off they went. They know about the camp. And when there’s any kind of violent crime, like one guy tried to rob a liquor store, and they come back there and checked everybody and left. Every time they come back there, they say, ‘You keep it clean!’”

“What do you think about St. Vincent de Paul?”

“I like it! Very good people here. They do help. I don’t abuse this.”

“I noticed that you don’t come in as often as other people.”

“Well, I don’t need to. Once every two weeks I do my laundry, maybe once a week I take a shower. But I’m not stinky and smelly because I have other people I can go to. There is a homeless problem, not just here, but in this country.”

I asked David, “Speaking about that, what would you say to people about homelessness?” Immediately he answered, “Don’t judge a book by its cover. Do not judge that book by its cover. Because you don’t know that individual or what happened in their life, and if they don’t want to talk about it, they’ll keep it quiet. They’re just trying to survive. Never live beyond your means. If I can’t afford it, I can’t afford it.”

“What advice would you give to the newly homeless?”

David sighed and said, “Wow. That’s a tough question. For one, they’re gonna feel lost. They won’t know where to turn, where to go, what to do. I guess my first statement would be, ‘Go to a church. To be honest with you, Go to a church. And it doesn’t matter if it’s a Pentecostal, Catholic, Baptist. Go to a church. They will help you, they will guide you, that’s for sure.’”

Martin and Don

“Jesus was a homeless person, man.”

Martin and Don were the first homeless persons whom I interviewed, and they were the first to be recommended to me by Mary Frances. They are both middle-aged, articulate men with fascinating stories. In addition, they both volunteer much of their time at St. Vincent de Paul.

They wanted to be interviewed together because they are close friends—they had met about a year before, and one could see the deep respect each had for the other. Both wore clothing that was clean, neat, and fit their personalities. Martin dressed in jeans, shirt, and jacket and emanated a peaceful quietness. Don, with his balding head, khakis, sweater, and closely groomed mustache, looked as if he had just arrived from teaching on the campus of Ole Miss. More extroverted than Martin, he had a quick wit and a talent for speech.

After Don prodded him to go first, Martin began to tell me his story. In a soft voice, he asked, “What is it that you wanna hear?”

“Well,” I replied, “tell me a bit about your background, where you’re from.”

He began by saying that he was a Service brat and joined the Army when he was 17 during the Vietnam War era. “I didn’t have to do any campaigns, which was a good thing. Thank God now that I didn’t have to go kill nobody, so God really blessed me on that. After I got out of the Service, I got me a job, got with this lady, and had three kids. They’re all grown now.”

His children live out of state, and he was quick to point out that they have their own lives now. His wife left him with the children when they were very young. “I was scared to death; I didn’t know what to do. I was thinking about giving the kids to a nice home so they’d have the best of everything, but they begged me, ‘Daddy, please don’t go.’” Martin moved his family out of state, and his grandmother helped him raise them.

If you speak with Martin for any length of time, you will soon see that he views events through the lens of faith. This beautiful practice manifested itself many times during the interview. He turned the interview toward the health problems that brought a great change in his life.

“I got a spot on my lungs that kept growing. I had been a carpenter most of my life. They told me if I didn’t have it cut out, I’d die, and if I did, it wasn’t too good of odds. So I went for the latter, you know?”

Martin’s voice became softer, and his eyes gazed off into the distance. “When I was in the hospital, I got a staph infection. And it just about killed me. It went through my whole body, so they had to put me on life support. My dad sat there for weeks, but he didn’t think I was gonna make it.”

His voice cracked and, with great effort, he said, “God came to me; He saved my life. It was *wonderful*. And it changed my life, you know? And He spoke to me. He gave me a lot of information while I was in there.”

“How long ago was that, Martin?”

“About four years ago. Four years. And I’ve been serving him ever since. All I think about is God all the time, and I wanted to just do something for God.

When I got saved, I realized how bad I broke His heart all these years. I wanted to get in a missionary field and everything, go to Africa, live in a hut, take food to starving children. But the one thing I didn't know is that I was in a missionary field all along.

“The world's really lost in a big way. In this world, the status of a successful man is a new car, a big ol' nice house, wearing a lot of nice clothes. Jesus cut that all out. He showed that those things were no measure of a man—the treasure of this earth. He taught me the life you live—and the way you treat other people—is the true measure of a man.

“I think, in a way, He wanted me to be homeless for a little while, as my time out in the wilderness.”

“Did you come here after Katrina?” I asked.

“Yeah, I was in New Orleans, and I wanted to get into a domiciliary for my health problems, but they had closed it down after the storm. I got a ticket for a bus here, but when I got to the VA, I learned there was no such thing. There I was, a bag of clothes in my hand. I didn't have any money, and I didn't know what I was gonna do. But the Lord stepped in, and He takes good care of me. I've got a job now, and it's landscaping work—the kind of work I can do, and I work for a very good man. He's a wonderful person. But I've got to hang on until I can get enough money saved up so that I can buy a travel trailer. I can just pay lot rent and utilities and stuff.”

We had reached a comfortable pause in the conversation, so I decided to ask Don to tell me about his background. Martin quipped, “This man's been to college! He's smart!”

“OK,” Don began, “I was born in 1952, and I came from a large family. I’ve got four sisters and two brothers. Anyway, my mother abused me, and no one knows why. When I say she ‘abused me,’ it wasn’t sexually. It was just mentally . . . physically. And I was the only one that she did. I can tell you stories that you wouldn’t believe. Let me give you one example—the worst one, which will always stay in my mind. I came home one day from playing with my neighbors, and my mother met me at the door. She said, ‘I’m gonna kill your father tonight. I’m gonna poison his food. And if you tell him, I will kill you, too.’ I went in, and I hid under a bed, crying, and my father came in and ate the chili that was poisoned. I didn’t know God. I didn’t know that God existed, what the Father was, what the Son was, I was ignorant. Anyway, I was crying out to God that my father not die. That night, he was throwing up—I could hear him. My father lived, and the next day he went to the doctor, and the doctor said he was poisoned. To make the story short, she finally left, but she wouldn’t take me. She took all my brothers and sisters, but she didn’t take me. She would have nothing to do with me.

“I lived with my father, who became an alcoholic. And I was left at home *a lot*. It was a very cold house; no heating, no firewood. There was not even a brush of paint on the outside.”

“Where was that at, Don?”

“It was in Oxford, Mississippi. So my father drank all the time with his father, and they’d leave me at home. But I loved school. I loved going to school, and I loved art. Because I had plenty of time, you know [laughing]? Anyway, I finished high school, and I went to work in Memphis in a factory. We did the same thing, ev-

ery day . . . same thing . . . every day . . . same thing . . . same thing . . . same thing, and I said to myself, 'I cannot do this the rest of my life. I cannot just sit here and do the same thing every day. I'm going to college!'

"So, I went home and went to a Methodist college in Mississippi. I didn't know what a Methodist was, but I went there because a friend went there. I was very good at karate, and I would teach it. Anyway, there was a guy there, a Christian man, and he wanted to tell me about God. One night, after praying for two weeks for me, he came to my dormitory room, and he started telling my roommate and I about the things of the Gospel. This partner of mine, who I thought was a pretty tough guy, started crying. I wasn't crying or anything, but I was really believing it."

Don said that his roommate had a conversion of heart and believed and that he [Don] soon followed. He elaborated on what really caught his attention: "Now the scripture that motivated me to do that was . . . do you have any children?"

"No."

"Matthew, if your niece or nephew came to you and said, 'I'm very hungry,' and you knew that they were hungry, would you give them a stone? No, you're going to *hurriedly* give them something to eat. How much more would the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who asked? And I knew that I was saved."

Jokingly, Martin butted into the conversation: "You wanna get around to why you're homeless?"

Don let out a laugh and retorted, "Shut up, boy! . . . So we'll go on. If you want to hear why I'm homeless, it's after [this]: through the years, I got married, had three children, and adopted two children. My wife and I came to some conflicts. The

cause was infidelity; let's put it that way. On both sides. I never took a drink, never smoked, never drank, all my married life. Wouldn't even *consider* it. I went to church constantly. I used to pray an hour before I'd go to work; one hour on my knees before I went to work. We divorced. It devastated me. Still does.

"In the time of my separation, my wife got me to come down here. We went to a bar right on the beach on New Year's Eve. She ordered us some drinks. I drank it, and it was good. I was feeling good, so I said, 'Listen, . . . let me order a screwdriver.' I had heard of them, but didn't know what they were. And I started feeling *good*. It opened a can of worms."

Don and his wife were both in education, and he had persuaded her to go back to college for nursing. Once she finished the degree, she wanted a divorce. He gave her the house, the cars, and pretty much everything they owned together. This response of Don's to divorce is sadly common among the homeless men I've spoken with. Some men said that they abandoned everything to their ex-wives because they wanted to start over or travel. For others, it was a type of self-pity—a modern-day falling on one's sword. For Don, it was out of compassion. "I left with nothing. I went to work in another city, and I just started drinking."

"How did you eventually end up here?" I asked.

"What happened is I left for another city because she was dating other men and stuff. I worked at a hotel downtown. I was an auditor, but I drank all the time, even on the job. But I could still function; I was a 'functional alcoholic.' Now Martin doesn't like me to call myself an 'alcoholic' because he doesn't believe I am an alcoholic . . . [but] that I just drink a lot."

“He knows he’s homeless because he chooses to be,” Martin replied. “I know a lot of alcoholics who work real hard and have a lot of nice things.”

“I knew you were gonna say that! Anyway, they sold the hotel to the state. So I was out of a job. I was going to go to a truck-driving school in Orange Grove [a town near Biloxi]. They said they would train you, and it would cost you \$1,500, and the company you worked for would pay for it. My friend brought me down there and dropped me off. I went there, and it was a whole different story: ‘No, you’ve gotta come up with \$1,500 *now*.’

“Here I am, I had no money. I couldn’t even buy a cup of coffee. I start walking down Highway 49 to the Coast. I said, ‘God, what am I going to do? Where am I going to *stay*?’ I’m walking, and I’m talking to God all the time . . . all the time. I get almost to the beach, and I stop at a stoplight in Gulfport. And my daughter drove up and saw me at the *very same time*, and I had not seen her in three years. I was praying, and how could that be a coincidence?”

His daughter picked him up and took him to where she was living. Don soon felt that it was inappropriate for him to stay more than a day, as she had her own life. “The next day, I’m on my own. So I became homeless. I tried to find a job, but it’s difficult for a person who drinks a lot to get a job and to keep on. I did get a job at Waffle House, but I lived in a tent. I said, ‘Well, I tell you what. I can’t get a really good job, so I’m going to work for St. Vincent de Paul. I’m going to work for God.’ And I started just working for God. And I’ve been here over seven years, just waiting on people, serving people.

“Now the reason I’m homeless, I guess, like he said, is that I choose to be. But right now I think the reason I’m homeless is because of alcoholism. Also, I want to work for St. Vincent de Paul. I love it.”

I turned to Martin to get his take on why he is homeless. Don jumped in with “He’s a knot head!” Martin laughed and said, “I really like my job, and the guy I work for, and he’s just starting his business. I can do better, I guess, but I’m really trying to give my life to God now. I could get food stamps and stuff, but I’d have to lie, and I choose not to. You know how housing is now around here, and with my income, it’s out of the question. I figure that after this year, I can save up some more money, and in the spring and summer I make good money. So I’m hoping that I can save up and have a travel trailer. I won’t be homeless by next fall. But at this point, I’m gonna have to struggle through it.

“I try to come up here and do Mass every day and stay as close as I can with God. The hardest thing is that the mayor does not want homeless people in Biloxi, so I pray to God to put a hedge around my place so they don’t find out where I’m at. The hardest part is to find a place that you’re safe. A lot of homeless people are drug addicts and stuff like that, and they’ll steal everything you’ve got. And they do a lot of panhandling.”

“We do *not* panhandle,” Don stated.

Curious, I asked, “Don, how do you get money to drink?”

“I work!”

I asked Martin what he thinks is the most difficult thing about being homeless. “Finding a place to stay, hiding from the authorities. They’re cutting all these

woods around here because they want everybody out. A lot of people panhandle—they mess it up for everybody else.”

“What we have done,” Don said, “is not tell anybody where we live. What happens is that if people find out where you live, they start coming drunk, making a lot of noise. Next thing you know, you’re discovered. Many of the homeless people trash their place. Our place is immaculate.”

Martin was quick to add that not all homeless people are bad people. “Matter of fact, we give money to people who really need it. I don’t like giving money to the greedy. I helped this girl out a while ago, and she stays in these apartments. I hadn’t taken a shower in a week, and I asked her if I could take a shower, and she wanted me to eat something before I left. And I got to eatin’ there, and her apartment’s really bare—she’s got one chair in her living room”

His voice trailed off as tears came to his eyes. “Come to find out, she gave me the last of her food. Broke my heart. I left her \$20 before I left, and I told her that God loves her. ‘God loves you a lot,’ I said, ‘because a rich man gives out of his excess, while a poor person gives out of their needs.’ So I went home and cried, prayed to God for her. I didn’t have the money to give, but I wanted to do it because God wanted me to.”

I asked Martin whether he’s experienced any scary situations while he’s been homeless. “Oh, yes. They knew I was workin’ one time, and they were out there by the railroad tracks. I had money, and they came out to me and robbed me. Threw me on the ground, put a knife in my face.”

Don added, "There are homeless people that are very mean people; very dangerous people. But I've never had a bad experience. I think it's because most all of them see me as working here, and they don't want to cause a conflict with me. Maybe that's their thinking—I'm not sure. I've had things stolen a lot, but nothing like what Martin has gone through. Nothing physical, praise God."

"How would things be different if there was a shelter that had resources, such as counselors or addiction help?" I asked. "Would you want to be in that situation?"

"Shelters are pretty tough places," said Martin. "They have them in big cities; [they're] a madhouse. What it was is I went in one once, and it was nothing but a crack house, man. At night, it looked like fireflies was goin' off, them smokin' that crack in there. But if they didn't take the same people they're trying to treat and put them in charge"

"Shelters," Don began, "a lot of times don't work. People that drink (if they go in there, you can't drink, OK?), well, they're alcoholics. They drink every day. And they do a breath test on them, and they say, 'You can't stay here. You've got to go.' It doesn't work because they're gonna drink every day. And [when] they get over that, then the shelter may work.

"There's also shelters . . . like there's one here in Gulfport that you go there, you don't bring anything. No car, nothing. Nothing. You can't get a job, you can't leave, on holidays you can't see your family. I'm serious, this is a real place. They don't want you to leave—you stay right there. They'll feed you and clothe you."

“That’s like a cult, in a way,” said Martin. “You become like an indentured servant. I guess if they got you off of drugs, that’d be a different thing.”

Don jumped in and continued: “As far as having a shelter, it’d probably work for some people, but they’d have to be ready to change. Maybe if the shelter is strong enough—financially strong enough—maybe they could teach you a trade. A person has *got* to get it in his mind, ‘I’m done. I’m done with alcohol, I’m done with drugs, I’m done with livin’ homeless.’ And with God’s help, of course, I see it that way. But I don’t see it happening to a lot these guys here. They don’t want to stop.”

“They’re basically resigned to their situation?”

“Yeah,” replied Martin, “they just use the services of the shelters and stuff to further their addictions.”

Don became animated and exclaimed, “They don’t work! Many of them won’t work! We’ve even *asked* them to work. You know, I’ve worked all day for \$20. I did work at Waffle House, but I blewed it all on drinkin’ [and] the casinos. I don’t like it. I don’t like homeless life.”

I asked, “Have you found anything positive about the experience?”

Incredulously, Don said, “Of being *homeless*?”

“Yes.”

“Huh!” He began to laugh. “Yeah, I’ve found Martin. He’s been a very good comfort, a good friend. We’ve known each other for . . . since last December.”

“Well, I tried to convince him,” began Martin, “that God’s made you homeless for a reason. It’s to teach you something. Almost all the prophets were homeless. John the Baptist was homeless, Jesus was a homeless person, man. God’s

got something to teach you, that's why he's got you out here, man."

"Well," Don retorted, "I'm tired of it! I'm tired of being homeless!"

"We do a lot of witnessing. Anyway, we're out in the missionary field first-hand."

I wanted to get their advice on what a newly homeless person should do, especially because the worsening economy would likely result in a surge of homeless people. Martin began by saying, "Probably get out of Biloxi, because they don't like homeless people. That's why they won't let us put up a shelter."

Don added, "I would say get you a tent and a secluded spot. Don't tell anyone where you are. But I'll tell you what, a tent makes a *big* difference, because it keeps you out of the elements. It doesn't keep you out of cold or hot, but it does keep you out of the wind and rain."

"Do you still keep in touch with your families? How do you think they feel about your situation?"

Don said, "They don't like it."

Martin added, "My family doesn't know where I'm at. Right now, I'm on a conquest to find God. To me, this has been a terrible experience, but an enlightening one. Right now, they've got their own lives. I really don't want them to know I'm struggling this hard."

"You know," Don began, "I could stay with my sister, but I don't want to go up there, and they say, 'Don, let's go out to eat.' And they pay for it. I don't want to be in their way."

We had been speaking for well over an hour and a half, so I asked them if they had any final thoughts. Don began: “I don’t know if it’s a choice or if it’s God . . . an affliction . . . that you’re homeless.”

“Well, Jesus said, ‘The poor you will always have with you’¹,” I said. “I just think that whatever society tries, you’re always going to have situations.”

We sat in silence for a moment, and Martin said, “It’s hard for a rich man to get into Heaven.”

Michael

“I’m above water, I got my nose up. I can breathe.”

Michael was homeless for many years, but had recently moved into an apartment because of being approved for disability. He invited me to his new home, which was located in a small apartment complex near the beach. As I walked inside, the first thing that I noticed was that everything was immaculate. Not one item was out of place. He later told me that this was common when homeless people move into a permanent place.

Michael is a short, powerfully built, middle-aged man. While we sat at his kitchen table and spoke, his eyes would flit to the windows at the slightest noise. Always kind and well-spoken, he would frame his answers in a precise, almost oratorical manner, as if every word held the greatest gravity. I could not help but hang on his every word.

“Well,” he began, “I’m originally from Florida, in the panhandle. Didn’t finish high school, dropped out of high school, but I made up for that when I joined the Army back in that day. So I earned my GED while in the Service. I spent six years there, got out, had to scuffle for a little bit, then I turned around and ended up with a decent job. And due to the fact that I fell in love with this certain particular woman, I ended up losing that job. This was back in the ‘80s. I ended up starting being a drug dealer up there because my unemployment was running out. So that was like a little Hell of its own. In the long run, I had to file my last income tax, and it came back \$1,300 [refund]. So I had enough to get me an apartment and start all

over again. I started schooling to draw my VA benefits. After that, my mother died, and I came back to Florida, and everything hasn't been quite the same since. Now when I got home to Florida, I ended up on the street for a while. This is where I learned about sleeping under a bridge. We'd take our clothes and stuff and hide it up between the pylons. And somebody come through, found 'em one day, and stole just about everything. I just made up my mind to come on down from there."

"Now, this time around, when I left Florida again, I came here to Mississippi because everybody I knew were all starting to do drugs. And some of the family that I lived with, they stole from me. I found out about the homeless program at the VA, so I took off. Instead of runnin' all across the country, getting further and further away from my kids and family, I decided I didn't want to go any further. I just stopped right here and said I'm gonna fight it from here. So far, I'm doing pretty dadblame good."

"Does the VA still have that program?"

"No, they don't have the domiciliary out there anymore. They were able to give you room and board, but they don't have that setup anymore since Katrina went through. After that, I just kinda kicked it around for a while. I've had several jobs here, all of which were pretty good, but nothing lasted long enough or wasn't paying enough so I couldn't afford a place of my own. I was in the woods in a tent, and I stayed there for a number of years. I'll grant you 10 years, but it was probably a few more than that. I never had to go too far anywhere as far as my jobs were concerned."

“I think that’s what a lot of people don’t realize: there are many homeless people who work.”

“Now there’s a lot of them that do work, but there are also some who don’t care. At the VA even now, they’ve got a program out there where they can put people on little temporary jobs to help people get back to the pace of life. Like I said, most of them guys would just rather lay around and stay drunk all they can instead of getting off their butts and doing something for themselves. You’ve got a lot of them that became junkies out there. It’s either drugs or alcohol, one of the two. Now when you get in the case where they’re doing it that bad, that’s when the suckers are not feeling sorry for themselves. They just don’t *care* no more. And as far as that goes, they’ll stay in that pit for who knows how long before they come out of it. Now there’s been a couple of guys I’ve met that said they used to smoke crack, too, but they quit. Then, all of a sudden, they’re just plain drunks. A couple of ‘em I’ve known are doing quite well. They’ve let the drugs go, they’re back in the stream of life again, got kids, grandkids—which is good. Because they finally found out there’s another priority in life: keeping the family together.”

“Do you have any kids?”

“I’ve got two sons. Both of ‘em have done time now. Last time I called home, I talked to my sister. I told her about my good fortune: my pension finally come through, and I was getting out of the woods. First thing to come out her mouth is, ‘Send [her] \$2,000 of it.’ And I refused it. I told her, ‘No, I’ve suffered for many years. I’ve gonna get myself together and get me up out these woods.’ She told me, ‘All you gonna do is smoke it up on crack.’ I haven’t heard from her since. I don’t

feel guilty about not sending her a penny.”

I asked Michael about his living in the woods. He said, “Around here, most of us did take off to the woods. But grant this, there isn’t much woods left because they’ve just about bulldozed everything around here. Now as far as abandoned buildings are concerned, that’s all good, too. I’ve done that myself, too. But a lot of the guys, they use what bathrooms they find in the building or the floor to urinate and pass bowel movements, and it stinks the building up. That’s unsanitary. People come by there, [and] they’re gonna call somebody. It’s alright to be homeless, but you’ve got to have a certain tact about it and be respectful to others, too. Somebody broke into my tent one time, stole all my medications. I’ve gotta go through getting a police report, the whole nine yards, in order to go to my doctor and have him reissue my pills.”

“What is most difficult about homelessness?”

“Let’s say three things: one is how are you going to get a bath every day out there, and number two is cooking your meals, and three is worrying about somebody coming in and stealing from you when you’re not home. Now gettin’ a bath is easy, but you have to have an idea of where you’re gonna get water from. Don’t be too lazy, get off your butt, go get your supplies, and have them there. Number two: You’re gonna leave your camp, but just don’t stay gone all night long. Hopefully, you ain’t got business way off somewhere unless you’ve got a job. I found that it was better to have a night job because in the daytime you can stay there and be sleeping. But at night, ain’t nobody gonna come and try to steal from you . . . because they can’t see out there, either. Now the other point is food. Food’s easy, but you’re basi-

cally stuck with all canned goods out there. You get tired of ‘em. I still have canned goods I’ve had for a couple of years, but I’m not going to throw them away. I’m gonna still use them.”

“Did you have any frightening situations come up out in the woods?”

“Yeah, I had one. I was over to this guy’s house, and the reason I was there was because I wanted to try and sell a wheelchair that the government had sent me. Anyway, he didn’t have any use for the wheelchair, so he didn’t buy it. OK, fine. So we went back over to his house to party for the night. We’re sitting there drinkin’ a little bit, watching TV and stuff. I actually got enough in me to where I fell asleep over there that night. Wake up the next morning, there’s nobody in the house but me, him, and his dog. When I got up to leave, I looked in his bedroom, made sure he was in there, and I proceeded to go ahead and leave. I went back later that afternoon to check on him. Next thing I knew, I had the cops taking me downtown for a murder investigation. I didn’t get charged, but they was investigating it. Lo and behold, the guy’s nephew went over there, beat him, slit his throat for \$300. Bad scene, too. That’s why I . . . stopped trying to meet a whole lot of guys out there. I don’t wanna meet nobody. Sooner or later, you might end up with a confrontation on your hands, and you’ve gotta do something about it. And I, for one, do not be joking out there.”

“Do the police leave those camps alone?”

“No! They come in searching for you! If there’s anybody who’s complained one iota about anything, they comin’ in. The spot that I was in, I stayed there a long, long time by myself. I had no problems. And when a few others moved in

around me, every time I looked around the cops was down there for something. And lo and behold, they get tired of runnin' down there, and I know they do, and I don't blame 'em. It just seems like all the idiots just start falling down out of the sky. Every time I looked around, there was another one there, and another one, and another one. It just made things a little bit rougher until I got to where I got away from there. And I was sure glad I left. What they do out there now, I don't wanna be bothered with no more. I see some of the guys that I still know. I speak to 'em, talk to 'em, but I go on my way."

"Tell me about how you transitioned to getting an apartment."

"It wasn't hard. I went to the post office one day to check my mail. I had a check in there. I wasn't expecting it. Then I looked at the amount on it. And it was very substantial. Now with that, I went and got me a bank account started, rented me a motel room for a few weeks, and started looking for me an apartment. I had this girl who was living with me at the time; she is homeless out there now, too. She didn't want to stay here. She decided she wanted to go back on the street and sleep in her car. So I was like, '*C'est la vie!*' Now I've got an apartment full of furniture, two TVs, stereo system, DVD [player], and plenty movies to watch. I'm more comfortable now than I've ever been in my life." Michael stood up, led me over to his bookcase and showed me his neatly cataloged row of movies. "As you can see, every one of those movies I went to the pawn shop and bought, \$3 a pop. Everything's pretty good. Closet . . . as you can see, I've got a little bit of a wardrobe in there. It's been quite peaceful, and I love it. As long as I've got something to take care of the bills every month, I'm here."

“A lot of people say it’s hard for them, you know, to change over. But it won’t be hard; it’s gettin’ used to it. I still toss and turn a lot in bed every night. It takes me a lot longer to fall asleep than it did in the woods. I am 52 years old. A 52-year-old man shouldn’t have to be living in the woods like a bum; therefore, I’m taking care of myself. I’m above water again, I got my nose up. I can breathe. So here I am.”

“Has faith been a big factor for you?”

“Very much so. Very much so. The biggest thing about faith is when the Bible says, ‘Be patient and long-suffering.’ And I knew, somehow, that I would get my chance again one day. I’d say, ‘If the Good Lord figures it’s time to cut me out of here, I’m gonna be gone. I ain’t gonna look back, y’all.’ It went just like that. I got mine, I got out, and I ain’t looking forward to going back or trying to go back. There’s a lot of stupid things going on. I’ve had dope dealers running through the woods, hiding out at my camp, me not knowing what’s going on. Cops come down every time something goes wrong; the first place they come to is down in the woods looking for whoever it is. I got tired of that. One night, some bounty hunters come down there. This was in the dead of night. They were looking for some dude named Steve, guns drawn. I just laid back because I didn’t want to catch no stray bullets. They got him and took him on in, and whatever they had to do, they done. I hope I don’t ever have to go back.”

“Did other people treat you well when you were homeless?”

“This one woman I met, she just put ‘em [homeless persons] down like they were dogs, you know? Next thing I know—I hadn’t seen her for a while—she’s

feeding the homeless. I don't know what her whole story was or what turned her head. Some of 'em, like this one dude I know—big-time caterer—this sucker is, like, he thinks he's gonna invite a few of us out of the woods and come over there. You get over there, and you eat, and he'll want you to do this, do that, do this, do that. For free. He feel like if he feeds you, he's done something."

"How would your situation have been different if there was a large shelter on the Gulf Coast?"

"I probably wouldn't have met a lot of people that I do know, and to tell the truth, who knows?"

"What about advice for someone who's become homeless for the first time?"

"Be careful with the decisions you make because you never know when you might get slapped down. Make those decisions very, *very* carefully. And once you make 'em, you better stick with 'em. You never know what'll happen to you out there. Believe you me, I'm one who has found out. It wasn't my way to be going like I went, just everything just fell that way. I guess I made some bad decisions along the way. Things I decided to stick with should've been the things I let go of. Watch who you hang out with. Because a lot of these guys, they will try to rob you. If you get drunk with 'em, something's gonna happen. Don't be getting too drunk to where you can't wake up and defend yourself if you have to."

"What do you think about St. Vincent de Paul?"

"Oh, I like it up there. The people there are really nice, and Lord knows, they've helped me for a long, long time. I'll never forget a bunch of them."

“Let’s say you were in charge of a government homeless initiative. What would you do?”

“You know what, you can set up a big shelter somewhere around here. Maybe you might have a few supporters. But sooner or later, the guys are gonna burn their welcomes out on that, and they’re gonna try to close the place down. So that’s why people don’t want to do anything for them. They’re so far down in the pit, they don’t know how to get out. Only thing I could tell anyone else? ‘You’d better strive hard, cuz it ain’t gonna be easy.’ Me myself, I just had strength all these years to keep crawling up. And I made it.”

A Final Story

A short time after I finished the interviews, a letter was left for me at St. Vincent de Paul. When I read its contents, I was touched to see a five-page, handwritten account of one homeless man's experiences during Hurricane Katrina.

The next week, the author of the letter, Tom, came and saw me. He is a quiet man with a Boston accent. He looks far younger than his listed age and was a bit embarrassed that I spoke so highly of his letter. I thanked him for his taking the time to write his story, and I asked if I could use his letter in the book. He agreed, and I offered him a \$20 gift card for his time. Softly, he said, "Well, if it's alright with you, I would like to donate that card to St. Vincent de Paul."

"Are you sure about that? We're truly grateful that you wrote your story."

"Well," he replied, "it does so much good for people and has helped me a lot, so I would really like to donate it."

Because of the genuineness of Tom's letter, I convinced him to allow me to present it exactly as it was written:

The Rath of the Storm Katrina

On late August 28th or 29th of 2005 is when Katrina came ashore. Before Katrina made it ashore the news warned of the strength, from pictures taken from the satellites in space. Me myself I was living in Orange County Central, East Texas at Beaumont, TX. The news media warned any one in Katrina's path, the storm would take its toll and . . . destroy anything in its path. The Doppler Radar showed a satellite view of the storm. It was horrendous the strength the storm had at sea. A day or two later the death toll was never ending it was very . . . very sad. So many elderly, youngsters and families. Thinking they could weather out the storm, instead of vacating. People wanted to stay and secure their property. They didn't realize how severe Katrina's picture on the Doppler radar is or was. A day later when the survivors describing to the news the strength of the storm. All of the snaps, smashes, breakage of buildings and cars and trees crash boom bang was all sounds under a muffled wind was the strongest sound with things whipping around, it was horrifying survivors would say.

I remember some of the people evacuated to Beaumont. F.E.M.A. was there to help. I worked for Labor Ready. We were on call to help some also. The missions were packed from Houston, Pasadena, or to Dallas Texas. People needed places to live, it was sad. So many bad stories, it was depressing. People were separated from their family and friends. There were a lot of people trapped on the top of their rooftops of houses or sheds. Some were lucky enough to get in to a boat or skiff. The Coast Guard was out rescuing people using motor boats or helicopters with a

person dangling from a line rescuing semaratenens like that. There were a lot of people to save. And a lot of clean up to be done in the future. All of New Orleans was under water I watched from Texas the National Guard and the Marines came in to help clean up. It took the better half of a year to clean up enough to reopen buisness-
es ect, they were on a roll, thing started looking up.

Now here it is 2008. Buisnesses are doing a lot better then they were. I went back to Louisiana New Orleans. There are still many big buiseses shut down. On the North East side of I-10. I helped this one man. Donnald his fathers house was almost ready to be remodeled. We tore the rest of the sheet rock off of the wall's and sealing. And through away a large amount of the soiled furniture and clothing. The hole front yard was full of trash bags. Then after all of that, we had to cure the mold damage problems. One room was totaly damaged only on the top of the 2"x4" frame. We pressure washed every thing with bleach and wrined with water. The preveouse water damage was up to 4' foot tall on the intereior of the house. We cleaned the walls and the windows, and finished picking up the lawn. Thing's were looking better, we were some 25 to 30 miles on I-10 East out of New Orleans. A big Walmart Super Center and a large Winn Dixie grocery store, were boarded up. A big 10' foot fence cerounded them, a full block wide. Luckely they had a Lowe's and a Home Depo. They had reopened, that helped tremendously.

After we were done I tried to go down the mission. The only one that had any room for lodging was the light house Inn, the Salvation Army was filled up. I got a bus ticked with Greyhound and went to vissit family in Florida for a while.

On my way back to Texas I stopped at Pensacola-Florida stayed at the Union Gosspe Mission. Then I went west to Alabama, and to Mississippi. I got to stay and rest at Pascagula. There was a Salvation Army all though it was so small. They would only give me 3-night's lodging. Although I didn't find any work it was a help. I went further west to Biloxi. The churches were a great deal of help. I was able to find some work. All of the beach was devastated by Katrina. All most all of the manchens and large motel, hotels were destroyed right down to there foundation. The beach never looked so desolated, it was very sad. I went to try to find a shelter or mission to try to stay in. Without luck. The only one was on the city edge of Gulfport. The only problem is if I sighed on to stay I couldn't leave to find work. And once I left I couldn't return for 6-months. So I stayed a while, the people were more then helpfull they fed me I bathed and got to go to church. The church was wouderful cousingering this was all in a small community. I wish I could stay except I had to find work. I was hopping someday soon I might get hired or be able to volonteer to build a Salvation Army for lodging or a Light House Mission or even Union Gosspe Mission here in Boloxi or Golfport along the coast were there were preveously mission or shelters. The rath of the storm Katrina demolished them to our sad remourse. I know it would take a while but then I sure would like to lend a helping hand of a building of a near by shelter. Thanks for taking the time to here my story . . . best of luck.

How You Can Help

There are many ways that you can relieve the plight of homeless persons both in Biloxi and across the nation. Before listing those charities that are in desperate need of your prayers and financial assistance, I ask you to think about what you might do for those homeless men and women in your area. Even greater than a donation would be asking a homeless person to have lunch or dinner with you. I know that the experience will bless them and you, fill you with peace, and show you the next step to take.

I have personal experience working with the following two organizations in Biloxi, and I can vouch that they are doing great work:

Our Lady of Fatima St. Vincent de Paul Society
314 Jim Money Rd.
Biloxi, MS 39531
(228) 388-1837

Loaves and Fishes
260 Main Street
Biloxi, MS 39530-3113
(228) 436-6172

In addition, please visit my website at coastcaritas.wordpress.com. There you will find reflections, a PDF version of this book for free distribution, and more. God bless you.