

## what's inside

### ACTION PACKED

Homeless individuals list the five items they couldn't do without.

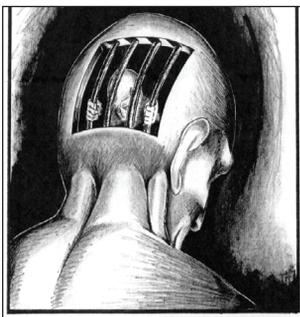
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### FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Hannah Halford and Nicole Huguley investigate what happens after war.

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**PRISON FOR ONE**  
"Tomcat" Anderson reflects on drugs and alcohol, life changes.

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**MESSAGE FROM YOUR VENDOR**

# Back to Memphis: Formerly homeless woman pens novel



BILL PIACESI / Focus for the Good

ONE WOMAN'S ACCOUNT OF TRUE HOMELESSNESS: A reflection on the long way home.

**BY DELORES WASHINGTON**  
*Contributing Writer*

## Introduction

From Chicago and back to Memphis. It was a late August night in Chicago. I was walking downtown heavily laden with my bags containing everything I owned — my life was in those bags. I was leaving Chicago.

The traffic was horrendous. As I crossed the street on Randolph, a yellow cab just missed hitting me as I waded in and out of traffic, finally reaching the other side of the street. I wondered if that almost-accident was trying to tell me something, like not to leave Chicago. Did I really want to return to Memphis? Maybe the near-miss happened to keep me there. But, as I thought about it, there was really no reason to stay in Chicago.

I was born in a small rural town in Mississippi, the youngest of nine siblings. I attended Threadgill High School in Greenwood, Miss. and several colleges and universities: Mississippi Valley State University, in Itta Bena, Miss., Northwest University in St. Joseph, Mo., and Southwest Community College in Memphis, T.N.

Sometimes unfortunate circumstances happen in our lives and cause devastating results. For every action there is a change or reaction, for every good deed there is a bad deed, for ev-

ery sunny day there is a rainy day; so no matter how you plan, the choices you make for good sometimes end up in unfortunate results.

## Journey II

From Memphis to Chicago should be what this book is about, since that's where it all started from — Memphis. But that's another book. I have put down my story the way the Lord has inspired me to do so, from Chicago to Memphis.

When I arrived in Chicago from Memphis, the Lord said to keep a journal of my travel activities. I did as he told me, and it turned into another story that leads into Journey II. I'm putting the cart before the horse because it is essential to the purpose of this book, to reach someone in need of inspiration right now.

To know that the Lord is there, no matter what you're going through, be it homelessness, an illness, a financial crisis, or the loss of a loved one, a job or health, the Bible says, Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me; for my soul trust in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make a refuge, until these calamities be overpast (Psalms 57:1).

I didn't have a job anymore. The cheap telemarketing jobs that I did get weren't cutting it for me. They were part timers with no future or nothing else promising. It had been hard to

find decent work, not knowing anyone except family, and they were of no help. I met a minister there, Minister Joseph Pierce. I did some solicitations with him — selling religious tracts and pamphlets. I didn't have anywhere to stay.

I'd stayed with a family member until the limit (you'll understand what I mean if you've ever stayed with family with little or no money for a while). I went to the YMCA, but after a dry run there for a while, with no money or food, I had to leave.

My last meal in Chicago was a hot dog and a Coke. I got on the Greyhound bus with my fare paid by Travelers Aid Society. The Travelers Aid Society is an organization that helps stranded individuals with no money or means of getting back home.

I'd left Memphis unemployed to look for work in Chicago. After five years of nothing significant to sustain me, I had no choice but to return.

When the bus pulled into the terminal downtown, I got off the bus and crossed the street, and as I looked down, I saw \$2 folded together on the ground. I was as elated as if I'd found a \$20 bill. Quickly I picked it up and pocketed it. I had nowhere to go.

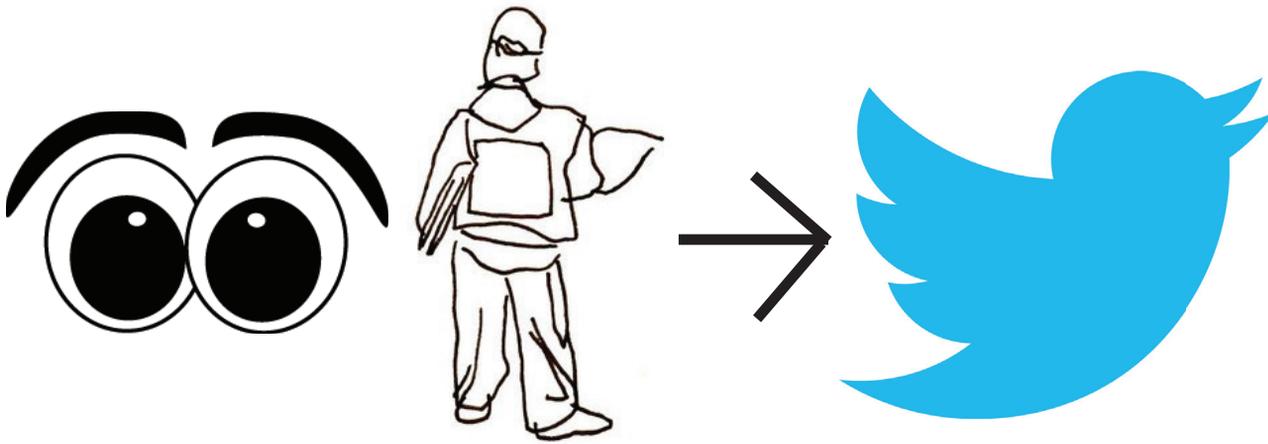
I had been despondent in Chicago. Returning to Memphis was a better choice because I'd lived there before. It was more familiar.

See "Journey" on page 10

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If you see a vendor of The Bridge around Memphis, take a location-tagged picture of him/her and tweet it to us @thebridgepaper! We'll print your name and possibly your photo in the next issue of The Bridge.



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*The Bridge* is a monthly publication dedicated to issues of homelessness in Memphis, TN. It is run by volunteers and is unaffiliated with any religious or political organization.

All articles in *The Bridge* are approved by the Editor in Chief and directors. However, specially-labeled pieces from outside groups or contributing writers may appear and do not necessarily represent the views of *The Bridge* editors and staff nor do they constitute an endorsement.

*The Bridge* welcomes letters from all walks of the Memphis community. Letters to the editor should be sent to [editor@thememphisbridge.com](mailto:editor@thememphisbridge.com) and may be edited for content.

### Want to get involved?

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*The Bridge* is a publication by the Memphis Street Newspaper Organization. The Memphis Street Newspaper Organization is a non-profit and exists purely to provide reliable income for those with experiences of homelessness and also to raise awareness about issues of homelessness in the larger community.

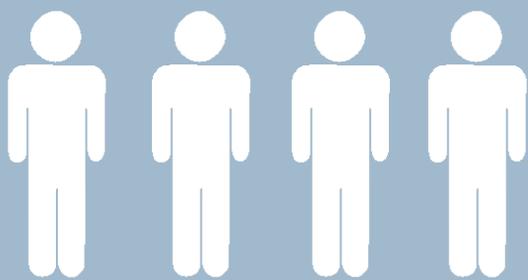
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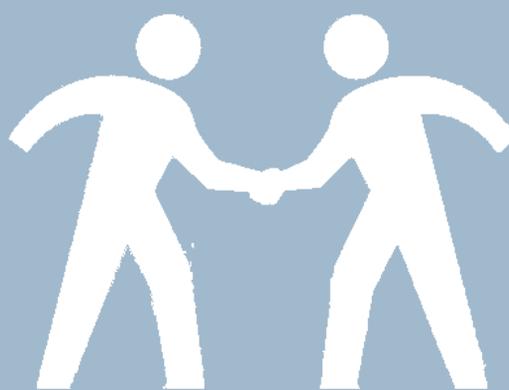
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## Letter from the Director: Layers

**BY EVAN KATZ**  
*Co-executive Director*

“Homelessness is just one paycheck away.” Step into any volunteer-run soup kitchen in Memphis, any educational seminar, and you’ll hear that line. Its purpose is sound – someone’s doing their best to “bridge the gap,” as we say, to show you that the distance between you and the man sleeping in the stairwell is only spanned by the narrow shield of next month’s rent.

For almost the entirety of the sheltered population, however, that’s a convenient lie. If you burned this month’s paycheck, you’d likely be able to keep yourself and your family afloat with your savings. Maybe you’d sell your piano, your china, your car. You’d get by.

But let’s say you were already living on the margins. On thin ice with your landlord, a missed month of pay truly would leave you with no place to call your own. Out on the street, you might say. But you’re not homeless yet, not by a long shot. Who would you call first? Your brother? Your parents? A friend from college? Take 30 seconds and think of the first 10 people who would take you in for a night. Now pretend that layer of support is gone. No problem – 30 seconds more and you’ve got a fresh list of 10 souls that know you, care about you, and wouldn’t think twice about offering up a spot in the guest room.

How many layers of friends, co-workers, ex-lovers, guys you met last night at the bar could you peel back before you actually had nowhere left to go? Sure, the amount of pride you’d be swallowing might be a choking hazard, but I’d be willing to bet your network is at least 10 layers thick. One-hundred people might let you stay over for a night, for a week.

Even a 100 bridges can burn, however. Maybe your cocaine addiction leaves you with no choice to but to steal cash from the very person offering you their home - one bridge on fire. Maybe your mental illness makes being around you not only difficult, but a threat to the safety of others. Another bridge down. Maybe your recent felony turns old friends into narrow-eyed skeptics who don’t want you around their families. Blazes dot the horizon, and suddenly the mainland is far away.

New bridges can be built, though, if you remember how. More than a stable source of income for the homeless, more than a way of educating the public, *The Bridge* aims to help people reintegrate into a society that’s pushed them away. You can help, too. Don’t just buy a paper. Draw open your bridge – you’ll be met more than halfway.

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# Summer Hygiene

BY WINN DECKER AND CAROLINE PONSETI  
Contributing Writers

Being without a home creates an infinite number of struggles for the unsheltered, one of which is the scarcity of bathing facilities. Lack of proper hygiene is both a barrier to finding employment and a threat to one's health.

Diners at First Presbyterian's Sunday soup kitchen enlightened us with their methods of maintaining a basic level of cleanliness.

Many spoke of the shower amenities of the Union Mission. But the Mission requires that you pay the \$6 fee for staying the night just in order to use their shower facilities.

Another man shared that he and his friends occasionally combine their money to purchase a cheap hotel room where they can shower and sleep for the night. When funds aren't available, some opt to bathe in the recycled water of the fountains downtown.

The port-o-potties on the perimeters of music festivals like Memphis in May are great resources for the unsheltered. The individuals interviewed detailed a bathing process they have dubbed a "bird bath," which entails finding a random sink, usually in a convenience store bathroom, and using paper towels and hand soap to scrub up. This practice appears to be most common way to cool off in the hot Memphis summer.

One can only hope that a public shower house will be available for those who are homeless in the future.

"Lack of proper hygiene is both a barrier to finding employment and a threat to one's health."

- Winn Decker and Caroline Ponseti

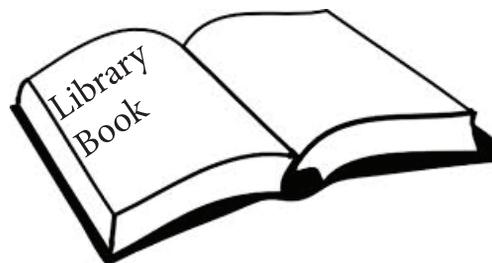


BILL PIACESI/ Focus for the Good

**THE CLEANLINESS CHALLENGE:** With summer heat and a lack of public bathing areas, homeless individuals rely on festivals and random sink "bird baths" to stay clean.

## What's in Your Backpack?

When space is limited by what you can carry, choosing the right items to keep in your pack is vital. We polled currently homeless individuals to find what they say they keep with them at all times.



Identification



Water



Cell Phone



Toiletries

# Falling through the cracks:

## Iraq veteran opens up on readjustment to everyday life



MAXIMILIAN URIARTE / Street Roots

**THE HIDDEN PAIN:** While visibly fine, many veterans are quietly reliving the horrors of war every day.

**BY HANNAH HALFORD AND NICOLE HUGULEY**

*Contributing Writers*

Bearded, elderly, poorly educated, and desperate — these words may describe the stereotypical image of a homeless person. Many people, those far removed from the men and women living under bridges or in abandoned buildings, could barely imagine a case in which a person chooses to be homeless. Never, they'd say, would a person freely elect to live in a homeless shelter if they had the option of staying in the comfort of home. An even more rare find, then, is a vibrant, well-spoken young man, not even 30, living as if his house in Collierville does not exist.

Meet Josh Nester. For Josh, homelessness was a life choice. Born in Collierville and a graduate of the city's high school, Josh now lives in the Alpha Omega home with other homeless veterans of all ages. When we first happened upon him we were, admittedly, surprised.

Clad in a University of Alabama sweatshirt and a camouflage ball cap, he was the perfect picture of a healthy, intelligent, friendly young man. He could have easily been at his family's kitchen table in Collierville, but instead he sat in an office in a shelter near downtown Memphis, courageously reliving his military experience to me. When Josh recounted his story, he spoke with a kind of quiet confidence that one can only imagine took time for him to cultivate. Humble and honest, he opened up about his experience in the military, beginning before he can remember.

"My father was in the military," he said. "And so was my grandfather."

Josh officially enlisted in the Navy in March 2006, shortly after high school. While he explained that there was no outward pressure to join, he admitted that he did assume a kind of tacit expectation. He remembered military recruiters visiting Collierville High School when he was enrolled there and taking his father with him to the recruiter's office after he had graduated.

He had no complaints about the way the recruiting

office portrayed military life, saying, "Ninety-five percent of the guys you talk to will say that the recruiter is not 100 percent forthcoming with what you're going to do because they don't want to scare you off. I mean, that's understandable." In the end, he said that the people out gathering numbers "don't know" what will be asked of each recruit — whether they will be stationed at home or overseas.

"I don't feel like I was misled into anything," he told us. "I just feel like the information wasn't all there."

His experience overseas speaks to that kind of uncertainty. Though he originally signed on with the Navy, Josh found himself being trained for combat and deployed to Iraq because the Marines and Army were suffering from low recruitment.

"They were taking from the Air Force and the Navy because, even though you joined a different branch, you're in the military, so they can do with you what they see fit," he clarified.

His new job was to protect convoys containing goods, food, and civilians. Though he said the job was dangerous, he tried to downplay it by comparing his experience to that of Army and Marine enlistees.

"Those guys were in a whole 'nother world," he explained. "I couldn't imagine what they were going through."

He reasoned that, while his division faced dangerous missions "every other week," those in other branches "dealt with that on a daily basis." His efforts in deflecting, however, could not detract from the monumental sacrifices demanded from him and his comrades.

Stretching for several miles long, the convoys Josh and his group guarded contained what he called "just everyday stuff," in addition to civilians. Given their size and content, these convoys were difficult for the soldiers to defend and popular for the insurgents to target. Josh admitted to us that they were very vulnerable on each excursion.

On one day in particular, that susceptibility cost them greatly. An explosion took place just 200 yards in front of where he was stationed, killing both his comrades

and the civilians they were escorting.

"The guys who were in front of us obviously took the brunt of the explosion," he explained, adding, "There was a lot of confusion in an instant."

Josh did not dwell on the details of the traumatic event. Instead, he reflected on how this attack affected his outlook.

"You know that that's a possibility going over there," he told us about the prospect of facing death. "You see it on the news like everybody else...but you don't think it's going to happen to you. That's what everyone's thinking."

His straightforward reflection helps break through undue assumptions about military life, humanizing the individuals we decorate as heroes and then abandon on the pedestals we build in their honor.

The truth is, people that sacrifice everything to fight for our country are not superhuman. They don't face down death with a sneer or a shrug. Instead, they deny its imminence much like we do when a natural disaster strikes a faraway town or a horrendous crime impacts the lives of others.

Death, even overseas in a war-ridden land, is never expected.

"You know it could happen, but you never think it's going to happen to me," he continued. "But it did."

And, according to Josh, moving on from such a traumatic realization is no easy feat.

"In the military you have a job to do. I understand that," he told us. "You're just kind of taught to have a little memorial for the people, and... life goes on. Your mind doesn't have time to break down what happened. So you just stuff that away, and that's the worst thing you can do."

Returning home only exacerbates the problem.

"And you come back and you're out of that environment; you're out of, you know, being surrounded by people who are in your same situation; and you're thrown back in with everyday people who don't understand, who are uncomfortable when you talk about it to them, who don't know how to help you. And they can't relate. It puts you in an awkward position, and then you're kind of left out to dry."

That transition from the tumultuous to the mundane took a toll on Josh's recovery.

"I just didn't readjust," he admitted. "I never really worked through the problems that I had from [the war]. I didn't address them."

The only relief offered to him was in the form of medication, which he told us led him to dependence. He explained that there were many instances in which he was overdosing on his medication and drinking on top of it. This abuse began to take its toll on his relationship with his family members, who were supporting him.

"It got to a point where I was causing problems. I have three sisters and a brother — and I was causing problems in the family because I was so unstable. They didn't know what to do with me."

His journey to Alpha Omega culminated with this familial tension.

"They encouraged me to go to the V.A., so I got treatment at the V.A. and went to the programs they had there. I didn't want to go back home because I wasn't ready — I didn't want to cause my family any more problems until I got my problems figured out, so I came here."

*Con't on page 6*

Con't from page 5

"Alpha Omega is great. It contracts with the V.A. but they're not a part of it. The staff is great and they'll help you get the tools that you need to rebuild your life to get back to a normal place."

Alpha Omega Veterans Services, located in close proximity to the city's V.A. Medical Center, is a privately owned non-profit corporation that provides disabled or displaced veterans with the social services needed to reintegrate them back into society.

The men and women who offer their time often work with veterans suffering from mild to severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, or depression after returning from war.

One veteran, Mr. Charles M., explains, "I knew in my heart I needed help and I wanted to become the person that I used to be again. I heard about Alpha Omega and I was blessed to be accepted into the program. While working on my recovery I became a staff member and enjoyed working every minute there. I now have 10 years of sobriety and I am able to mentor youths as a deacon at my church and reconnect with family members.

"Thank you, Alpha Omega for believing in me."

Alpha Omega provides the counseling and care that the V.A. often lacks, then follows through by helping veterans rebuild their lives, either through new jobs, schooling, a new home, or a combination of the three. "They're kind of that support to fall back on," Josh told us, "and that push to motivate you to get some help." To Josh and many others, these kinds of institutions and programs are invaluable to veterans of all generations who need continued support.

Readjusting to life at home is made even more challenging for a veteran like Josh because of the added difficulties posed by government bureaucracies.

Josh was shocked by the onslaught of forms and red tape that await the recently-returned veteran.

"With everything you do in the military, there are 15 pieces of paper you have to fill out to do it," he explained. "Seen through our eyes, [they're] a discourager."

He connected his frustration with endless forms to his experience with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. The workers and doctors at the V.A. Medical Center seemed overwhelmed, he recalls. They seemed to simply lack the resources to take proper care of patients. As such, it is common for only the most proactive patients and veterans to receive adequate help.

"You have to kind of claw and scratch to get what you need. I mean, you have to press the issue," Josh explained.

Part of the reason for this is the fact that the V.A. is not always successful in getting word out about their different programs and other forms of assistance.

"I didn't even know that there were programs," Josh confirmed. "They don't even tell you when you get out. They tell you, 'Make sure you register with your local V.A.,' and that's it."

He defended the V.A. by saying, "I think they're trying as hard as they can to put the information out there." Josh immediately recognized how the lack of communication hinders veterans from seeking aid.

This setup and the type of personality it favors cause difficulties for veterans, as many of them must first break through their military mindsets and attitudes to ask for help in the first place.

Josh said, "You know, the military teaches you that weakness is something that you don't want to expose. So [veterans] are not very comfortable getting that out."

An ingrained reluctance to seek help, a strong desire



JASON REED / Reuters

**FRONT LINES TO FRONT YARDS:** The rigor, routine, and teachings of the military make it difficult to transition to life after the war, especially when they need help.

to solve problems independently, and an inability to address these problems with others are sentiments expressed by veterans of all ages, Josh explained.

Whether Vietnam, Desert Storm, or the Iraq War, these veterans received the same training and act upon the same discipline taught to them by the United States military.

For every year these veterans continue to bottle up anger and ignore their inner demons, the more difficult recovery becomes.

That's where Alpha Omega steps in.

Although Josh exalted Alpha Omega's staff for their tireless efforts and care, he could not deny the overall lack of institutions offering the same services.

The overload of veterans lined up at the V.A. could be redirected to places like Alpha Omega, either before or after receiving governmental care.

"It's easy to fall through the cracks," he confessed, "and it's happening right now a lot to people."

His thoughtful tone held no anger, only resignation and empathy.

Despite what he has seen and experienced himself, Josh refuses to harangue any particular person or institution. He does, however, hold the

politicians and government officials who control the program responsible. He lamented spending cuts in an area that he finds, and that many others will doubtless find, extremely important and valuable.

The \$85 billion of federal sequester cuts, which went into effect at the beginning of June 2013, retracted money provided for the high school and university education of soldiers via the Tuition Assistance program.

The Army, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard offer an average of \$4,500 in assistance annually and have been suspended until further notice.

Technically, the Department of Veterans Affairs is spared from these cuts, but they will nonetheless be affected by changes made elsewhere.

As the V.A. works with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide housing to homeless veterans, they anticipate

problems collaborating with local housing agencies. These smaller agencies might likely fear accepting vouchers from the V.A. because of spending cuts to funds that once helped them administer their own programs.

"I understand that government spending's got to be cut, but I think cutting it in those areas to guys who have earned the right to receive treatment ... I see that as unjustified."

These spending cuts and other decisions contribute to the flawed system, one that is ill-equipped to handle daily demands.

"The nurses and the doctors I dealt with are, as far as their attitude, good," Josh reassured us. "They want to help you, but they're just limited in what they can do with the tools and the resources they have."

Describing these workers in the V.A. as "totally overwhelmed," Josh explained how this system can leave fragile ex-soldiers stranded.

"You finally get the courage to go up  
and talk to someone. In four months, you  
don't have the same courage. It's sad. It's a  
shame."  
- Josh Nester

"You're asking to see a doctor and they tell you, 'Okay, come back, we've got you an appointment four months from now.'"

He shrugged ruefully before continuing. "A lot happens in four months.

A lot of those guys usually

don't show back up. You finally get the courage to go up and talk to someone. In four months, you don't have the same courage. It's sad. It's a shame."

Keeping these resources open and readily available must become a priority for the V.A., Josh told us, because of the struggles of readjusting to life at home.

Returning to a place of freedom and daily comfort can cause immense, suffocating levels of anxiety. Many veterans, not even including those officially diagnosed with PTSD, cannot bear to leave their homes for more than a few hours at a time.

Josh offered us his own feelings of separation as an example.

"You go from, you know, waking up everyday surrounded by people that want to kill you to coming back home to hear people griping about, 'Well, they didn't have the cereal I wanted at Kroger.'"

See "Josh" on Page 14

# Fighting for a Living Wage

BY JENNA TUTTLE  
Contributing Writer

Workers and students rallied for living wages on April 17 at the University of Memphis. The demonstration, billed “Fight Against Poverty Wages: A Rally For Human Rights, Equality, and Living Wages,” drew nearly 100 people with speakers and singing, followed by discussion.

A recent anti-living wage bill in the state did not faze those at the hopeful event.

The rally was held in front of the University Center on a shady hill beneath a tree on the U. of M. campus. Students passed by as a crowd stood in solidarity in front of a panel of speakers. The first speakers were union workers from United Campus Workers who fought against poverty wages.

With a city poverty rate of about 27 percent, Memphians face wages that are unlivable. A living wage is the hourly wage an individual must earn to support a family working full time. Fifty percent of those living in poverty in Memphis work either full or part time.

“Memphis has been known as a low-wage economy,” said David Ciscel of the 2010 Workers Interfaith Network. “The Living Wage movement is an attempt to convince people that low wages are shortsighted for the economy as a whole and disastrous for those who have to live on them.”

Vivian Williams, a campus worker in the physical plant building services, explained why she went to the rally: “I want the same thing for my family as anybody else would want for their family, just a nice decent living. The majority of the workers leaving here are going to another job afterward, they’re leaving their underage children at home to be raised by older siblings, and the single parents have to rely on social services. We’re struggling.”

Williams, outstandingly passionate about the cause but nevertheless smiling, has been working at the University for 13 years and makes \$10.69 an hour part time.

According to the Poverty in America Living Wage Calculator from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the living wage in Memphis for one adult and one child is \$18.18, two adults one child is \$17.87, and one adult and two children is \$21.89. The poverty wage in Memphis for one adult and one child is \$7, two adults one child is \$8.80, and one adult and two children is \$10.60.

Meanwhile, the minimum wage is stagnant at \$7.25 in Tennessee, no matter how many dependents an individual has. Slowly rising wages also do not reflect the enormous rise in insurance premiums for campus workers.

Later in the rally, various students spoke out about living wages in the city and for campus workers. Students hailed from many different organizations, including Subliminal Thought. Brandon Shaw, a student and co-founder of Subliminal Thought, felt encouraged by the turnout. “This rally makes me feel empowered. I feel fueled to unite even more. The workers do a lot for the students, and if the students are not helping the workers, then how will the community get built from the ground up?”

The event was spirited and hopeful despite the recent bill which banned the city and county’s right to pass wage standards. The original living wage ordinance in Memphis was enacted in 2006, but a Republican-backed campaign shut it down this spring. Since then, efforts to get Governor Bill Haslam to veto the

bill have begun.

Vanlyn Turner-Ramsay, a student and part of the Progressive Student Alliance, said: “We built a coalition here on campus centered on getting living wages passed in our university and today was our first huge action as a coalition standing for human rights, quality, and living wages because it really affects our community as a whole and not just the individuals who receive that. A lot of people are devastated by the wages they receive. That also affects their family and community. If they have to work two jobs, their children will be at home and the community just suffers in general from it.”

Organizations of every stripe backed the rally. It was sponsored by the Living Wage Coalition, which is made up of the United Campus Workers, Progressive Student Alliance, Subliminal Thought, Empowered Men of Color, Hispanic Student Association, College Democrats, Chess Club, Japanese Culture Club, Social Pupils, Workers Interfaith Network, and Teamsters Local 984.

Workers Interfaith Network fights against poverty and for living wages in the Mid-South. Their University of Memphis Living Wage Campaign is a main effort for the network at the moment.

United Campus Workers is Tennessee’s higher education union and was also well-represented at the event. The union is for faculty and staff at several universities around the state and has claimed many victories related to workers’ rights in the past.

Jeffrey Lichtenstein is a member of the union and a former student. He is a temporary campus worker in the Center for Partnerships in Geographic Information Systems.

Lichtenstein offers a unique perspective on the phenomenon of worker and student life overlap. “I looked

at how austerity measures were destroying jobs all across the economy and it really felt to me like the only chance I had for a long-term good job was to join a job where I had a good union. I wanted to work on campus because I felt like in the long term, United Campus Workers and the school here are going to really build working at the University of Memphis into a livable job, which it currently is not.” Lichtenstein makes \$8.50 an hour working about 30 hours a week.

Lead organizer for United Campus Workers Tom Smith was present at the rally. “I’m here today because we’re committed to continue the fight for dignity and respect until all public higher education employees make a living wage and have their union recognized by the university,” he said.

Smith was formerly a campus worker at University of Tennessee, Knoxville as a custodian and in the library. The union helped to avoid layoffs by transferring workers, fought for merit raises, and achieved power in day-to-day struggles.

Williams explained that many workers were scared to come to the event for fear of being fired. She said, “Everybody thinks, oh, you work at the University of Memphis, y’all making all this big money, but no, we’re not. There’s no law that says I can’t stand up on this hill under a tree and listen to a speech. The majority of the [workers] really want to but they’re afraid.”

The rally drew to a close as workers went back to work and students back to class.

“We’re just getting started.” Turner-Ramsay proclaimed as the event came to a close. Ms. Williams added: “I’m always going to be hopeful. But if we don’t say nothing, nothing will be done.”

After many people from all walks of life spoke at the rally, the crowd gathered in support was led in song. The group cheered in solidarity.

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# POETRY

*Sunshine*

Oh my sunshine my sunshine  
 What will you bring us today  
 Will there be glum, will the  
 Wind blow or is that for you  
 To say. Will you shine and make  
 Our day bright or will you cease  
 And it'll still be glum. Oh my sun-  
 Shine, come out and make your  
 name

Like it says. Sunshine and make  
 Our day as bright as you, oh my  
 Sunshine, when will you shine so that  
 We can see the beauty of the  
 Gleam, you bring, how you make the  
 Flowers bloom you bring out the  
 bees

And the trees and all the things we  
 Need, even the leaves. Oh my sun-  
 Shine when will you gleam or will it  
 Be seamy, oh my beautiful sunshine.

- Toni W.

*Prelude to Destiny Journey*

In a void; a blank space in time, waiting in  
 line.

Suspension void;  
 Hold-up, hold-back, hold-on.

Questioning void;  
 Why, who, the invisible line;  
 To your dreams, your reason, your sunshine.

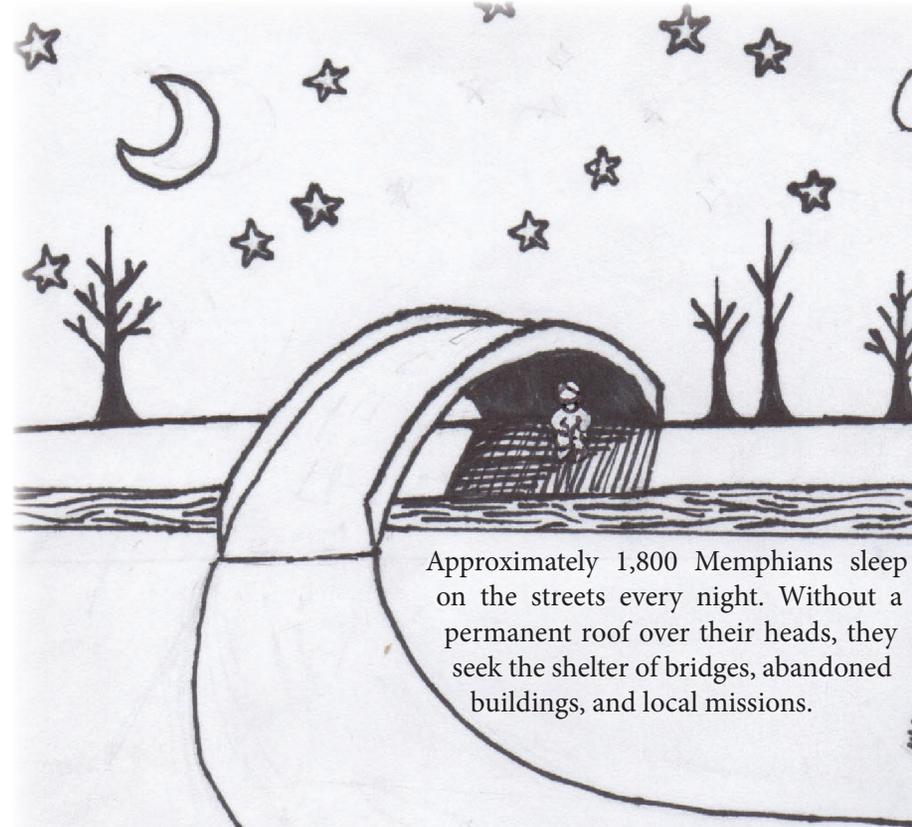
- Delores Washington

*Heaven*

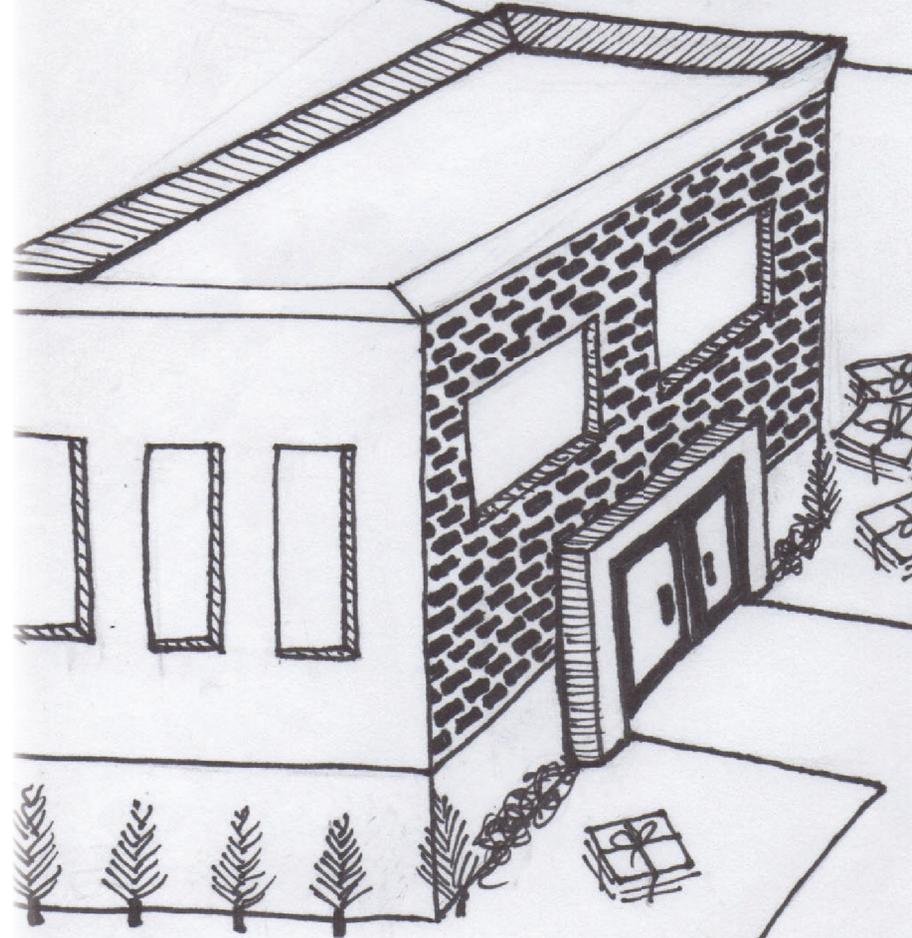
I think heaven is a beautiful place  
 A place with no more sorrow  
 I look forward to going there  
 But I hope its not going to be tomorrow  
 I look forward to going home  
 Where I will be free to walk and roam  
 It will be nice to see loved ones up there  
 Who are living free without a care  
 I want to see the tree of life  
 I want to go where theres no more strife  
 I'm trying to pass my test  
 So I can have eternal rest.

- Candi Jones

## The Ven



Approximately 1,800 Memphians sleep on the streets every night. Without a permanent roof over their heads, they seek the shelter of bridges, abandoned buildings, and local missions.



We hold a training sessions every week at St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral where we teach new vendors selling techniques. They leave the hour-long training session with a badge and stack of 20 free papers.

# por Cycle



Churches around the city offer weekly soup kitchens to feed the hungry. Volunteers from *The Bridge* conduct informal interviews at several soup kitchens every week and encourage those experiencing homelessness to come to vendor training to get a job.



Once a week, we hold a town hall meeting where current vendors share their experiences from the week, exchange selling tips, and create a positive support group. They also have the opportunity to buy more copies of *The Bridge* for a quarter, allowing them to work their way off the streets.



SOPHIE ANDERSON / Staff Artist

## *Holy Spirit*

The core of me, dark electric pushing  
Bursting, stretching all along my throughout;

From the hollow of my pit: my pit of darkness center  
Mine eye of my universe; searching, probing my wholeness;

Connecting, reaching, communicating  
Healing: broken hearts, bodies, minds.

Fulfilling: dreams, hope, faith:  
Fulling and willing, my holy spirit.

- Delores Washington

## *Springtime*

It's springtime, a time for caring  
Just think of all the fun times we'll be sharing.

Lying in the sun and getting a tan  
Maybe inspiring a nice young man  
These are a few of the things we'll be sharing  
Because it's springtime, a time for caring.

- Tina Robinson

## *Life*

A short ripple of polluted air  
Meaningful, but pettiance,  
Footsteps on a treadway,  
Memories dancing by in the gray haze of day.

Sad tones/sweet tones  
Enraptured among nature's greenery.  
Destiny is pre-ordained that the footsteps of man,  
Come from whence they came.

- Delores Washington

## *God*

Past as with Langston Hughes  
Present as with Langston Hughes.

Daycares of sending prayers to God  
God sends me to eat in the kitchen;  
When there.  
Growing strong, for tomorrow  
Hewding upper  
Growing strong  
Kitchening, Thy shalt not.  
Kitchening, The Golden Words send in.

- Theodora Brownard

# Journey II

Con't from page 1

I felt more at home. I didn't continue onward to Greenwood, where I'd lived before coming to Memphis because jobs there were scarce. My plan was to stop in Memphis and secure a job.

I reached into my pocket and fingered the \$2 I'd found and smiled. I knew it was from God to feed me, to get something to take the edge off my hunger. I bought chips and a Coke from the grocery store on the mall.

As I walked on, weakened by hunger and exhaustion thinking of a place to take the load off my feet, I thought about the Sisters of Charity located on Keel Street which was about five or six blocks from the city bus terminal.

I'd lived there through a past bout of homelessness. The Sisters would allow destitute women to stay there free for three weeks; lodging, feeding, and clothing them.

I'd also lived at Living for Christ for about a year or so. It's a shelter for men and women. I'd given up on everything and just flopped, crash-landed there and stayed.

When I got to the gate (a wire, fenced-in gate) no one was there. Desperate to get in, I picked up a few rocks off the ground and threw them at one of the side windows of the dorm building. Luckily, one of the nuns was nearby and heard the plinking sound of the rock. She came out to the gate to meet me. "We aren't taking any more in right now, we have a full house."

"Can you spare something to eat Sister, a sandwich or a bag lunch?"

The Sister looked at me, sizing up my situation and could easily see that I was dusty and thirsty. "We might be able to fit one more in at the supper table this evening at five o'clock. Come back then."

I said okay and left. It was about two. I walked around for a while and walked back up to the courtyard mall, found an empty park bench and sat. I got sleepy and took a short nap right there.

Upon awakening, I went back to the Sisters. I was welcomed with open arms and smiles. I remembered how friendly and warm-hearted they were. I ate a full

dinner with dessert and drank all the iced tea that I wanted.

After I left there, I felt lonely and alone again. I didn't have anywhere to go. I thought about the city bus terminal. I could spend the night there inside and around other people. When I got there, the terminal was closed. It was Sunday and I remembered they close early on Sundays, around six o'clock. I stayed out all night. I went back downtown to the Federal Reserve Building to see if anyone was sleeping on the ground grates that covered the building heating and air conditioning system.

In the summer, homeless people slept there to keep cool and the same way they did in the winter to stay warm. The square area of the grate was about 12 feet by 12 feet. Some nights there would be about 20 people huddled on the grate. No one was there tonight.

It was early dark now and I needed to find somewhere to sleep for the night. I walked back to the bus terminal and luckily someone was there, a woman, homeless like me, was sitting on one of the outside benches with her bags surrounding her.

"Did you miss the last bus?" I asked her.

"No, I'm out for the night," She replied.

"I'm glad you're here. There was some little skinny guy checking me out a while ago. I guess he thought that I was alone. Now that you're here, if he comes back and tries anything we can beat the crap out of him together."

We slept sitting up on that bench all night until the next morning. After sunup I walked to Midtown to find some kind of refuge.

I knew that I had to find some work to get a place to stay. I called Linda at the Commercial Appeal to see if she needed any more people to assemble the Sunday paper. I'd worked there before and she always needed someone. It was only for two days, sometimes three, maybe six hours a day, but it would be enough to rent a room.

In the meantime, I needed somewhere to crash. I needed to wash myself. A McDonald's was nearby at Poplar and Cleveland. I went inside straight to the bathroom, trying not to be seen by a manager. They didn't like homeless people coming there and using their facilities.

I washed up as best that I could with my meager belongings from my backpack, which held toiletries,



Anthony Johnston/ Contributing Artist

personal paper, a few articles of clothing, some scraps of food and my Bible. Most homeless people that I knew carried theirs as a comforter, as protection, or inspiration — or whatever. They just carried one.

After taking care of my hygiene in the McDonald's, I dreamed of bubble baths with candles and incense and a little music.

It had been years since I'd felt the relaxation and total cleanliness of a real bath. Things that some people take for granted, but for me it's like pie in the sky. Some people dream of having a million dollars, but I dreamed of a luxurious bath, along with some other things that I wanted ... but a million dollars wouldn't hurt either.

I went to the radio station on Poplar near Cleveland. It used to be a real radio station, but it had relocated and now it was being used as a soup kitchen for the homeless. There, you could get coffee, donuts, soup, sometimes clothing, books, and just socialize.

I ran into Tyrone, an acquaintance I'd met before leaving Memphis.

Con't on page 11



**The Bridge would like to thank Bluff City Sports for their generous help in printing new vests for our vendors!**



*Con't from page 10*

"Hey, Carmen, give me a dollar." Carmen was a nickname that most people around Midtown called me. Tyrone was one of the local drink boys — the guys that hung around the corner on Poplar and Cleveland at the store and the bus stop drinking beer all day. They had their own money to buy the beer, or they panhandled, or passed their cans of beer around to each other.

"I don't have a dollar, Tyrone. I'm broke. I just got back into town yesterday and I'm looking for a place to crash until I can get a room."

"You can stay a night or two at my place for a few bucks, \$5."

I had \$12 on me from customers at the drug-store that I'd panhandled earlier. I didn't want him to know that I had some money. He would beg me to death, but I was tired and needed a bed to lie down on to stretch, relax, and get some sleep.

"Tyrone, you don't have a place to stay."

## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Mrs. Corrine Washington: a loving, compassionate, servant of God and man.

This is for you mama:

I remember you  
When we used to walk across  
The tracks on quiet Sunday evenings;

When you, me, and cousin Willie Mae  
would walk up the car lot downtown  
and look at the new cars; then we'd  
walk back,  
cousin Willie Mae hopping from  
side to side.

We'd walk back across the tracks and  
sit on the porch and wait on the sunset.

I remember you mama.

I remember when I used to walk  
downtown on those same sunny  
Sunday evenings; alone now,  
marveling at the brilliant sun shine  
on the trees and the grasses.

How it made them shine.  
I walked back then; not knowing of the sunshines  
of the Caribbean, of  
Florida, of California; I walked back  
across the tracks and sat on the porch  
and waited for the sunset.

One day I would see the sunshine all  
over the world and one day mama, you  
would see it all over the universe.

I remember you mama, until we meet  
again,  
I remember you.

-Delores Washington

"Yeah, behind my mother's house. She lets me stay in the old house she moved out of. There's no electricity, but it has running water."

"Okay I'll give you five bucks tonight after I get down there. I need to round up a grocery cart to put my things in first."

I'd gotten a few articles of clothing and stuff from Catholic Charities after I left the radio station. It's one of the places where we get our daily bread — peanut butter sandwiches, bologna sandwiches, boiled eggs, soup, bananas, juice, and coffee. We got heavier dinners from churches on different days of the week.

That night I pushed my cart down to Tyrone's place behind his mother's house. He was there along with some woman that he introduced me to as his girlfriend, a white woman that he later told me was a patient, an ex-addict from the halfway house across the street from where he lived. I went into the house to a back room that held only a dresser and two mattresses stacked on top of each other.

I put my bags down in a corner of the room and got under the blanket on the mattresses. It felt wonderful to lie down on a bed even as bad as this one, especially with the pillow. I hear Tyrone and his girlfriend in the next room laughing and mumbling low to each other. They were getting high — smoking crack.

Along about midnight Tyrone came into the room. "Hey, Carmen, get up! I need some more money."

Apparently he and his girlfriend had smoked up the \$5 I had given him for the room.

"I just gave you \$5 two hours ago, Tyrone, for the night."

"I need \$5 more or you're going to get out of here."

"That's not right, Tyrone. Just because you want to show your girlfriend that you've got some money. I just paid you. You can't put me out."

"Wanna bet?"

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# Is the V.A. living up to its promises?

BY BROOKE BIERDZ

Contributing Writer

The V.A. More officially known as the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the V.A. actually has its roots in the Plymouth Colony in the 1600s. When the pilgrims of Plymouth were at war with the Pequot Indians in 1636, the colony passed a law entitling disabled soldiers to financial assistance from the colony. About 150 years later, the Continental Congress of 1776, which established the United States Declaration of Independence, offered pensions to disabled soldiers in order to encourage enlistments during the Revolutionary War. It wasn't until 1811 that the federal government authorized the first domiciliary and medical facility for veterans; and throughout the 19th century, programs to assist U.S. veterans vastly expanded. Upon the United States' entry into World War I in 1917, Congress established a new system of veterans' benefits in anticipation of the ramifications of the war. In 1930, Congress authorized the President to "consolidate and coordinate government activities affecting war veterans" since there were three different federal agencies acting on behalf of the veterans at the time.

Today, the primary function of the Department of Veterans Affairs is to support veterans in their time after service by providing certain benefits and supports. This is accomplished through the actions of three subdivisions: the Veterans Health Administration (V.H.A.), the Veterans Benefits Administration (V.B.A.), and the National Cemetery Administration.

Since its founding, the department has continued to grow in size and magnitude with its health care system growing from 54 hospitals in 1930 to include 152 hospitals, 800 community-based outpatient clinics, 126 nursing home care units, and 35 domiciliaries in 2012. Upon saying, "There is only one place for the veterans of America, in the Cabinet Room, at the table with the President of the United States of America," President H. W. Bush established the V.A. as a Cabinet-level position on March 15, 1989.

In 2009, President Obama appointed retired U.S. Army General Eric Shinseki to lead a massive transformation of the V.A. into a high-performing, 21st century organization that can better serve veterans. Under Shinseki's leadership, the VA has adopted three guiding principles: to become people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking.

These principles are reflected in the 16 major initiatives that serve as a platform for transformation; some of these include: eliminating veteran homelessness, automating G.I. Bill benefits, improving veteran's mental health, and improving the quality of health care while reducing cost.

The Veterans Health Administration (V.H.A.) accomplishes some of the most pervasive and ambitious aspects of the V.A.'s functions. A great undertaking for any organization, the V.H.A. is tasked with providing health care in all its forms and performing biomedical research.

Years ago, journalists leaked a scandal involving decomposed bodies found near a veteran's medical center in Salem, Va. They turned out to be those of patients who had wandered off months before.

Recall popular media portrayals of veteran's hospitals, such as those shown in the film "Born on the Fourth of July," in which a wounded Vietnam veteran receives shabby treatment in a crumbling, rat-infested veteran's hospital.

While it is true that in the mid-1990s the reputation of veteran's hospitals had sunk drastically low, a 2003 study performed by the New England Journal of Medicine found that on 11 measures of healthcare quality, veterans'



HANNAH HALFORD/ Staff Photographer

**GETTING BETTER:** While hindered by problems in the past, the Department of Veterans Affairs now surpasses Medicare in patient satisfaction.

hospitals proved to be "significantly better" as compared to fee-for-service Medicare.

The Annals of Internal Medicine also recently published a study that compared veteran's health facilities with commercial, managed-care systems in their treatments of diabetes patients. In seven out of seven measures of quality, the V.A. provided better care.

Additionally, the National Committee for Quality Assurance ranks healthcare plans on 17 different performance measures.

Achieving the NCQA's approval is the gold standard in the healthcare industry. In every single category, the V.H.A. system outperforms the highest rated non-V.H.A. hospitals like Johns Hopkins and Mayo Clinic.

Indeed, 81 percent of V.H.A. hospital patients expressed satisfaction with the care received, compared to 77 percent of Medicare and Medicaid patients.

So maybe it's not all that bad?

Phillip Longman discusses in his book "Best Care Anywhere" the processes that the V.H.A. has undergone to reach such pinnacles of success. Even outside experts, including Institute for Health Care Improvement president Dr. Donald M. Berwick, agree that the V.H.A. has become an industry leader in its safety and quality measures. This has not always been the case, however.

In the mid-1990s the veteran's healthcare system was in a deep crisis. Hospital beds were emptying and doctors were not performing surgeries as the population of veterans sharply declined.

While voices called for the complete dismantling of the veteran's healthcare system, Kenneth W. Kizer became the V.H.A.'s undersecretary for health (in effect, the system's CEO).

A physician trained in emergency medicine and public health, Kizer immediately started upending the V.H.A.'s entrenched bureaucracy through radical downsizes and decentralization of management power, implementation of pay-for-performance contracts with top executives, and winning the right to fire incompetent doctors. He

and his team sought to transform the V.H.A. from an acute care system into one focused on primary care and outpatient services. They also became obsessed with systematically improving quality and safety.

By 1998, things were already turning around and Kizer was getting generous credit. How exactly did this systematic improvement occur? It seems in large part due to something termed "laptop medicine."

Today, many offices are converting to electronic medical records, and the V.H.A. has mastered this conversion. It uses an information technology approach to deeply

reduce medical errors, to improve diagnoses, and ensure coordinated post-hospital care.

The system, VistA, is putting more science into the practice of medicine — and with powerful results. Medication errors are being prevented and patients more fully treated.

The integration of medical records from generalists and specialists is making treatment more accurate and efficient. Patients are able to access their complete medical records. Researchers can look back at collective medical records and determine which procedures work best.

Diagnoses are being made more quickly and accurately with such complete information. Healthcare professionals couldn't be more satisfied with the system. It is being used in public healthcare systems in Finland, Germany, and Nigeria.

This begs the question: why isn't this being replicated in healthcare systems across the United States?

Technophobia and resistance to change are the most common diagnoses. An even broader reason is the fact that even small changes take so long to be implemented systematically in the healthcare field.

Additionally, healthcare providers in the private sector often lack the financial incentive to invest in electronic medical records and other tactics to improve the quality of care.

Several studies using cross-sectional survey methods have attested the perception of quality care at V.H.A. hospitals.

Con't on page 13

"The system, VistA, is putting more science into the practice of medicine — and with powerful results. Medication errors are being prevented and patients more fully treated."

- Brooke Bierdz



HANNAH HALFORD/ Staff Photographer

**HOMELESS VETERANS:** Even with the help of services such as Alpha Omega, the experiences of veterans lead to higher rates of homelessness than the population at large.

*Con't from page 12*

Elizabeth Yano and her team of researchers found that only rudimentary primary care was in place in 1993 and that it grew from 38 to 45 percent in 1996 (when the quality transformation just begun) to 95 percent in 1999.

They concluded that investment in primary care development may have served as an essential substrate for many V.A. quality gains.

They also speculate that fundamental changes in how primary care was organized (e.g. improved continuity of doctor-patient relationships, use of primary care to train future providers, use of biopsychosocial models to improve patient health) may have served as an essential base for V.A.'s policy reform.

Another study headed by Steven Asch found that adherence to recommended processes of care in two V.H.A. regions typically exceeded that of a comparable national sample in 12 communities.

These findings even persisted when adjusted for age, number of acute and chronic conditions, and the number of outpatient visits.

Vets complain of difficulties they encounter in establishing eligibility to guarantee this high quality care from V.A. medical centers, but rarely complain if afforded this service.

These studies and the overwhelmingly successful transformation of V.H.A.

hospitals have made such systems the standard of medicine for which private sector systems strive.

With this astounding evidence, I wonder what makes the V.H.A. hospitals so successful.

First, unlike virtually all other healthcare systems in the U.S., V.H.A. has a near-lifetime relationship with its patients, giving them incentive to invest in prevention and more effective treatments.

It's simply maximizing its own resources.

Second, its doctors are salaried. Most could make more money doing something else, so their commitment to their profession is evident and they have no need to be fearful of new protocols or technologies to keep people well.

Third, because it is a well-defined system, the V.H.A. can systematically function to attack patient safety issues, manage information, develop and implement evidence-based standards of care, and discover where its care needs improvement.

In short, it can do what the rest of the healthcare sector can't seem to do, which is to pursue quality systematically without threatening its own financial viability.

With the increase in veteran suicides it is evident — now more than ever — that more mental health services need to be provided for veterans.

As reported in the July 23, 2012 issue of Time, more U.S. soldiers have killed themselves than have died in the Afghan War. The prevalence and persistence of PTSD cannot be understated, and its effects are evident.

The V.A. has published the "Guide to V.A. Mental Health Services for Veterans and Families," which is designed to teach what mental health services local and regional V.A. health care facilities have pledged to provide to veterans.

While the V.A. does provide a national call center for homeless veterans (1-877-4AID VET), outreach to veterans living on the streets, and drop-in centers, there is a shortage of qualified mental health professionals.

Preventing and ending veteran's homelessness is a current initiative in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Unfortunately, without a plan of action, there will remain an estimated 107,000 homeless veterans on any given night, according to recent data.

Veteran homelessness is a complex and multidirectional issue.

It is known that veterans account for a larger proportion of those experiencing homelessness compared to the overall population, but we also know that experiences that predate military service common of service members increase the risk of homelessness. These include: physical or sexual abuse as a child, other traumatic experiences, or foster care.

Additionally, experiences during service contribute to high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and sexual trauma (especially for women). PTSD may also contribute to substance abuse problems and relapse.

Other mental health problems common of veterans may create barriers to employment and stable relationships. All of these risk factors contribute to high rates of veteran homelessness.

There are unique and robust programs and supports available for veterans, but for some their lack of awareness about programs or their ambivalence about seeking care may keep them from receiving these services. Secretary Shinseki and the VA are committed to working with the United States Intragency Council on Homelessness (USICH) to address these issues.

The USICH specifically aims to end veterans' homelessness by 2015 among other goals as laid out in "Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness."

Presented to the Office of the President and Congress in 2010, "Opening Doors" is the nation's first comprehensive strategy to prevent and end homelessness. It serves as a roadmap for joint action by the 19 USICH member agencies (along with local and state partners in the public and private sectors).

The plan presents strategies building upon the lesson that mainstream housing, health, education, and human services programs must be fully engaged and coordinated to prevent and end homelessness.

A signature initiative also includes the facilitation of collaborative efforts by the Departments of Veteran's Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Health and Human Services to align resources for greater effectiveness by bringing together programs that would otherwise operate separately.

With big ambitions and about more than two years to go, we will have to wait and see how successful the USICH is in its endeavors outlined in "Opening Doors" — with both high hopes and many crossed fingers, no doubt.

The V.A. has received scathing reviews of its medical facilities and has been negatively portrayed by the media, but it seems that it's not all that bad.

The Department itself is obviously premised in an honorable mission — to provide critical services for those who commit to our country.

While more attention needs to be allotted to mental health services, V.H.A. healthcare systems are excelling beyond those of the private sector. The V.A. is also committed to ending veteran homelessness by 2015.

The prognosis is difficult to label since we have two and a half years until the self-proclaimed deadline, but the fact that a national strategic plan has been developed gives those 107,000 homeless veterans hope that things may change in the near future.

Help is out there. It may require work to be certified as eligible to receive it, but according to many, the effort is worth it.

The V.A. is committed to repaying veterans for their service to our country — and those who have undertaken the charge of defending this country, its rights, and its principles deserve the support provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

It is the least we can do "to care for those who shall have borne the battle" for the rest of us.

"While more attention needs to be allotted to mental health services, V.H.A. healthcare systems are excelling beyond those of the private sector."

- Brooke Bierdz

Con't from page 6

You hear these things, and you can't believe people are complaining about this. It's not their fault, I get it, they don't understand," he hastened to assure us. "But you just see it. It builds up a lot of anger. Guys coming back don't know how to deal with that, and they don't know what outlet to go to to get that out.

"What's common is alcohol and drugs. That's where a lot of these guys are falling in; that's where I fell in. I was one and the same. I'm lucky that I got out and got help. I feel for the guys still coming back from Afghanistan who have no idea what they're coming back to."

Josh attributed his successful recovery to a unique support system that he says separates him from those who are not as fortunate: his family.

"I'm luckier than others," he said. "I have a family to fall back on. I chose to be a part of this program. Some of these guys don't have that."

Lacking familial support because "they've either worn them ragged or they just don't have any," these individuals, according to Josh, are at an immediate disadvantage, mainly because, as mentioned, getting help from the V.A. is not a simple task.

"The way I found out about the programs at the V.A. is through another veteran," Josh explained. From there, Josh's family was able, as he explained earlier, to motivate him to reach out to the Alpha Omega shelter. "That's usually how we find out: word of mouth. Usually at the urging of a veteran or someone who's in the V.A., or their family."

Establishing these interpersonal connections, then, is crucial to recovery. Josh favored programs like Alpha Omega and others like it because they connect

veterans to each other, which in turn provide them with the kind of empathy everyday civilians inevitably lack.

"When you talk about your situation, or when I would talk to my family, it seemed like it made them uncomfortable," Josh said, looking regretful. "They couldn't understand; they couldn't relate. It's not their fault — it's just the fact that they haven't been there. That's the great thing about a place like here, you're with guys who are in the same situation."

Describing the bond between veterans as "a common language we have," Josh applauds the efforts of these programs in connecting veterans across generations.

His praise, stemming from personal experience, only solidifies his argument that the V.A. deserves sounder support from higher-ups.

He has seen firsthand, in his own life and in those of the others around him, how influential these programs are in changing the lives of veterans of all ages.

"Everyone has a different story, different issues," he surmised, "but we're all pretty much at the same point that something's broken, and that's why we're here: we're trying to fix it."

"Fixing it," as can be seen, is a task that must be taken up not just by the veterans but by those in charge of funding, staffing, and executing national programs as well as each veteran's own society.

Encouraging veterans to establish those critical connections, being as empathetic a listener as possi-

ble, and refusing to shut them out when they become frustrated or angry are all ways family and friends of veterans can help make a difference. Most importantly, Josh told us, is communication.

"I don't know how to fix it," he admitted. "I think that there's definitely a way to fix it. But I think what y'all are doing, getting the word out, that's great."

Concerned for the future generations of returning veterans as well as those still suffering every day, Josh recognizes and points out the need to spread knowledge and information about the condition of returning veterans, and the importance of proactive efforts.

"Get the word out," he urged. "And slowly, I know it's going to take years and years, but something can be fixed."

"They couldn't understand; they couldn't relate. It's not their fault — it's just the fact that they haven't been there."

- Josh Nester

More information about Alpha Omega's services, including additional testimonials, events, pro-

grams, media, and resources, can be found online at their website: [www.aovs.org](http://www.aovs.org).

The Veterans Crisis Line connects veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text.

Veterans and their loved ones can call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, chat online, or send a text message to 838255 to receive confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

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## Interview with: Thomas “Tomcat” Anderson

BY MOLLY WHITEHORN  
Contributing Writer

Nothing fazes Thomas “Tomcat” Anderson. Born in Missouri in 1957 and raised “a few blocks from LeMoyne Gardens,” Anderson remembers how the “big players — the pimps, the hustlers” stood out in his neighborhood, and he began to emulate their lifestyles.

“I started working in the pool room when I was about 16 years old and I learned how to play pool. [That’s where] I got introduced to alcohol.”

By the time he was 18, he had been in juvenile hall four times and was sentenced to a correctional school for boys called Tennessee Youth Center for an indefinite period of time.

After receiving his diploma, he was almost immediately arrested for a robbery charge, but was found not guilty.

However, the next time Anderson got arrested, he was told that he would either be locked up or he could join the Army. “So I joined the Army, and my drinking escalated. I can say I really became an alcoholic then.”

After Anderson got out of the army in 1981, he became homeless. His addictions became more severe, he started using drugs, and was in and out of jail.

“Back then, the homeless weren’t recognized as they are today. We didn’t have access to the things they have now. The only place that was open for the homeless back then was called the Day Shelter. There would be work that came through the shelter. We would go out and spend [the money] on drugs and alcohol and do the same thing the next day.”

Although Anderson did not have a home of his own before 1981, he often spent nights at his mother’s house. Anderson says that after she passed away in 1981, he found himself homeless.

“After my mom died, I kind of felt like I couldn’t go to anyone. That’s when I started downtown. I don’t really know what brought me [there], but I just struck out walking and ended up downtown and that’s where I was until 1993. I never went back to my neighborhood. They didn’t know whether I was alive or dead. I didn’t have any contact with family or anything. No one tried to find me, so I didn’t try to find them. My homeless friends became my family.”

Anderson’s downward spiral of drug and alcohol abuse continued for years. At one point, to feed his addiction, he started to sell for a drug dealer.

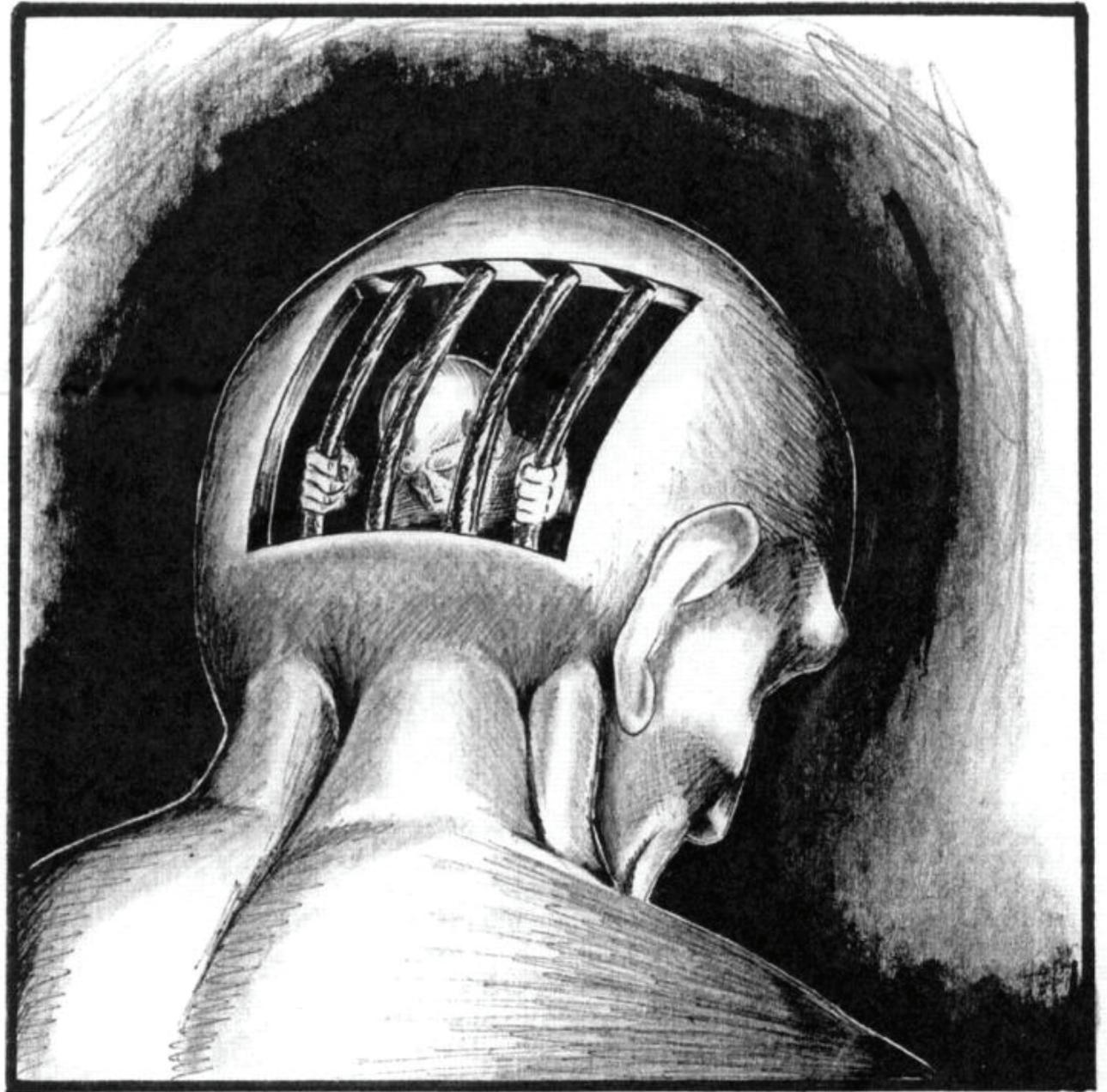
On July 4, 1987, Anderson and his fellow sellers were given the day off. A man came to get drugs, wouldn’t take no for an answer, and Anderson ended up being shot four times and left for dead in an alley.

“That should have been my first sign to get out of it, but it only made [my addiction] worse. After that, I just wanted to get high.”

Another instance that could have been a wake-up call for Anderson occurred in 1991 when he fell about 3 feet down an elevator shaft in the Hickman Building, an abandoned building where homeless individuals sought refuge.

After the fall, he lay paralyzed for about eight hours and says that the fact that he didn’t suffer long-term

“No one tried to find me, so I didn’t try to find them. My homeless friends became my family.”  
- “Tomcat” Anderson



STREET VIBES / Contributing Artist

**PRISON FOR ONE:** The self-inflicted prison created by Tom’s drug and alcohol abuse led to an arrest in 1993, which finally gave him some much-needed clarity.

damage from the incident “wasn’t luck. God had another will for me, which was to be in the position I’m in now to help others out of drugs and alcohol.”

Anderson finally had his moment of clarity after he was arrested on Beale Street in 1993. While in jail, he “kept prayin’ and prayin’ that when I got out, I wouldn’t still be doing the same things I’ve been doing all of these years.” When he got out in 1996, Anderson got treatment and hasn’t touched drugs or alcohol since.

After he got sober, Anderson started volunteering at Cavalry Street Mission in the mornings while working nights at Rendezvous. Eventually he went on to become the director of the Mission’s drop-in summit at 600 Poplar. In June of 2009, he began working at the Hospitality Hub, where he has continued to thrive.

“Everyone isn’t homeless because of drugs and alcohol. At the time, when I was in my addiction, I didn’t know that. I thought everybody was using something. People get homeless at any given time ... when I was at 600 Poplar, people would come in and say, ‘My mom put me out [because] she got a new boyfriend’ or ‘I lost my job and I can’t pay rent’ or ‘I just moved here. My friend told me they had

work for me, but they don’t have work for me now and I’m homeless.’ You have different situations and you have to deal with them differently,” he discovered.

Anderson has also become an advocate for the mentally ill. He describes one eye-opening experience when he visited a formerly homeless man’s new home. “He was living in a room with no running water, no electricity, no refrigerator, no stove. [There were] roaches and rats everywhere. That’s when I realized how bad the mentally ill were being treated ... he had used his whole check for this room.”

After years of working with the mentally ill, Anderson has realized that “they could be some of the best people you’ll ever know.”

Having suffered from addiction for years, it is amazing how sharp Anderson remains. He rattles off dates and addresses and can remember details that most would have forgotten long ago.

“You can go to school for this, you can be educated by professors and everything, but for a person that’s been down in the trenches, they have a lot more knowledge of how the people actually think.”

Some people climb mountains for fun. For Anderson, it’s his calling. After pulling himself from the deepest depths, he returns to offer his strength to others on the way up, every single day.

My name is Joe.  
This is my voice.  
This is my livelihood.



#bridgethegap