

On the streets, the eyes of the homeless reveal many stories

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LOS ANGELES - It's easy to walk past the homeless, to disregard the guy lying on the street or ignore the woman standing at an intersection holding a handwritten sign with a plea for help.

It's harder to look away when you've seen their eyes.

Look past lines drawn by hard living or the still-soft skin of someone young but struggling to break the cycle of dependency or abuse.

Their eyes hint at lost promise or offer a glimmer of hope. Some are haunting, some placid. Others troubled or masking troubles. Some are warm and tender; others tough and anxious.

You wonder: Why did they end up here? How do they get by on so little? What do they need to get back on their feet?

The questions don't always have easy answers. Solutions are not always available. The extent of someone's past troubles can be impossible to know.

As part of its project looking at the homeless crisis on the West Coast, AP photographer Jae Hong went to Seattle, the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles to shoot intimate portraits of the people with no permanent homes. He used a special lens to focus on their eyes.

Here are the stories those people told.

NAME: MOI WILLIAMS, 59

HOME: Streets of Los Angeles

Across from the elegant Millennium Biltmore hotel, Williams reclined on his side, resting on an elbow on concrete steps leading to a park in the heart of downtown Los Angeles.

Rather than stand out in contrast to the business people hustling by or commuters heading home, he fits in as one of the many homeless people who idle their days in Pershing Square.

Williams' stare is as empty as the details he offers about his life.

He said he's been on the streets three or four years. His beard and hair are starting to gray and a cigarette is propped behind his left ear.

He had a job, but "it just got away," he said. He figured he'd find another, but it never came along.

"I'm not fighting, like I used to," he said. "When I was younger, before I got a job, I used to fight a lot."

Now he is trying to beat drugs and alcohol.

Williams would like a place to live and some money, but said he doesn't stay at shelters and hasn't signed up for any public assistance. For now, he's mostly comfortable where he is.

"I'm not bothering nobody," Williams said. "I'm not being bothered."

NAME: JAMES HARRIS, 54

HOME: A tent in Hollywood

Harris likes to open with "God bless you" before asking for money. It makes him feel better to offer something in exchange for a handout.

"It's hard panhandling and taking things from people," he said.

Harris said he has had AIDS for 30 years, he said. When medication stopped working, he got depressed and was evicted. Now he feels like an outcast, vulnerable and struggling to survive.

"I've been beaten, robbed, chased," he said. "People steal your tents and your tarps and your clothes. I've lost everything I owned."

He's hoping that as a veteran he can get permanent housing, though he missed an earlier opportunity because a stint in a shelter disqualified him from being considered chronically homeless.

He gets by on \$900 a month from Social Security and whatever he can scrounge up. A little extra cash might get him some crack to smoke at night.

"I put needs first, drugs last," he said.

He spent the remaining \$105 from a recent check on a suit and put on makeup to look like Two-Face, the villain from Batman comics. He wanted to "make an honest living" with others dressed as superheroes or movie characters jostling for tips on Hollywood Boulevard.

But it didn't go well. He said he didn't earn a dime.

NAME: TAMMY STEPHEN, 54

HOME: A homeless encampment in Seattle

They call her "mom." Stephen, whose children have grown up, cooks and looks after the denizens of Camp Second Chance as if they were her own.

"I'm not going to let my family go hungry," she said. "We're doing our best to get through life. I don't let people mess with my family."

She has known the cycle of dependence herself and been pulled down in it by partners, she said.

Six times she's lost a place to live because her third husband got high and got them evicted.

The final time came when things started looking up. Her husband had just landed a job, but spent his first paycheck on meth and got them booted again. She went her own way at that point.

"I broke the cardinal rule. I met him at rehab," she said. "One of the first things he said was, 'Don't fall in love with me. I'm not good.' I should have listened."

She didn't get sober until her third try in rehab.

She's been homeless more than three years and has been talking with other campers about pooling money to rent a place, but it can cost \$1,200 to \$1,500 for tiny apartments.

At one point, she and a daughter were living in someone's storage room for \$700 a month. It was hard to afford on her monthly \$734 disability payment.

"Most homeless people I know aren't homeless because they're addicts," she said. "Maybe they were at one time. Most people are homeless because they can't afford a place to live."

NAME: JORGE ORTEGA, 40

HOME: Skid Row, Los Angeles

Ortega sleeps on a street in one of the most wretched homeless havens in America.

The sidewalk reeks of urine and drug addicts sprawl nearby, one in the apparent throes of a high with her arms spread wide and head turned toward the heavens.

Ortega said he drove a forklift at Los Angeles International Airport for 18 years before having problems at work and losing his job.

One of those problems may have been drug use. He said he started using drugs as a 12-year-old in Mexico and tried to quit while working.

"Every time there's something good in my life," he said, "something happens."

He collects cardboard for money.

Ortega becomes emotional talking about a 14-year-old son he hasn't spoken with in a few years. He has family that lives in the area, but he doesn't want to be around them and doesn't want them to see him.

"I'm here on my own," he said. "I like to be around by myself."

NAME: ALICIA ADARA, 33

HOME: A tent in Seattle

Adara says she ended up on the street after losing a custody fight for her two children to her ex-husband.

She panhandles to survive and also gets \$198 a month in food stamps. She showers at Mary's Place, a nonprofit daycare center for homeless. Sometimes she takes sponge baths at the Seattle Ferry Terminal.

The tent she sleeps in is not the home she wants, but right now it's the one she chooses — and it beats living in a shelter.

"I don't do shelters. I feel like I'm in jail," she said. "I've been like basically a prisoner all my life. I need to do this. I need to be out here. It's freedom."

As she sat in an alley in downtown killing time, she said she thinks she'll do this for another year and then hopes for a permanent job. She doesn't have a clue what that will be.

She takes a long pause to consider it and then says, "dog sitter."

NAME: BENNIE KOFFA, 66

HOME: A Seattle tent encampment

Koffa stands out among the homeless because of the way he dresses — in a suit. Friends jokingly call him Tony Soprano because they think he looks like a mobster.

He said it's a custom he's maintained since his years working for the government in Liberia.

Koffa said he came to the U.S. in 1990 and never returned as a civil war raged for years back home. He has lived in Canada and sought refugee status in the U.S.

He ended up homeless and living on the streets of Seattle after splitting up with his wife a year ago, he said. Recently, he got an opportunity to live in a tent encampment.

"I've lived some lives, you know, up and down," he said. "I'm very thankful to have Camp Second Chance, which (the) name actually means something to me."

Koffa said he has mental illness, which he attributes to the corruption and strife in his home country.

He tries to spruce up camp by weeding, though he resigned a job in the kitchen out of frustration because of a lack of cooperation.

His goal is to continue studying the Bible to become an ordained minister. He wants to help the poor.

"I would love to get out (of here)," he said. "I understand this is a journey."

NAME: JOHN RUIZ, 9

HOME: A recreational vehicle with his parents and siblings in Mountain View, the home of Google

The fourth-grader dreams of going to college. He knows it's the path to a better job and a home that's not on four wheels.

His father is a minimum-wage landscaper, who moved the family to the aging camper after they were evicted from an apartment where the rent kept going up, nearing \$3,000 a month. His mother is five months pregnant.

The family parks the RV outside an apartment building where three bedroom apartments rent for up to \$6,000 a month.

John's friends at school were surprised to hear he lived in an RV.

"I thought they were going to laugh, but they were OK with it," he said.

The worst thing about living in a camper is that it's cramped, hot in summer and cold in winter. He and his brother have to walk to get water and dump their trash.

"At least we have a home we can live in," he said. "I have a bunch of toys. Mostly the good part is there's a little stove where we can eat."

John dreams of his family having a successful life together and maybe ending up in a mansion — a home that might have a swimming pool and backyard. Or at least one big enough to have his own room.

"I want to have a happy life," he said.

NAME: BARRY WARREN, 52

HOME: A Seattle street close to a waterfront park

Warren sits in a lawn chair next to a shopping cart teeming with his possessions. He's been homeless his entire adult life — if you don't count the three years he said he spent in prison.

He said he's schizophrenic and has been collecting disability payments since before he left home in California.

"Mommy wanted the crazy check," he said. "We had that kind of family."

After about 20 years without a home in California, he moved to Seattle, where the benefits are better and life on the street is safer.

"Everyone knows Seattle is a homeless town," he said. "It is and always will be the best town to be in if you're homeless."

Inertia and mental illness have prevented him from getting work, he said. He was lazy until he was in his early 30s. Then when he tried to work, he couldn't get hired.

He said he's obsessive compulsive and would make a good janitor. He sometimes spends up to three hours a day sweeping the sidewalk where he stays.

"Walk in that tunnel — it's nasty. And then you walk out here and you say, 'Is this the same sidewalk?'" he said as he laughed.

NAME: DOLORES EPPS, 41

HOME: Around the Los Angeles area

Epps talks tough, curses freely and tosses back sexual harassment that comes from men on the sidewalk of Skid Row.

She once had a job at a salon and still makes money cutting hair.

"I don't touch everybody, only the people that are clean," Epps said.

"All these dope fiends are going to keep looking like a dope fiend. You're not my problem. But if you're a clean person and you just want to get a little bit extra sassy or as a man look a little more handsome, then yeah."

Epps said she has been homeless on and off since her mother kicked her out of her home in San Diego five years ago. Her mother has custody of her 15-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son.

She said she doesn't use drugs other than pot, but also talks about having been "straight for a while" before moving back in with her mom for 15 months. She went to jail for fighting with her mother about her kids, she said.

She lives on \$900 a month for an unspecified disability and earns some money clipping hair and selling electronics. She also takes college courses online.

She had just spent a night at a friend's house and was able to shower. Compared to many others on the street, she said she's doing well.

"The people out here looking really horrible are doing it by choice," she said. "Or they're definitely severely mentally ill and addicted to serious drugs. That's it."

NAME: HARRISON PERKINS, 31

HOME: A Seattle street.

The path to the streets began with a prescription for the powerful painkiller OxyContin, Perkins said.

He has a rare heart disease and pain in his legs. He began supplementing his medication with heroin, though that cost him dearly.

"That's why my belongings are gone," he said. "I don't have a watch on my hand. I don't have a wedding band. I got rid of whatever jewelry I had."

He never finished college studies in computer science, but managed to do computer work for years.

He and his wife lost a place to live when she accidentally set fire to her mother's kitchen and the landlord wouldn't let them return.

Perkins said he's been clean for six months, but it's hard to remain sober on the street. He's thinking of moving back to his native Cleveland and hoping to stay with his brother there. Perkins concedes that his drug problems have given his brother reservations, so he's not sure that will happen.

He and his wife can't afford a place to live in Seattle on the \$760 disability check he gets each month from Social Security, and he's resorted to begging.

The couple can't stay together at a shelter and don't want to be exposed to bed bugs and lice outbreaks there, so they opted to live on the street, where their possessions have been stolen.

"Drugs are offered to me more than a place to live," he said. "Even in my worst drug addiction days, I always kept a roof over my head. ... We literally have nothing. This is what we've got. It's not worth it."

NAME: BERNADETTE ORTIZ, 39

HOME: A temporary shelter at a San Jose church

Ortiz was living in a tent encampment with a boyfriend earlier this year when she learned she was pregnant.

That helped her land a place to stay at a church, though her baby, Serenity, hasn't been able to stay with her there. The infant stays with a family member at night and is returned to Ortiz during the day.

"I don't know what I'd do without her," Ortiz said. "I love her up. I look into her eyes. She looks into my eyes. That's my precious moments with her."

Ortiz said she spent about five years with no permanent roof over her head after arguments with her husband escalated and he kicked her out.

She alluded to drug abuse, but wouldn't elaborate: "I had a problem with things," she said.

She left behind four children her estranged husband doesn't let her see because she's homeless, she said.

Ortiz and her boyfriend were getting ready in September to move into a \$1,050-a-month studio apartment paid for by Catholic Charities for six months. Mainly a homemaker, Ortiz said she planned to eventually look for a job. But that won't be in fast food, after her previous experience.

"It's too hard," she said. "You have to put up with customers' attitude. And it's really fast. I was too slow."

NAME: ROBERT IRWIN, 72

HOME: Seattle tent camp

Irwin is a self-described jack-of-all-trades, who had a steady job as a maintenance engineer for 25 years at a Seattle hospital until it closed down decades ago.

He became homeless earlier this year when staying with other people didn't work out. About three months ago, he landed at Camp Second Chance, which he credits with turning his life around.

"I used to be mad and mean all the time," he said. "They accepted me. From day one, I felt uplifted."

Irwin has put his skills to work repairing tents or shoring up the platforms that elevate them on the gravel lot. He hopes to leave in the spring and move to Michigan to see his ailing older sister and live with a nephew.

He becomes emotional discussing family and said it "kind of gets me down." He said he plans to drive his old Chevy Blazer across the country.

"It would be my last trip," he said.

Jae C. Hong reported from Seattle, San Jose, Mountain View and Los Angeles. Melley wrote the story from Los Angeles.

Follow AP's complete coverage of the homeless crisis here: <https://apnews.com/tag/HomelessCrisis>

Part of an ongoing examination of the homeless crisis along the West Coast.

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/article182978621.html#storylink=cpy>