

Shelter Stories: Ross

As relayed to Barry Franklin, PR Team Writer

Ross has a light in his eyes that nothing could extinguish. He has a deep reservoir of emotion and an even deeper capacity for love. Ross is the epitome of a man who, when life was the roughest one could imagine it to be, drew on his ability to turn tragedy into triumph. He is an example for all of us to follow. My hope is that whoever reads this can gain at least a tiny bit of his resolve. I left this interview thinking that if I only had a fraction of Ross' "zest" for life, I'd be a rich man.

Where are you from?

I was born and raised in Calgary Canada. This was in the early 60s. My mom and dad divorced when I was 10 and my mom and me and my little brother moved to Santa Monica, California. My sister went to BYU and went to California afterward with her boyfriend and stayed. We went down there to stay with them. In Santa Monica my mom went to a Mormon dance for single seniors and met my step dad. He already had kids and she already had kids. We all just kind of came together. My brothers in Canada were all older and drifting around. I didn't see them for eight years.

I grew up surfing. That was the first thing I wanted to do because I watched all those Annette Funicello, beach blanket movies. We lived in a big house about 10 blocks from the beach. Me and my little brother and my sister were there and my stepdad had two boys, my stepbrothers, which I don't call my stepbrothers. They're my brothers. He also had a daughter and she took me under her wing. She was more blood to me than my actual family. It just worked. She got in a car accident when I was 25 and died and she's with Heavenly Father now. She's my guardian angel. I say a prayer every morning. I always talk about my daughter and I ask that she doesn't forget about her dad and I always thank my sister for protecting me.

I was in the California area right up till 1982, when I got married. My dad was building some condos in Snow-Bird Utah. I brought my crew out there from California and we used to go party at Park City. I've been a carpenter, contractor for 30 years. We used to build banks and work behind the scenes at Disney Land. They had their own carpentry guys but for the big stuff, they bring in a different crew. My daughter loves that story.

When I got married, we moved to Sun Valley and lived there until we got divorced in 1994-95. I owned a home in Hailey right across from Hailey elementary. I was bouncing back and forth between Sun Valley and L.A. and paying child support and basically just trying to keep it all together. My wife and her new husband moved to Seattle so there wasn't any reason why I should stay in Idaho. My kids didn't live here anymore. So I decided to stay in L.A. and keep working. We were building banks until the economy tanked in 2008.

What led to you becoming un-housed?

We had two years-worth of work between the banks and Disney Land. My boss calls me around 9 at night. He never calls me, especially not on a cellphone. He said he had some bad news. I'm thinking either I'm fired or someone got hurt. I'd been following the papers for weeks and I knew there was a storm coming. My boss told us that they told everyone to stop work. A few of us got together and worked for another guy but that only lasted a few months. I was living in a hotel spending all my money. I didn't know where to go or what to do and I was starting to panic. In two months I'd blown through all my money. I woke up in the morning and knew I had to leave the hotel that day.

I had a little a suitcase with the wheels on it. I walked out the door and hitchhiked down the beach about 7 miles. From there I walked 45 miles along the beach to Santa Monica. My knees got so swollen I could barely move. That kind of stuff has never happened to me before. I would wheel my suitcase a few feet and then have to stumble back and get my backpack. Something inside of me was telling me I had to get back to Santa Monica, where I'd grown up. There's a cliff that goes along the beach there. I remembered that was where all the homeless guys used to sleep. I thought to myself, well I guess I'm homeless so I'll go there. I hadn't eaten in three days. I had nowhere else to go and no money. It was four in the afternoon and I was so happy and peaceful. Something happens to you when you fast. Clarity is the only thing I can think of. I was very happy to be alive. I thought about my family and my wife, daughter and sister. It was extremely emotional.

So there I was. I leaned back on the railing and there were homeless people all around me. People walked along the boardwalk, looking at us like we were monkeys. I didn't care, I was so tired. Then here comes this guy winding his way along the beach with a big bag of McDonalds' hamburgers and drinks. He walked up to me and said, "Sir would you like a double cheeseburger?" I said yes. I told him I hadn't eaten in three and a half days and he told me to take two. I sat there and I ate those two burgers and I cried.

I was back in Santa Monica for three weeks around December and January of 2008 to 2009. I didn't have any blankets or a sleeping bag. People think it's warm there but not at night and not in the winter. I found a place out of the wind. I went around and got three of the black trashcan liners and tripled those up and put them on. I put every piece of clothing on I owned, found some newspaper and wadded it all up and put it into the trash bags. The police would drive up and spot me with their light and bleep their siren. That meant they were cool with me being there. I realized later that they were keeping a watch over me, looking out for me.

After Christmas, I started to think about my daughter. She's 26 years old and just had a baby last year. I didn't have much time on my cellphone, maybe like one text. I'd texted my sister a while back, just before I ran out of money. I didn't tell her I was homeless, just said I was going through some hard times and I was heading for Santa Monica maybe to sleep on the beach for a while. That must have really freaked her out. My brother got wind of it. He texted me that one last text and said, "I don't know where you're at bro,"

he always called me bro, “but I wired you a hundred bucks.” I bought some decent food and some clothes and a warmer jacket. I had about \$40 left in my pocket and started to think that I had to get out of there.

It really hurt me because there were guys in Santa Monica I’d grown up with and known for 30 years. You can’t imagine what it’s like to hear that someone you’ve known for so long is homeless. They just couldn’t deal with it. I wasn’t asking them to stay at their house. I have a lot of pride. Any homeless person you talk to, pride is all they have. They just want to be treated with some respect. All I wanted was a sleeping bag. I tried to get a hold of a few of my friends but no one got back to me.

How did you make your way back to Boise?

You ever see Forest Gump? I was sleeping under that peer that he runs to in the movie. The day I left, some people had come down to try to help. They gave me some coffee. I walked down to the end of that peer and looked into the water and thought about how the road behind me goes all the way up to the freeway. I remembered Forest Gump and I stopped and said, “You know what, I’m going home.” I threw my coffee in the dumpster, grabbed my suitcase and backpack and walked all the way back to the freeway. That’s a long haul. I got there and stuck my thumb out. It took me two days to get to Vegas and I got stranded there. I had to sleep there over night on the sidewalk by one of the casinos. I walked right through North Las Vegas. That’s the ghetto with people burning fires in trashcans and living out of cardboard houses. A big black guy walks up to me and asks, “Are you crazy?” I told him I was trying to get to the truck stop. He said he’d walk me there. He had dreadlocks and 40 ounces of beer in hand. So here he was with his buddies following me. People would stop and ask if I was crazy, I told them I was trying to get home.

I wanted to come home and see my daughter. John Lennon said love is all you need. That’s all I wanted. The love for my daughter saved my life. I tried to catch a ride with the truck drivers but they don’t pick up hitchhikers there. I tried anyway for an hour. Everyone was afraid to. It’s impossible to get hold of my sister but she happened to be home. Something told her to check her cellphone. She saw a text I’d left her telling her I was trying to get home to Boise. I went back to the truck stop and was going to wait there till I got ride. I was ready for anything. It was a miracle. She got back to me and said she’d be right there.

When I finally saw my sister, she gave me a big hug and brought me back to her home in St. George. I ate until I couldn’t think straight and literally slept for a day and a half. They put me on a bus from St. George to Boise. I got off and it was 7:15 in the morning, a gray day. I texted my daughter and she was freaked out that I actually made it here. She had a hard time with me being homeless. Now she’s cool with it. A daughter needs to look up to her father. A father should take care of his daughter and not the other way around. I walked down to McDonalds and got a cup of coffee. There was a guy there who was in and out of Sanctuary. He walked me down to Corpus Christi and there were really

nice people there. They told me I could stay at [River of Life]. I texted my daughter and told her where I was staying. That freaked her out even more.

I stayed at [River of Life] for three or four months. Then in April they kicked me out. They think it's warm enough to be outside in April. I actually worked as a bellman for the Double Tree. Then I left them to go work merchandising. After hours I'd go to Albertsons and Fred Meyer and move all the stuff from aisle to aisle. I did that until December of 2011 and that fell through. I stayed for three weeks in a motel then ran out of money. I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought I might hitchhike up to Idaho Falls because I heard there was work there but I ended up sleeping outside for four days. January is cold as hell, you don't sleep. You just walk around all night. I just bit the bullet and decided I could either hitchhike out of [Boise] or give Sanctuary a try.

I didn't really want to go to Idaho Falls and wanted to stay here because my daughter is still in Boise. I walked down to Sanctuary about seven at night. I was wearing a light jacket and it was cold outside. They had to make sure I couldn't go back to [River Of Life] because Sanctuary was close to full. [The guy in charge] personally did [the paperwork] to get me in that night. I was so grateful to be there. When I walked in the door there were at least a dozen people I knew. Some cool guys. I've always embraced my fears you know, leaned into the wind. You find out the boogey man isn't as scary as he seems to be.

If there's one thing I've learned it's to embrace your fears. Homelessness teaches you to trust your instincts and listen to your gut reactions. That's been very helpful. Listening to my inner voice has been really helpful. So many things have changed in my life and it has been a blessing in disguise to be homeless. You get over the anger, the embarrassment, everything goes wrong being homeless. Then you start to embrace it and turn a negative into a positive. That's what I have done. I'm lucky enough to have a normal life to get back to. [I still work construction from time to time] I'm trying to get my foot back in the door. That's a vicious circle though. I have to travel to make any money and end up spending it on living wherever I travel to.

Faith breeds faith. You can't just tell me something, I have to experience it. There is common everyday stuff that could be considered miracles. Being homeless has given me back Rossy. My mom and my sisters used to call me that. I'd forgotten who I really was. I was a good boss, a good father, a good husband but I wasn't happy. I was making a ton of money but that can become like a narcotic. I got addicted to it and lost who I was in the process. For a long time I was angry about what happened. But I had to come to terms with it. Becoming homeless really put happiness back into perspective for me.

[Someone from Sanctuary] works up at Bogus Basin. At the time, I had no computer experience. A guy from Idaho Labor helped me and it turns out he is a ski instructor at Bogus. He told me they need lift operators. That night I went to Sanctuary and there she was. I had a big old grin on my face and she asked what was up. I told her I just filled out an application for Bogus Basin. She got this look on her face and said, "Guess where I

work, Bogus Basin!” She said, “guess what I do, lift operator!” She talked to the head of lift operations and told him I’m a good guy. A few days later I had a job at Bogus.

What is a typical day like in your life now?

Everything has come full circle. When I was a kid I wanted to ski and surf and play guitar. Now I have a job getting paid to work at Bogus. I remember thinking, well I’m homeless. Why don’t I set out to do what I really want to do? Today I’m happier than I’ve been since I was 21 years old. Here I am 61 and people like to hang out with me. I don’t know where this road is going, but I’m going to go down it. I’m going to take guitar lessons again. I’ve been writing songs and I want to put some music behind them. I’m going to be who I should have been and I’m at peace with myself now. I have a job! 2 years ago I was sleeping on the beach and now I know where I’m going. I know what I want to do with myself.

Heavenly Father has saved me for a reason and that reason is the love of my daughter. I want her to remember me as a good guy because I’ve caused her so much pain over the years. You know, being gone all the time living in hotels working can take its toll on a relationship. I had a very successful construction business with a partner so I can always fall back on that. Everyone who has ever known me has said I have a zest for life. I never thought I would live this long. I literally had two lives. One as a construction worker and the other following my heart and right now I’m following my heart. If I like something, I put 180 percent into it.

I am who I am. That’s the beauty of being my age. You don’t have to worry about any of that anymore. I don’t have to sell myself my story. I’ve had a fun life. I’ve done a lot of interesting things and I’m going to do more. I’m climbing back up the mountain right now. Even to me it’s unfathomable that two years ago I was sleeping on the beach in Santa Monica now I’m sitting here talking to you. I have a really nice mountain bike and a job at Bogus and a laptop. I also have some really great friends.

What do you want the community to know about homelessness?

These are genuine people. They are really good guys and anybody can make a mistake and they are paying the ultimate price. I have a lot to be grateful for. They are just decent people. Only homeless people understand homeless people. You really have to be homeless to understand what it does to your psyche. I’m using it as a positive. I don’t judge people and I look for the best in them. I treat them like I treat myself. At the end of the day all you have left is your pride and self-respect. When quality people take [homeless people] seriously, you don’t know what that means to us. [Being homeless] can ruin your life or it can change your life. It’s changed my life. It’s a blessing in disguise. A few years ago I couldn’t talk about writing music or skiing or anything like that. I would have been stuck in a hotel somewhere in California, waiting for the next job to come up.

For ten years I wanted to move to Boise and be closer to my daughter. Now I'm here and our relationship is better. I couldn't go to her graduation in Seattle because I was working in California. That broke my heart. That's what that business did to me. I could build [anything] but I couldn't go to my daughter's graduation and that's way more important. I got lost in all of [it]. A lot of people thought I was really successful but I would have given it all away if I could be closer to my daughter. Now I'm doing what I want to do and I have a different perspective on life. All the things I wanted to do are coming to pass.