

Shelter Stories: Rick

As relayed to Barry Franklin, Interfaith Sanctuary PR Team Writer

The first time I laid eyes on Rick, he had a screwdriver in his hand. He was explaining to those around him a way to make the washer work, when it seemed as if the machine would never wash again. Rick's laugh is pure joy. He is well spoken and intelligent. If I stepped into this interview with any negative preconceptions about homelessness, they were proven wrong yet again. I thank Rick for his candor and for the many laughs we had together.

1. Where are you from?

"I was born in Boise in 1952. I grew up in the North End right across from Lowell Swimming Pool. One thing my dad always taught was to respect wherever we were. When we were camping we always left the campsite cleaner than when we found it. We didn't have a lot. We weren't poor but my dad didn't make a whole lot of money. Later on my mom got a job working for a newspaper. She waited till all of us kids were out of school."

"My folks were model parents. I never heard them quarrel or raise their voices up to each other. They were hoping for a boy but they had three girls, all two years apart. Then six years later I showed up. Really, growing up it was like I had four moms. There was no arguing among us kids either. It was just the way we were brought up. It wasn't heavy strictness or anything like that."

"My dad was an avid outdoorsman. We spent a lot of time camping and fishing. He was a fireman and he'd be on 24 hours and off 48. All through the year my dad would switch with someone and we'd get a five-day vacation with him. I don't think there's a mountain lake in the northwest I haven't been to. He taught us to respect and love the outdoors. We were taught to respect the law. I still like to get out and go on nature walks. Any hunting I do these days, I do with a camera."

"By the time I was in junior high and high school we moved onto the second Bench. I went to West and Borah. I took some classes at Boise Junior College when I was still in junior high. I took a science class in [an introduction to] genetics. I started my first business then too, breeding and raising tropical fish. I supplied them to local pet store owners and had 83 aquariums. When I was still in high school the government came around and gave everyone an aptitude test. I still kick myself about this because after graduation they offered me a full scholarship to learn about a little something called the computer. In those days computers were still so big they'd fill a room. They were still using punch cards. With no idea what a computer was or if it was anything I could earn a living at, I turned them down."

“After high school I did the typical hippie thing. I stuck a thumb out and traveled the country. To this day I will not panhandle. I believe in making my own way. I would do odd jobs and get a little money in my pocket and then move on. I learned everything from what it was like to see big city ghettos and street gangs to seeing people who were down on anybody with long hair. I met wonderful people across the nation. Some of whom I’m still friends with. I love Oregon and the Redwoods. I love Kentucky when the fall colors hit the forest but Idaho has always been home. Boise is a place where you can say hello to someone on the street and they won’t look at you like you’re going to rob them.”

“After three years I settled down and went into several different careers. I was in construction and carpentry. I ran heavy equipment. I love to design things. If something is broken, I can usually fix it. It doesn’t matter what machine it is. Sometimes I can even improve on the design of something. I’ve worked as a machinist and a welder and a truck driver.”

“I went to college for the first time in California in the late seventies. It was a trade school type of thing. Then I graduated from another college up at Washington State in computer science. Every year I was on the Dean’s List. I love computers and everything involved with them. I’m looking into trying to get a master’s degree from Boise State in computer science. At [my] age I can go to school for five dollars a credit. I’m honest with myself. Companies are probably looking for someone who is right out of college. But I think when you believe that you’re too old to learn, you better dig a hole and put the dirt in over you because it’s over. I may be 60 years old but I don’t know it all yet and there’s still a lot of things I want to do.”

“After college I was able to use my computer drafting skills in the workforce for about four years until the company I was working for went under. By then places like ITT Tech had flooded the market with people that had my skills. The jobs were few and far between so I had a hard time finding anything in that category.”

2. How did you become un-housed?

“I was raised that if you want to buy something you don’t use credit, you use cash. At one point, before everything went south, I had just about \$1.3 million in savings. I’d saved part of every check I had since I was in junior high for my retirement. Some of the money was in the stock market and some of it was in the bank. When everything crashed, it knocked me down to just over \$830,000. I put all of that in the bank. My dad had died and mom was not well. She wasn’t taking care herself. She’d lost a lot of weight and was in a deep depression. This was when I was in my late 40s. McCall was her home and she didn’t really want to give that up. I moved up there with her to take care of her. It took several years for her to get out of her depression.”

“Then in 2000 I decided to go back to work. I bought a one-ton pickup and started hauling RVs from the factories to the dealerships. I could work when I wanted, I could stay home. I could take [mom] with me if I wanted. She and I spent one whole summer driving up and down the coast. We camped wherever we wanted. We were just enjoying

life. After that I started spending more and more time on the road and away from mom. In case I was out and spotted something I wanted to invest in or buy, I put her on my checking and savings accounts. That way I could call her up and have her do what I needed to be done at the bank.”

“After a while, mom started to get worse. She was losing weight and the doctors didn’t know why. She was also beginning to show signs of either dementia or Alzheimer’s. [The family] talked her into going and living with my sister. Then I went out to work again hauling trailers. During that time, my sister and my niece talked my mom into giving my niece power of attorney over handling her bills and other financial stuff. Because I’d put my mom on my bank accounts and my niece had power of attorney over her, my niece was able to clean me out of my entire life savings.”

“I came back off of the road and stopped at my cabin. There was a note on the door that said I had until eight the next morning to get all of my stuff off the property. Luckily a neighbor who was a friend helped me get [some things]. It was in the middle of winter and everything was buried. When I first saw the note, I ran to the bank and found out that I had \$38 left. I tried to find a lawyer to handle the situation. Every lawyer I talked to said I didn’t have a chance. Even though it was my money, my family took it legally.”

“For two years, before I totally lost my health, I was able to work enough to live in my trailer. I physically can’t do much anymore but I work in the laundry room [at Sanctuary] because I love to do whatever I can to give back. Once in a while I collect scrap metal for money. I’m applying for Social Security Disability because I am unable to work and I will be unable to work for the rest of my life.”

3. What do you want the community to know about homelessness?

“In any layer of society you will see good and you will see bad. It’s the same with the homeless population. We are not all lazy, or a drunk, or a drug addict, or the drudges of society. Sadly there are some people who are down [at Sanctuary] who fit that description but they are by far the minority. There are a lot of young people here who have made mistakes but they are trying to climb out of it. I know multiple other people who are [at Sanctuary] for much the same reasons as I am.”

“Some I applaud because they are working hard and trying to overcome homelessness. They are trying to make something of themselves and they are by far in the majority. I will bend over backwards to help them and support them because they have turned their lives around. Simply because they have a past, it makes it way harder to get out there and make something of themselves. They have made some mistakes but they are giving their all to try and straighten their lives out. I think society should look at the individual and where they are now.”