

Shelter Stories: James

As relayed to Barry Franklin, PR Team Writer

James is a quiet, well-mannered man in his fifties. He conveys an inspiring personal strength and I thank him for his time and his story.

Where did you grow up?

“I was born in Boise and lived in Idaho most of my life except for a six-month stay in Wyoming. I lived in a lot of foster homes. Mom read the Bible and prayed for us a lot. She was the thread that held us together and when she decided to follow my father and become a drunkard I went to the foster home. I was nine. That just led me right into institutions. I had no fatherly training. I didn’t know how to make decisions in important situations. I loved my family and I wanted to live with my family. A lot of [foster parents] didn’t care. They didn’t love me like a parent would. I liked them and I’d give each one a shot. If they didn’t care, I was out of there. I was suicidal. I’d go lay on the railroad tracks. They’d always see me and stop about a quarter of a mile away. At that point I was 14 and full of energy so after a while I’d get up and go play.”

“When my dad started drinking, he got these really dull light bulbs. When I’d do the dishes, I’d have to stand in this really dark corner and do them by feel. I didn’t want [my family] eating on dirty dishes. I know it’s because I read the Bible, and that’s not typical behavior for a six year old.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers. We all have a potential to turn violent. The more you pray, the more Jesus will become a part of your life. I call it engaging. I try to engage. When I was 17, the foster home tried to decide whether or not to let me go. I was pretty troubled even though I was ministering everyday. I ended up going to prison. We were drinking. I pled guilty because I was. I didn’t want to drag people out of their jobs for a jury. They sent me to prison for that. It was five years in St. Anthony but it felt like the same thing. I met a lot of brave and courageous young people there. I tried to teach the Bible while I was there but they wouldn’t let me do it before chores. Of course only two people wanted to stay after they had to do their chores. So that didn’t work out really good.”

“I work trimming trees and if I’m working and living at a place, I’ll pay for that first. But I never make enough money to pay the bills. I’ve learned many things about life and one of them is that you have to give. I give constantly. I may not have made the right decisions but maybe I can help other people do right. While I’m working I have to submit to God. I rake and I pray and I say God, this is really what I’m supposed to be doing right now. I try to help my coworkers as much as possible. It makes me a better worker and I know I’m doing my part.”

“Faith is the lens I look through in my life. I absolutely know God is true. There’s no way he’d create all this and make us guess about who he is. My favorite verse is; and to them gave he the power who were born not of blood, nor the role of flesh, nor the will of man.

God speaks the truth. Hopefully I can listen. I asked God to forgive me for my sins against him.”

What are some of the major factors that led you to being un-housed?

“Being younger and reading the story of Noah and The Ark, I got this vision of the rain falling and the water rising. All the animals got on board and when I got to the door it was closed and locked. I couldn’t get in. Since then I’ve always thought that was what was going to happen to me. Not knowing and having visions like that have caused this feeling in me of not wanting to go forward with family and my career. I just lived and fought my battles, because I knew I was going to parish. I constantly have to renew my mind and ways of thinking.”

“I prayed for 20 years for a wife and thought I got her. She was a wonderful woman. We got married and moved to the mountains. I helped to develop property and build roads. I ran a horse program and had a horse program at home. All that ended. We had to sell the horses and move away. I don’t like to admit it but the horse program I was working did great but the one I had at home was not. She wanted higher education and I was a little slow about getting there. I wanted to but I’ve always had a terrible time with school. She left after three years. I tried, I went and got my CDL and started driving a school bus and started substitute teaching. Those teachers up there were healthy. They ate vegetables out of the garden. They loved the children and loved their work. No one was ever sick. I couldn’t get enough work. After the divorce, I came back to Boise and haven’t worked since, save for trimming trees. That has kept me homeless.”

“I try to be a good soul and live in a righteous way. I lived over 20 years with mental illness. But the Lord used that time in my life, from about 1974 to 1996. I’m still not applying that to the greatest degree. I would have been lost if it weren’t for the inheritance my mom gave me. She taught me to read the Bible. She couldn’t give me a physical inheritance but she gave me that.”

“I got institutionalized and when I got out, only the lowest paying jobs were available. I want to go to work but without the ability to buy a car or something like that, it’s a struggle. I still struggle. I’m thankful that God lets me have patience. That he let me out of that building and gave me the knowledge that I could serve him better out here and not back in prison. I have a crushed disc in my back and it pinches my nerves. If I hang upside down, like on an inversion table, I can get a moment of clarity. I want to give. They let me work at Sanctuary. I had over 1000 hours logged at Sanctuary over the course of 110 days. I’d help clean and do laundry and just do whatever they needed me to do. Now that I’m working, I had to quit the laundry job. When I make decisions about my job, I try to do it in a loving way. I try to love the people I work with. When I’m challenged, I try to respond with love.”

What is a typical day like for you?

“On my off days I stay inside either at Corpus or somewhere else and I try to help people by praying. I go to the library and I look up [what interests me]. It keeps me busy but I know I need to move forward. I need to get a full time job or else I’m not going to be able to get out of [my situation]. I don’t need to be on housing, I should be able to pay for a place myself. I don’t want to take up a bed. I need to take that responsibility. That issue of moving forward is always there. Sometimes I get settled and that’s not a good thing. Sometimes I just exist.”

“When my wife and I decided to get married, her son came out from where he was living with his dad. I went on a walk with him and told him that I would call him by his name or I would call him son but I would never call him stepson. That comes from being at church or somewhere when people would introduce their family to me. They’d say this is my wife, this is my son and then they’d point to their other child and say this is my stepdaughter. I could see in her eyes that she didn’t feel like she belonged. She didn’t feel like she was part of that core group. That’s the kind of guy I am. You’re either a part of my family or you’re not. I remember two weeks into the marriage he called me dad and winced because he loved his father. But he called me dad and then I called him son and after that we called each other by those names. I was thrilled about that.”

What do you want the community to know about homelessness?

"I would want them to know that God loves the poor. He always had the poor with him. I also want them to know that we are grateful for what the community has provided for us. There are many people who give on faith. I feel the warmth and sincerity from that. I think there’s a need for hands-on giving. I’d like to see people come down and encourage us on how to get a job and how to move forward. It took me six months to do a resume down at the Idaho Department of Labor. I didn’t know how to operate the computer. They have well-meaning people down there who want to help but I need more time than they can give. After long hours of work and not being technical, I lost all my information. It’s hard to work the tutorials if you don’t know how to work the computer. Come down and hang out and tell us how you got your job and get involved personally.”