

Ohio tent city is a refuge for the homeless and displaced.

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AKRON, Ohio - From her home outside Indianapolis, Christy Brooks logged onto Facebook to find her younger sister.

For days, she'd been reading online about a place called Second Chance Village in Akron's Middlebury neighborhood. That's where her 36-year-old sister Stephanie Beasley, who has a learning disability and epilepsy, said she was living, like a refugee from society.

"She had told me that she couldn't go to any of the other shelters and that she had come to this tent city," Brooks said. Anxious moments have been common in the five years since Brooks last saw her sister. There was an episode in 2014 when Beasley, who dropped her own baby during a seizure, was found guilty of trespassing after talking to women in the maternity ward at Akron City Hospital. "I think I was being over nice," Beasley explained, adding that she meant no alarm or discomfort for anyone.

Sometimes, the homeless and mentally ill are just misunderstood.

Concerned about her current situation, Brooks called back. But Beasley's phone had already been disconnected — a sign of the sisters' loving but long-distance relationship.

Googling "Second Chance" led Brooks to a series of Akron Beacon Journal/Ohio.com stories and virtual tour of the homeless day center and tent city. "I sat down with my coffee and thought, 'Hmmm. What is this about?'" Brooks said. "I played the video and within minutes, there was her face."

That "eye-opening emotional moment" prompted Gary Beasley to drive from Indiana to Akron last weekend with one daughter to see how the other is surviving.

Family coming together is a hallmark of the holiday season. But stories like this only happen when people are given second chances. After spending a couple of summer months visiting Second Chance Village, the Akron Beacon Journal/Ohio.com decided to return as those who live in Akron's biggest tent city prepare for the winter by reconnecting with loved ones and helping others.

For Sage Lewis — the founder of Second Chance Village, the tent city that took in Beasley until she found more permanent housing — it's just another season to let the homed know how the homeless are living.

Since a railroad company ordered a homeless camp off the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad in January, the Second Chance Village has become a magnet for hundreds of desperate Akronites — all homeless, most mentally ill, some with addictions and several with criminal pasts.

There's no sure way to determine if their vices or their perils came first. They are often born of parents like them, abused as children, drug users as teens and isolated as adults lacking consistent treatment and often ashamed to ask for help. It's a recipe for compromising situations.

But at Second Chance Village, where the homeless write and enforce their own laws, there's no one to fool. Paul Hays, who runs the donation and day center at 15 Broad St., came from that disbanded railroad camp. The villagers call him Pops, a spiritual leader whose quiet wisdom makes miracles of broken lives.

Hays sees the program working not only by the number of homeless people who come and leave with a job and stable housing, but also by the number who simply come back. The

latest evidence that the program is working would be Beasley, or rather the help she received from Erik Gunsberg.

Gunsberg, a fast-talking, rough-around-the-edges, recovering crack addict from Brooklyn, New York, spent most of his life in jail. In six months at Second Chance, he's finally heeded Hays' advice.

"Paul convinced me that I could help myself by helping others. And he was right," said Gunsberg, who is charged with kicking people out for drug and alcohol abuse then keeping tabs on them in the wild and encouraging them to get help and return.

Gunsberg has found that salvation can be serendipitous. "I was born on Thanksgiving. Me and my daughter. And I'm probably going to see her for the first time because of this place."

That was a week ago. Two days later, Gunsberg smiled while showing off cellphone photos of his daughter, who came to visit him at the shelter. It was the first time they'd seen each other in years.

"Maybe it'll be a good Thanksgiving," he said of their birthdays this week.

On Thursday, Lewis backed his white, Ford F-150 pickup truck into an open bay door at the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank on Opportunity Parkway.

He pulled out with 1,204 pounds of fruit, pastries, bottled sports drinks, breads and more — for \$7.74, or nearly half a penny per pound. Back downtown, he drove with Gunsberg, Tony Putnam, who runs the kitchen at Second Chance, and Randy Holbert, who's been kicked out of the village twice for drinking.

"It turned out to be Third Chance Village for me," Holbert joked, sober again to save his life. "I'm a stone-cold alcoholic. I ain't gonna lie to anyone."

Holbert, a lifetime Akron resident, spent 22 years in the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville for armed robbery, most notably a \$30,000 heist at the Ponderosa Restaurant that closed decades ago on the southern edge of Akron.

Holbert, who turned 60 this month, lost a lung in jail. His heart is failing. Since serving his time, he never fully re-entered society.

"I've been living out here for 17 years by choice," he said. "But it's not my choice anymore. I'm getting too old for it. I get bone chills, literally."

Lewis turned his truck past the Haven of Rest emergency homeless shelter and cut down a half-dirt road that hugs Grace Park.

He took a hard right and parked at the bottom of a hill beside the tracks. Ten or so people emerged from tents and chucked wood into a burn barrel to greet their visitors. On a tarp, Lewis and his crew unloaded a couple hundred pounds of food. The rest would go to Second Chance.

Rich Grene looked stunned. "I'm kind of discombobulated. This is blowing my mind."

Greene, while living at Second Chance in June, had been sent to Oberlin for treatment. There, the 50-year-old man from West Akron stayed alcohol-free for five months. By the time he got out, the state funding he relied on had dried up, too.

So, Grene headed back to Akron, where he's slipped back into the bottle during a momentary lapse in support. "That's what happens," he said. "You make bad choices."

Greene, for now, lives along the tracks beside Grace Park, where Lewis plans to dump a cache of food each week. As for moving back to Lewis' fenced-in village, Grene just shrugged. "I haven't tried. I'm kind of embarrassed. I have to swallow my pride."

After unloading half his truck, Lewis walked toward a tunnel beneath the Market Street bridge, following the only man there taller than him — Ethan "Country" Bruner.

A few years back while still living in Shelby outside Mansfield, Bruner lost his 46-year-old mother to cancer and his 51-year-old dad to a heart attack. The young man then turned to alcohol, heroin and thoughts of suicide.

After a stay at Heartland Behavioral Healthcare in Massillon, he was directed to the Haven of Rest. Sober now for three years, he stays at the shelter for no more than five days a month, the maximum allowed for those without a job.

So Bruner, 25, lives beside the quick trains that screech through the tunnel, playing cat and mouse with cops who sometimes force the camp to relocate up or down the tracks. Sometimes, authorities look the other way, the people who live there said.

Under the Market Street bridge, Bruner points to a pillow dotted with red blotches. It was Silk's pillow, his empty tent not far from it. Bruner, who said last names aren't typically shared, said a man named Ed took a hammer to Silk's head a week earlier. Then Ed kidnapped a girl, stole her truck and hasn't been seen since.

The rest of the campers nodded. That's how it went down. Akron police are investigating the incidents.

Bruner, who prefers the wilderness near downtown because it's "closer to everything" than Second Chance Village is, said a hatchet came through his own tent while he slept Wednesday night.

"They're out here in a really dangerous environment," Lewis said.

"Meh," said Bruner, a towering man wearing a John Deere ball cap and a nonchalant smile.

"Anyway, we need to get you some shoes," Lewis said, pointing to Bruner's worn-out size 18 sneakers. "You're not going to find those lying around in just any closet."