

THE MARGAZINE

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WINTER EDITION

SURVIVING HOMELESSNESS

What 6 people who've been there
want you to know

HOW DID YOU COME TO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS?

A deep dive into the day in the life
of the homeless experience.

INSPIRATIONAL CORNER

Uplifting encouragement
anyone can use!

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 want you to know

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SURVIVING HOMELESSNESS

*What 6 people who've been there
want you to know*

by Rebecca Ruiz & Kate Sommers-Dawes



The home is sacred — a practical and spiritual shelter that sustains life. Yet, every year more than 3 million Americans, many of them children, lose that sanctuary and become homeless, according to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. They turn car seats into makeshift beds, find temporary respite at crowded shelters, sleep on concrete under garbage-bag tents.

These scenes are so familiar that homelessness in America can seem incurable. In San Francisco, where estimates indicate at least 6,600 people are homeless, finding an affordable and permanent place to call home in the city's exorbitant housing market is increasingly akin to winning the lottery. Those grueling odds exact a physical and emotional toll on the people who endure them.

As part of the SF Homeless Project, a collaborative effort between more than 70 news outlets, Mashable interviewed six people whose lives have been touched by the powerful forces that created widespread homelessness just a few decades ago.



That crisis, says John McGah, an expert on homelessness and a senior associate at American Institutes for Research, is a modern phenomenon born of major economic and social trends that emerged in the past 40 years. Before then, systemic homelessness as we know it did not exist. If you understand homelessness only through complaints about panhandling and encampments, or efforts to teach people without homes how to code, that history may come as a surprise.

The unraveling began in the 1970s, when the federal government started slashing its spending on affordable housing by billions of dollars, just as household incomes began to stagnate. Meanwhile, the value of welfare benefits decreased steadily over the same two decades. By the 1990s, the country's housing market had lost one million affordable housing units, but millions of people had become low-income renters.

As the federal government significantly reduced funding for affordable housing, it also failed to deliver on a promise to aid thousands of people transitioning from psychiatric institutions to communities around the country. This was a process known in the 1970s and 1980s as "deinstitutionalization." Many of those patients, who lived with mental illness, became homeless, as did returning Vietnam War veterans. The devastating effects of institutional racism also continued to keep many minority families out of white middle-class neighborhoods, and contributes to the overrepresentation of minorities, particularly black people, in the homeless population.

"Combine any one of those, or all of those, with an individual's own vulnerabilities — no health insurance, a car accident, a family breakup, a health situation — and now you're really vulnerable to these trends," says McGah. "And that's a deadly combination."

Matt Schwartz, president and CEO of the California Housing Partnership, a nonprofit organization that advocates for affordable housing, says it's time for the public perspective on homelessness to evolve.

"Until we can change our thinking about housing — that it's got to be a right, not a market good — we're not going to have the outrage that's required to change our priorities," he says.

To McGah and Schwartz, the problem of homelessness has an obvious solution: provide people with permanent affordable housing, and when necessary, give them supportive services that address mental illness, addiction and chronic unemployment. Not all people who are homeless experience these conditions, but some do as a direct result of losing shelter. Providing secure housing to people with different needs and backgrounds across the country is complicated, experts say, but not impossible. The following interviews, which have been excerpted and lightly edited, illustrate the vital importance of housing. Collectively, these six San Franciscans survived more than two decades of homelessness, thanks in part to aid from several local nonprofit organizations. Their stories share common themes, but demonstrate how the individual experience of homelessness defies simple stereotypes.



— *Profile*

Meet Mariah Holmes

Mariah, 25, has been working with Homeless Prenatal Program, a San Francisco nonprofit, since she learned of her pregnancy. She's taking parenting classes and searching for permanent affordable housing for herself, her partner and their 4-month-old daughter Cassidy.

I found out I was pregnant at about four-and-a-half months and got back on methadone, and that's what I've been doing. On Dec. 31, we got into Hamilton Family Center and we got into our own bed, one of the six-month beds. And our out-date from there is coming up July 1, which is hectic. There's a lot going on. We don't have anywhere to move to. We have money saved up, but I'm not trying to spend it all on a hotel.

Even so, even the cheap motels, half of 'em don't accept kids 'cause of the environment and stuff. We got a subsidy [from Hamilton Family Center], but we've been calling all over, and so many places don't work with third-party checks — they just have a bad image of subsidies and stuff. It sucks to generalize people rather than taking people on as individuals, and giving them a chance to prove that they can keep it up.





Rather than being judged on the fact that I had a rocky start, have been struggling with keeping myself sober and stuff, I'd rather be looked at for the fact that I'm seeking help and I'm trying to get on my feet. I'm trying to do what any person, whether they have an addiction or not, is trying to do when they have a kid. I love her a lot, and I'm just trying to figure it out. I'm willing to do whatever it is that I need to.

I'm not asking for a handout. I'm willing to work and I just want to create a safe, stable environment for my kid. I've got a lot of love to give and I got a lot of ambitions, and now I finally have the drive to achieve some of those ambitions with having her there. Now it's about more than just me.

To support Mariah, email sfhousing@homelessprenatal.org.

— Profile

Meet Lexx Thomas

Lexx was homeless for four years before he moved into a supportive housing apartment in 2013 through a San Francisco nonprofit called Delivering Innovation in Supportive Housing (DISH). He now has his sights set on getting back into the workforce.



When I realized that [one year] had passed [living here], something empowering came over my heart just to know that if I can make it in San Francisco, I can make it anywhere. It just gave me so much strength to know that I'm not weak, and I am a survivor and a strong person. About a year-and-a-half later, [I had] stable and permanent housing.

Upon completion of my 55-day [rehab] program, I had a housing coordinator for San Francisco really, really push me to make the appointments with the housing managers, and [that's] how I was able to get housed. They were able to push me to my potential.

For myself, it's even a challenge to try to maintain the mental health that I do have to do the best that I can, no matter what. [The challenge] used to be to look around and have nothing but compassion for the people on the street. Today I'm in a position not to only have compassion, but to be able to have a voice and to have able hands to do something about it. That's the difference between then and today for me.

— *Profile*

Meet Charles Hardigree

Charles, 56, lost his job and was homeless for six months. He was hospitalized and entered rehab before moving into DISH supportive housing in 2009.



It can happen to anybody, but it happened to me. Like everybody else I lived in the suburbs, driving a minivan, working every day and lost my job. Place went out of business, and then my health fell, and, you know, just everything come down at once. My health went bad and, next thing you know, you ain't got a place to live, you know? One thing I noticed is out there on the streets, [a lot] of the people out there have mental problems. It's really sad and, to me, they shouldn't be out there. A lot of them should be at least under a doctor's care ... It's not their fault, and that's the worst thing I see. I just think it's wrong [in] a country with so much.

When you walk by and you see a guy panhandling or going to the garbage can or things like that, you just got to remember — that's a human being and, for better or worse, whatever the situation is, he didn't really choose to be there, you know? I don't know what the answer is, but there's got to be something better than what we got. Believe me — I've sat there and I've looked and I've thought and I've pondered on that issue, and I don't know what the answer is, 'cause everybody's different, a different case.

I never thought, you know, I had a good livin'. I was comfortable like everybody else. I lived in a nice part of town. Four-bedroom house, two-car garage, a fenced-in yard, the whole nine yards. It can go like a flash.

— *Profile*

Meet Ivan Throckmorton

Ivan, 56, worked as a pastry chef before experiencing homelessness. He's had stable housing since 2009 through DISH, and has received treatment for alcohol abuse and mental illness.

I went down, really far and fast. By this time my mental illness was like — I was hearing voices and was delusional. So I got off the bus [in San Francisco] and just started floatin' around, sleepin' outside. It was cold, too, at that time. I didn't have a jacket or anything. So I started staying in winter shelters and day shelters. After that, I got into a program called South of Market Mental Health. I started getting help with a therapist and a psychiatrist. They finally put me on meds. That sorta straightened me out for a little bit. I haven't been on the streets for six years. I go to those [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings every day, and it's been good. Life has been good.

I'm learning how to spend time with myself. I've developed friendships with people, which I never really had before. I've got regrets, like my family. My ex-wife and two kids are kind of out of my life. They couldn't deal with my mental illness problems, so they kind of dislodged me from their life. But I'm OK with that now, too. It's like I've come to terms with it, and I don't hold any grudges and I'm not resentful or anything. I really like being alive. For a long time I thought dying was my only option. That's what I thought it was. I thought it was my only option. Waking up every day I think, jeez, I'm still alive. Took me some years and a lot of talking to get through it. I'm quite content with what I have now. I've got a nice, comfy room, and I've got everything I need.



— *Profile*

Meet Patricia Jackson

Patricia, 56, lived in automobiles and shelters for seven years. She's lived in a DISH studio apartment for two years.

I came to San Francisco in 1984. They transferred my husband's job here, and that's how I got here. He worked for the airline United, and they transferred him from Chicago to here. I lived on Divisadero and California Street for 15 years. I lived on Bridgeview for about seven years, and I lived on Mendell. That's where I was living when my husband passed. He dropped dead of a massive heart attack [in 2007], and from there I became homeless. I stayed in shelters, I stayed with people — all kinds of stuff. I had a mental breakdown. I was in the hospital for a while. I never had to sleep on the street, though, thank God.

I stayed in shelters, I stayed with people — all kinds of stuff. I had a mental breakdown. I was in the hospital for a while. I never had to sleep on the street, though, thank God.

I stayed with a lot of people, here and there — you get to a place where it's like time to go, I wore my welcome out. I stayed in cars and vans for years. Then my mobile home got towed. That's when I began going through the shelter system, wherever they'd take me. That wore me out. It wore me completely out. Some of 'em you've got to get up and leave and come back later on. You have to find something to do all day.



Riding the bus, riding the train, sitting in restaurants, eating slow — all kinds of stuff you do to make time pass, till it's time to go back in the shelter. I see it every day. It hurts my heart — I've been there and done that.

A lot of people, they knew me before I became homeless, and they knew me after I became homeless. I'm still the same person I was, but they didn't see it like that.



I'm not pitiful; I'm just homeless — me and a whole lot of other people.

Some people felt sorry for me. I didn't need nobody to feel sorry for me, I really didn't. Some people looked at me like they couldn't figure out why I was homeless. They just didn't see me as the same person as I was when I had somewhere to stay.

They looked at me all pitiful. I'm not pitiful; I'm just homeless — me and a whole lot of other people.

— Profile

Meet Aja Monet

Aja, 46, has been a DISH tenant for four years. He was homeless for two years before that, and actively participates in his community.



I stayed in the Tenderloin area for like two years; I volunteered for Glide for a long time. People didn't know I was homeless, though, because when I went to sleep I would always go downtown somewhere. I wouldn't stay in this area.

Even when I was going to jail and [was] deep in my addiction and on parole and all that, I still had my ear to politics. I would be on parole and I would still go down to City Hall and participate. I'm on a couple of boards in the neighborhood. I'm on the HIV prevention council. I have always believed that my gift in this life is to help ease our community problems by listening and by lending an active hand whenever I can.

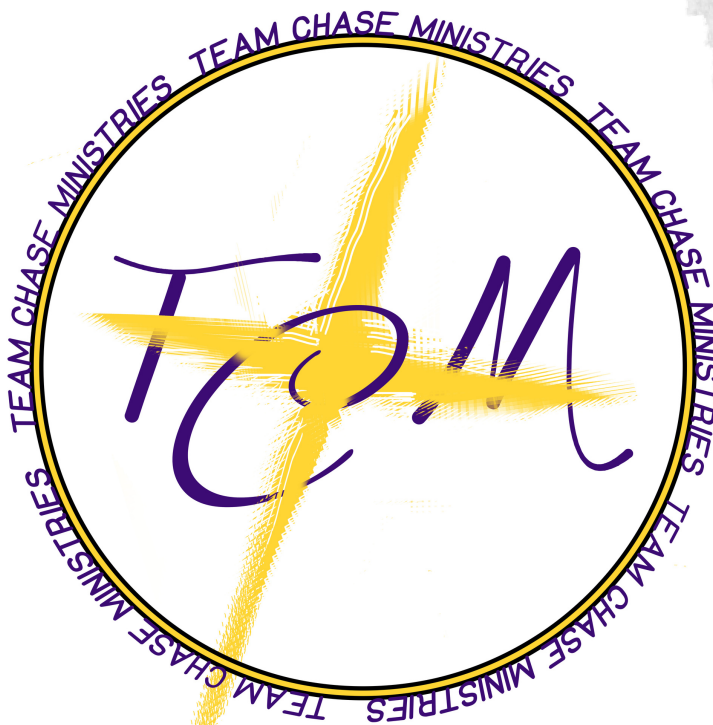
When I was homeless, I always tried to think positive and I went to places like the self-help center and the Stonewall Project — that's who got me into [supportive housing]. I went around places like that. I just got on the list to have a case manager. I started going to self-help groups, and harm reduction groups, and Black Brothers Esteem.

The thing is, plenty of times I would want to say, 'Man, I'm so sick of this, I just want to get my rent deposit and just give up my place.' If I give this up, where would I go? I'd spend my money and go out and have a good time for a couple of hours, and then I'd be in the same rut.

[My home] could be the worst place in the world, which it's not. It's a great place to live and I just love it, and they're very supportive. The management and the desk clerks — I just love them to death. As long as I'm able to open my door and lie down in my room, I'm happy.

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How Did You Come To Experience

HOMELESSNESS?

How did you come to experience homelessness?

I had been going along my merry way as a regular user of meth while leading a life as an adjunct professor of anthropology. I had made some foolish decisions with my money while using. And I got to an impossible place where I could not pay my rent and was forced to couch-surf with friends. I bounced around on a lot of couches.

Did you keep staying with friends?

I got back in stable housing but didn't stop using meth. And problems got worse again, as they do when one uses drugs. I next became homeless in July of '09. I was evicted.

I wound up moving in with my drug dealer for two months until I came to again. I stabilized, cleaned up some. You know, the cycle repeats. I once again found myself homeless.

Where did you stay?

I found a friend to take me in, but when she found out I was using, I was out on my ear again. When I was living in my landscaping truck, this one church set up their parking lot for car camping. There was a communal bathroom and a communal kitchen, and it felt safe.

Where did you bathe?

Hospital restrooms were a favorite of mine. At the time, it was really easy to walk into a hospital and act with authority, like I was visiting a patient or had an appointment. Also, hospitals are open 24 hours and have single-stall restrooms with locking doors. I'd take my shirt off, use paper towels and the soap from the dispenser, wipe under my armpits, wipe down around my crotch, douse my head in the sink. I still think about restrooms a lot: where they're located; if I have access to them; if they have toilet paper; if they're private.

How did you get food or eat, day to day?

Food stamps, food banks. And if I wanted a luxury item, like wine: shoplifting. I would go to a Walmart or Fred Meyer, grab whatever food or alcohol I wanted and walk with it in my shopping cart to a less visited part of the store, like where they keep the sheets and towels. I'd hide behind a display, crouching down, as if I was looking at something, and sneak it into my bag.

What's an experience that's stuck with you?

I bathed in Keller Fountain before I'd go to church. I realized as I was sitting in church that people could smell that fountain water on me, that rank chlorinated odor like fishy garbage. I was never more embarrassed in my entire life, because we had to do the hug of peace. I definitely did not want people to think that I was homeless. It was important for me to maintain the appearance that I was not living on the street.

Did you have favorite spots to spend time?

At parks I could just blend in and relax: There wasn't anything that had to be bought, there wasn't any task that had to be done. I always felt embarrassed if I was hanging out in a spot where I had to buy something, and daily living was so involved — just taking a bath was so involved. I could go to a park with a library book and just hang out for hours.

Tell me about the possessions you carried in your duffel bags.

All through my bouts of homelessness, I held onto oil paints from art school in a red fishing tackle box. They were a connection to my life. And I felt that if I lost these things, I would be absolutely unmoored. I finally got rid of the red paint box a couple of months ago, but I still have some of the paint. I have the two license plates from the F10 truck and the van that I lived in. Those hang on my wall to remind me of where I was and where I don't want to go back to.

How did you break the cycle?

I was unable to pay my rent. I was so high, I was unable to go renew food stamps or ask for help with rental assistance. I had spent my last \$40 trying to get meth, and didn't wind up getting any. I knew in my bones that I would become homeless again. And I just couldn't do it. I was finally willing to do whatever was asked of me to not do drugs.

How are you doing now?


I am almost seven years away from that period in my life. I'm sober, I'm relatively sane — whatever that means. I'm able to hold down a good job. I'm able to just be a human among humans.

_____ Shea Anderson 44,
Portland, Ore.



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always remember: there is grace today for yesterday's failures. thank god for his grace!

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