

WOTS | WORD ON THE STREET

a paper for the people

MY HOMELESS JOURNEY: DAY ONE
By Ashley Parks

GYPSY WINDS PHOTOS

CREIGINATOR BY DAVIS OHMAN

SERVING LOVE THROUGH PROJECT PICKLEBALL

IN THIS ISSUE

WOTS RADICAL EMPATHY?

ACTIONS OVER WORDS
By Victoria Zunich

A TRUE HERO
By Gerri Graves

501 C-3 JEANS- ITS A THING!
BY JODI PETERSON-STIGERS

Actions Over Words:

Jodi Peterson-Stigers on the Challenges Facing the Misunderstood Homeless

By Victoria Zunich



What do you think when you see someone standing on the side of the road? There are many common ideas that pop into our heads when we see someone and label them as homeless. Even if we are correct about the current housing status of someone, there is still a wide range of misconceptions regarding who makes up our nation's unhoused population. Homelessness is an issue we are all aware of, yet an increasing number of families find themselves unhoused.

According to the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report, done by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 582,462 U.S. citizens endure the challenges of losing their homes and permanent shelter (HUD, 2022). That same source found that in the state of Idaho alone just under 2,000 individuals experienced homelessness as of 2020. The problem is that unhoused people are amassed into one set of traits and experiences. Although some of their stories are the same, they are still individuals with unique struggles and do not receive the recognition they deserve. As of 2022, only about 60% of people without homes are able to find shelter on any given night (HUD, 2022).

Fortunately, members of Boise's community like Jodi Peterson-Stigers are creating safe spaces and productive conversations for those in need. Since 2017, Peterson-Stigers has been the executive director in charge of one of Boise's busiest shelters, the Interfaith Sanctuary. As the executive director, Jodi oversees fundraising, program development, advocacy, and balances the needs of the staff and those using the shelter. She described Interfaith as a "low barrier shelter." This entails that anyone, no matter their identity or sobriety status, are permitted to stay at the shelter as long as there is

room. Her primary goal is to "[... keep] families together, no matter how you define your family."

The main question I have grappled with when considering the subject of homelessness is, "Why is it anyone's responsibility to provide support beyond those who are homeless?" My answer to this lies in the morality of our community. There is a recurring myth that people lose their homes due to their own choices. However, many reports show that circumstances beyond the control of an individual or family are the primary routes to homelessness. These circumstances could be medical emergencies, eviction, or loss of a job. Finance writer, Jane Tumar, shared in an article, "63% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck (LendingClub, 2022)" (Tumar, 2023). This means that upon one layoff, an entire family could lose their access to permanent shelter. There seems to be a high amount of confidence when it comes to labeling who is homeless and who is not, however, the population may look very different than we presume.

Many believe that all persons without homes do not have jobs, and are incapable of obtaining one. However, according to estimations from the National Coalition for the Homeless, 44% of homeless people do maintain jobs (National Coalition, 2023). The problem comes from the inability to catch up with financial burdens and collect enough to purchase or rent a place to live. Even people who exist outside of that 44% still attempt to find jobs, but the assumptions and stereotypes they face prevent them from successfully reintegrating into life through the workforce or other forms of socialization.

A New York University (NYU) news story by Robert Polner explains how homeless people are typically blamed for their situation and viewed as someone prone to criminal or violent behavior. "Homeless persons are more likely to have criminal justice intervention. However, this is primarily because many of their daily survival activities are criminalized—meaning they might be given a summons or arrested for minor offenses such as trespassing, littering, or loitering" (Polner, 2019). It is nearly impossible to escape the law, and the implications that follow being a criminal, when your daily way of living is wrong. As defined by Kaitlyn Dey in her Portland State University research thesis, criminalization of the unhoused population is "policies and practices which make acts of survival illegal or banned as a means to exclude homeless people and people perceived as homeless from public space" (Dey, 2019). It is obvious that the barriers which prevent homeless people from advancing

come from unfair written and silent perceptions against the community as a whole. The grouping of the population makes it difficult for individuals to thrive because we really don't know the story behind every unhoused person, and hardly anyone cares to listen.

When I asked Jodi which groups made up Interfaith's population, I expected a series of statistics that detailed the different demographics they serve. However, that is not how Jodi described it. She emphasized the fact that who they serve changes on a daily basis, because it is an "as-needed" and temporary shelter. Peterson also pointed out that each person staying there is an individual so it is unfair to confine them with labels. All the community needs to know is that, "100% of the people don't have a home."

Since the year 2018, Boise is one of America's fastest growing cities (Dey, 2019). With an increase to our general population, the competition for adequate housing will only get tougher, forcing more community members to try and survive without consistent or quality shelter. Advocates for the homeless have declared that now is the time to begin the reversal of this growing housing crisis. An article from the Idaho Statesman by Gerri-Lynn Graves shares the touching story of a single mother in Boise who simplifies that she became homeless after her "[...] life [had] been blown right up over health issues — while being poor, the ultimate crime. How much worse can it get?" (Graves, 2023). The mother goes on to express her frustrations regarding the harsh assumptions that are thrown at her everyday. She was even surprised to learn that only 30-35% of homeless people have

a dependency on drugs (Lautieri, 2023). This shows that inaccurate criticism of people without homes seeps into the population and can

become internalized.

Other cities across the states have faced homelessness, but their numbers are much higher than Boise's. There is a widespread fear that Boise will become like Portland, Oregon or Spokane, Washington, and others. In my interview with Jodi Peterson, she asserted that something could have been done for the homeless in those cities, and something can still be done for Boise. "I think that they [other cities] had a chance, but they sat around waiting too long [...] because no one wanted to do anything." Unfortunately she sees a similar pattern unfolding in Boise, but still strives to find solutions because she is certain that committing to an act will make

Continued on page 2

progress. "It is decisions, it is actions over words."

There is hope. "Thank goodness Interfaith has the foresight to see the changing needs of its community. [...] When no one else was paying attention, they listened, they heard and they're meeting that challenge head on," the mom says (Graves, 2023). The gratitude expressed for Interfaith Sanctuary is well within reason. The sanctuary has a temporary shelter as well as a hotel and recovery programs which provide constant care for those who face more obstacles in reintegration. Interfaith goes beyond providing basic human needs. The staff and volunteers allow for their visitors to reconnect to the things they love.

Art and music are both provided as key ways to brighten the lives of people who have been through the

unimaginable. Guests can express themselves through various mediums and even earn from what they create, as pictured on the left. The connections made at the Interfaith Sanctuary, between all of those involved, are also difficult to come by. "In a strange way we're the most fun shelter in town. [...] It's not fun to be homeless, but we provide a lot of distraction and a lot of success."

Jodi Peterson-Stigers and her team are paving the way for advocacy and effective support, but even they cannot do it alone. Peterson emphasized the importance of the role that the community plays. "We have a lot of work to do when it comes to understanding the communities' responsibility with the whole community."

Members of Boise can support Interfaith's mission by making financial and material donations to the Sanctuary. With the recent approval of a new building, Interfaith needs help now more than ever to renovate the new space and give shelter to those in need.

Over

Words



By Gerri Graves

2nd generation, removed-

All the people that ever were are but grains of sand that line the shore. We try to write our name in them..... among them, but wind, wave and time erase them from memory.

Write it anyway.

If it isn't written, it never happened....and you happened

CREIGINATOR

By Davis Ohman



I love the song "Where is My Mind?" by the Pixies. It feels like the end of a sappy coming of age movie to me, but in the best way. Describing how you have been struggling to find your place in whatever reality you believe yourself to be living in is something that I feel like everyone at my age thinks about in one extent or another. What I have begun to realize is that the song has seeped into another crevice of my mind, no pun intended. When my dad was diagnosed with early onset dementia/Alzheimer's disease earlier this year, I connected the song to my dad's evident loss of what he thinks to be his reality, and it is an incredibly sobering and horrifying experience at the exact same time. Will I ever be able to fully understand what is going inside that decaying mind of his? Never. Do I see how this fading away of his mind has affected his perception of himself? Absolutely.

In seeing my dad's view of himself and what he provides to others around him that he loves and cares about the most change, I have been able to find an incredibly difficult and jagged reality to wrap my head around. My mom and dad have always been my rock. Through every anxiety attack and every worried moment throughout my time growing up, they have been there for me. One of the biggest struggles for me is seeing how the ways in which they used to support me are no longer realistic, especially with my dad. Earlier this year, my dad, after significant memory and cognitive losses following his cardiomyopathy in December of 2019, was diagnosed with early onset dementia/Alzheimer's Disease. Seeing someone who I love and idolize so much begin to fade away, not only in my eyes through my perception of him in the way he used to be, but his own perception of himself and his self worth as time goes on has taken a huge toll on me. I want to be able to help my dad through his everyday struggles that used to be a walk in the park, like putting the dishes back in the right place in the kitchen cabinets or remembering how to turn the

TV on and off, but it has gotten to a point where the most seemingly simple tasks to the normal person have become difficult for him to complete.

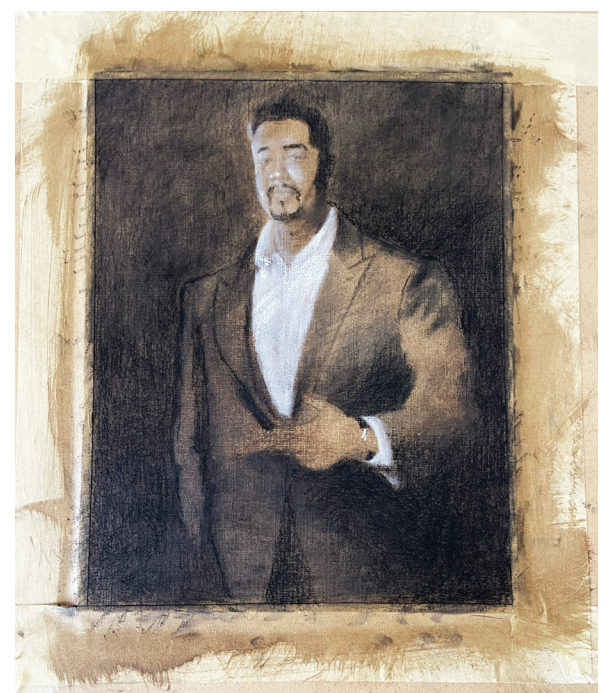
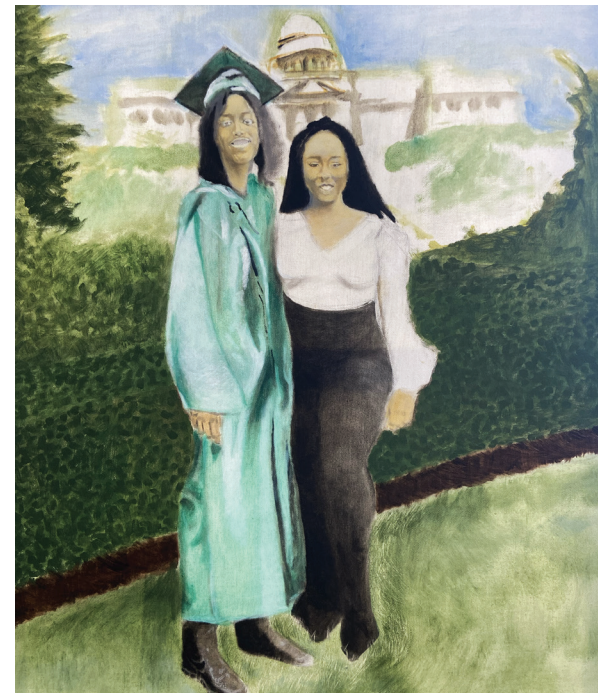
A strange shift that I have struggled quite a bit with in my head is the fact that I am now beginning to take care of my dad, when he used to be the one that would take care of me as I was growing up. Being 18 years old, I do not expect my dad to care for my every need all of the time as I am developing into a more self-sustaining adult, but this was a change in caretaking abilities that I did not ever expect to happen so soon in my life. My dad is 54 years old and was 53 when he was diagnosed, which is incredibly young for someone to be diagnosed with Alzhemier's Disease and he has been given 8-10 years to live. I never in my mind had ever thought I would be conceptualizing my dad's death so soon in my life, let alone the unfortunately slow death of his mind that he has to overcome on a daily basis. I have been extremely burdened by this and its many intricacies throughout this past year as the reality of what the rest of my family's life looks like changes, and through it all I have been doing my best to keep the hope in my mind alive for what the next 8-10 years will bring to us. In the meantime, it has gotten easier for me to make the shift in my head and compartmentalize everything that my dad is struggling with. I want so badly to help him through his days, but I cannot anymore in the way I would like to, as it is time for me to start to move forward and continue to develop my career and myself as an individual.

Making the transition into college without your parents is a difficult process in itself, but my dad's health situation has made it even more overwhelming for me. However, my dad, through choosing to continue to look at his life in such a positive way, has given me so much excitement and hope for the future. Though my dad may not think he is the same man as he once was, he will always be the greatest dad in the world to me and his smiles, laughs and aura of positivity will continue to inspire me for the rest of my life. I want to take my moments of sadness and reframe them into truly being able to see the reasons in which I can be inspired, which my dad has shown me. That is what a home is for me: not a carefully selected assortment of materials that create the place you eat, sleep and survive under, but the hope that the ones you love the most provide to you. The passion that you become fueled by in seeing how much your dad cares about you. The familial love that surrounds you like the waves of heat coming from a warm Christmas Eve fire.

More than anything, a home is where your family is. I may never be able to find the semblance of what I believed to be my home like in my childhood, but that does not matter to me. My family is my fortress, like my good friend Sam Worthington said to Zoe Saldana in the newest Avatar movie, and I never see this changing. When you can't find a house-like structure to plant your feet into, look no further than those who love you the most, because they will lead you back home, no matter what is happening in your life.

Jose's Portraits

Jose Miguel Bocanegra Jorge, a member of Interfaith Sanctuary's Homeless Art Collective, has been doing art for as long as he can remember. These portraits focus on members of Boise's homeless community. "I'm leaving something behind that will last many years after I am gone," he said of his work.





A True Hero

By Gerri Graves

It's easy to look at someone rough around the edges and let our assumptions grant us permission into giving them a wide berth.

Maybe they don't shower as much as you, yourself, do. Clothes are rumpled and dirty. Hair is unkempt. Disposition snarly and defensive.

Best to stay away from folks like that, right?

I know 'I' have been semi judgmental in my life. I have a true phobia about germs and other people's presence in my invisible circle that I envelop myself in. Come within my personal boundary, without invitation.....and I'll give you a tongue lashing.

It's a bubble I've built to keep myself from being hurt. Many of us that snarl now, were once naive and trusting. We use this defense mechanism to let everyone know from the onset.....'dont f*ck with me'.

Truth is, I just can't take any more heartbreak. My soft bits are still beneath my ribcage, but no one is invited in anymore.

I used to worry myself into a frenzy, trying to make everyone happy.....and ignored the pounds of my own flesh I was gifting to everyone I emotionally bled for. It left me feeling inadequate and never enough. Suicidal. Like I didn't belong in this world.

I stay away now. Keep to myself. If I have something to say....I journal. Which is basically, all you've ever read from mea journal entry.

There's still parts of me that come out when no one is looking, though. Like..... I still wish on stars. I have full conversations with squirrels, birds, cats and dogs. My phone is filled with pictures of flowers. I love the rain and the quietness around the river when others have run for their cars. Good books, good plots and movies that make me cry. Music is still magic that people make- perfect harmonies give me butterflies, everytime.

I still want to save the world. I do. I don't tell anyone, because it seems all too impossible and impractical.....but I still have a wee pilot light inside that hopes for it.

Neat thing about keeping in touch with your gentle side, we recognize our kin. We see ourselves in others.

I'm drawn to people like me, no matter what package they come in. It's a sort of.....silent understanding. An invisible handshake. The secret club no one really wants to belong to.

Too soft for this mean ol' world, we surround ourselves with vitriol and brash puffery. Purely, for self-preservation.

We know from experience, we break too easily.

That's how I noticed him. I recognized me in him. He comes off as gruff and standoffish....but I saw right through it.

I approached him softly, with a bit of trepidation. Like a wild rabbit who pays you no mind during his garden feast.....until you get too close. Pew!

I made him coffee every morning and started with small conversation. Took months for our friendship to go beyond that small talk beginning that most move past within a few days. I used patience that I don't actually possess. It was important to me to be a friend to him.

Like I said.....he was kin. He just didn't know it yet. Lol

His eyes are that of Paul Newman, lady killer blue. Piercing, like a javelin straight through your middle.....or playful, when he lets you see that part of him. They almost waltz when you amuse him.

His face, kind..... but wary. He has that leathery look of a seaman from years on the street. His hair, Einstein chic. And I imagine every well earned wrinkle, a lash on his face from someone that hurt him. That he wears his internal scars.

He likes his conversations short and to the point. Doesn't play up or bull****. I've learned he doesn't like fussing..... which is kinda my love language. I love taking care of those I love.

He's let me care for him a few times. I insisted on applying sunblock to his skin that was so burned it was blistered. I've covered him up at night with an extra blanket. I've brought him things to eat.....or McDonalds coffee - 6 and 6. Little things he lets me do.

I've pushed him in his wheelchair to a doctor's appointment, after someone had stolen his walker. He needed a doctor to prescribe a new one. He wanted me to come in with him. He's not well. I won't go into particulars, because of his privacy, but he's not doing so good.

He drinks too much and he knows he does. He doesn't suffer people nagging at him to stop. I can't speak for him, but I sometimes get the feeling that he might think it's too little too late to feign caring. He doesn't want your sympathy, fake niceties or pretend concern.....he just wants to get through another day.

Again, I can't speak for him, but it feels like he's given up.

He's a vet. A Vietnam vet. Helicopter pilot. His dad was a military pilot too, he likes to remind me.

His chest is a road map of deep scars. Took three bullets for our country. Responsible for getting our boys out, it seems to him a necessary evil. Justified.

There are days he is angry about it. I can't pretend I know what the anger is about. He doesn't like prying.

Our men and boys witnessed unimaginable horrors over there. They came back.....forever changed. It plays like a horror film in their minds. Over and over. Unable to talk about it....unable to let it go. They were raised in a generation where boys were spanked or beaten for acting weak. Weeping is for sissies. War is men's work.

Can't cry over it. Can't live with it and yet, unable to stop reliving it.

I have my own opinions about war, but they don't belong here. Being a vet is a source of pride for him.....and I will not undermine that.

He rallied himself when he returned stateside. Went to college. Became a child psychologist. Married. Had children. Tried to make a go of it.

But, as things often do.....it took a turn for the worse.

He lost a patient that deeply affected him. Little girl. Gone at the hands of her mother.

It tortured him. He feels like he let her down. He feels responsible for her death.

It's one of two times I've seen this tough ol' guy break down. This tall, tough veteran trusted me with his vulnerable side. I listened in silence until he was through.

I know from my own experience, that no one genuinely listens anymore.....and the one thing us softies crave is to be heard. Really heard.

He walked away from his profession, not long after..... and from there, he spiraled down.

He lost his grandchild from complications due to COVID last year and his mother a few months after.

He's in and out of the VA hospital. I get worried every time he goes missing. I'm afraid something will happen to him and I'll not know about it. That he'll leave, quietly. Unknown. Unmourned.

Our heroes, anymore, are chosen from an exclusive popularity list. We place on pedestals those who have wooed us with their beauty, talent or wit. Superficial.

However, true heroes won't let you call them that. They move silently among the masses. They make small changes, for the betterment of mankind, quietly. Anonymously. They keep their hearts masked, their deeds uncelebrated. They don't require your envy and worship.....nor do they covet it.

Real heroes live among us, but we don't see them anymore. We don't recognize them. We don't seek them out.

But he's there. Sitting in his walker on a street corner near the liquor store. Disheveled. Abrasive. Gruff. Sparkling blue eyes. Holding a sign, asking for spare change.

A real life hero. My friend.



By Jodi Peterson-Stigers

One day, while going through our donations I stumbled upon a large bag of perfectly distressed vintage Levi 501 Jeans. I couldn't believe that someone had delivered such a valuable bag of clothes to our shelter. I started to imagine our Homeless Art Collective artists putting their art on these vintage jeans and making a new clothing line to help raise funds for our shelter. As I was explaining this idea to the art collective I accidentally called the jeans 501(c)(3) Jeans, which was funny and perfect. At our last Homeless Art Collective meeting I got to see some of the artist's creations, and oh my goodness, these are the coolest jeans I have ever seen. I am always amazed by

the talents of our guests, but this new project is truly blowing me away. I can't wait to unveil the collection and allow our community to own one of these fabulously designed 501(c)(3) Jeans. Stay tuned for when the collection will be released.



Serving Love Through Project Pickleball

By WOTS Staff



This spring, guests at Interfaith Sanctuary partnered with the Serving Love Foundation to learn how to play pickleball. Project Pickleball is in full swing under the instruction of Melvin 'Pete' Peterson, a former Boise State University tennis coach and founder of the Serving Love Foundation. Serving Love aims to improve

the health and wellness of Native American communities through racquet sports including pickleball and tennis. Peterson, who is a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), started the organization in 2019 to bring access to Native youth, foster teamwork and mindset skills, improve health outcomes, and build connection in Native American communities experiencing the long-term impacts of forced



displacement, lack of resources, and ongoing threats to culture and language. Members of Boise's unhoused community frequently do not have access to sports like tennis and pickleball, so Peterson brought the program to them. Project Pickleball is now entering its fourth month and will develop into a local pickleball league where the whole community can interact as one.



My Homeless Journey: Day One

By Ashley Parks

My homeless journey began in February 2008. I remember plain as day, like it was yesterday. While a ward of the state in the Kansas foster care system, my family relocated to a small town called Kuna, ID. Come my 18th birthday, my case worker presented me with a choice:

- 1) I could go into independent living. In this program, I would've been supported until my early 20s with a \$500 stipend per month. They would have also been able to help with a job, an apartment, and a car. OR -
- 2) My parents would buy a plane ticket to move me to their home in Kuna. This meant the opportunity to be with my two little sisters again. The same sisters who needed protection from our father. Sisters I painfully missed and had not seen since the year before.

Little did I know, this one decision was going to affect my life for the next 15 years. This is one of numerous testimonies I could story about, however, this particular one is a rarity. At 33 years of age, over half of my life homeless, I am finally willing and able to share a life of trauma transformed into hope.

Naturally, my choice was to go back to any resemblance of a home to be reunited with my sisters. In February 2008, my case worker brought me to the airport for my big day. Going home! With me were two bags of luggage and all of my clothes, KU gear, photos, journals, & more; one carry-on bag; and two cardboard moving boxes containing all my memories including my keepsakes from living in Okinawa, Japan, and from all the foster homes, group homes, and growing up in Kansas. My case worker was able to check in all of my luggage, but had to pay per pound on the boxes of memories. As I was no longer a ward of the state, her hands were tied on being able to pay for the memories that came with me. This would be the first of many times I would lose my stuff and have to try to start over. Though the first time was the most traumatic.

After a six hour flight and one layover I almost missed, I arrived at the Boise airport. It's pretty late at night and I'm nervous, anxious, and terrified. Mom and dad met me at luggage claim with glares, then dad helped me



carry and load it into the family Suburban. The whole 25-30 minute drive could cut the tension with a knife.

The next morning, my sisters and I are finishing breakfast. Dad asks them to go to their rooms. I remember clear as day his words, "You are a danger to the family and your sisters. You are not our daughter or a member of this family and you haven't been for years." Dad then hands me a packet called the "Self-Rescue Manual" and told me to flip to the homeless shelter page. His instructions were to start calling the shelters and pick one.

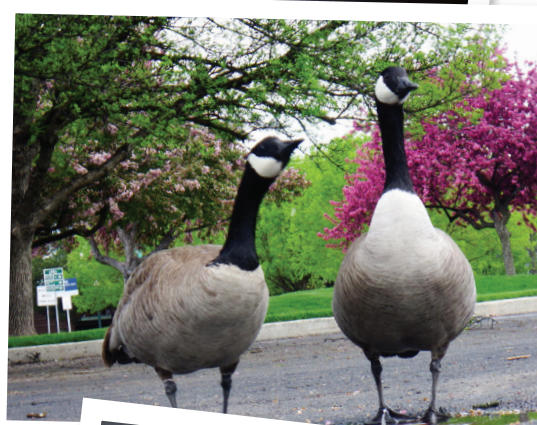
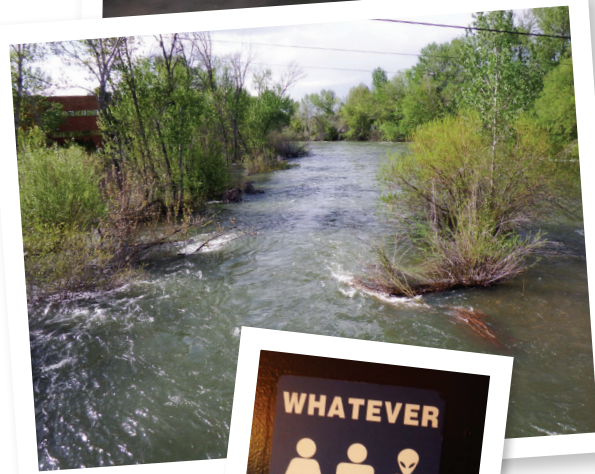
City Light women's shelter is what I chose. In the mornings, there's breakfast, but all guests must leave for the day shortly after. Guests can come back for lunch and leave again, until 4:00 p.m. Come Monday, my dad dropped me off, gave me \$20, and said "good luck." The official start of my homeless life. Eight days after my 18th birthday, I'm in a new state, in a city I don't know, snow up to my knees and I'm utterly alone, truly alone, and on my own for the first time in my young life.

I remember my first full day as a homeless person. All I knew was my dad had pointed out the Towne Square Mall on the way to City Light the night before. He said there were city buses that would take me there. He also said if I were to look for work, it'd be there or in the area. Plan in hand, I asked about the nearest bus, got a bus pass and headed out. The stop I needed to catch was just on the other side of the block. I sat there for a couple hours before I figured out which bus to take. I learned that one must wave the bus down. I had never been on a bus before and remember feeling like I was in a movie.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Photos By Gypsy Wind

WOTS contributor Gypsy Wind's photographs and interactions with people and nature document the realities, contradictions, and humanity of life on the streets.



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SCAN ME