

THE HOMELESS



VOICE

5th Annual Will Write For Food Edition

COSAC Foundation

PO Box 292-577 Davie, FL 33329

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MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME ...

Get to know the residents at the COSAC homeless shelter



Families Page 5

Photo by Jacob Byk



Friends Page 4

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More stories unfold at wwff.us:

Meet the man who cooks the shelter's food

Read first hand accounts from the students who put together this paper

A search for one resident's true past reveals a man haunted by memory, illusion and reality

FINDING COMMON GROUND

For two of them it meant a more than 24-hour roadtrip. For two others it was a reason for their first flight on an airplane. The youngest was 17, the oldest was 50.

Curiosity was their common ground.

Students ate meals, chatted and toured the rooms in a shelter of more than 200 residents.

The staff was immersed in shelter life from Saturday night through Sunday (sleeping very little at a funky Ramada Inn), running back to a makeshift newsroom to swap stories with each other before darting out again for more interviews.

Together, they questioned how best to tell the stories of people who are rarely asked to share their experience of homelessness.

On the first night, the students rattled off observations and discussed how to best cover such a tough issue with compassion.

"How do you cover the homeless without exploiting them?" asked one reporter.

"I was surprised at how much we had in common," said another.

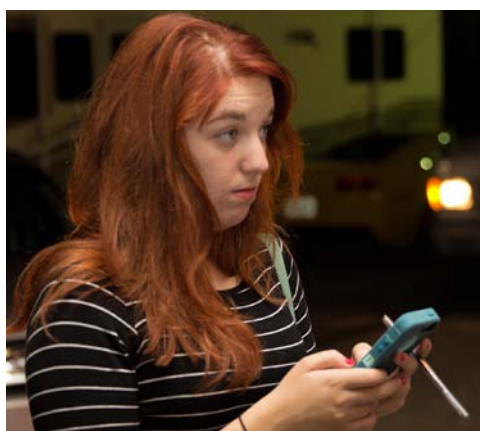
After 15 hours of interviews, reporters, photographers, designers and videographers huddled together to decide how to produce a 20 page paper.

As editor it's my job to let the students' voices shine through. Their work and their tweets (see below) speak for themselves.

@Kryloftis "It's been inspiring, deeply saddening and above all else - real."

@Gidelannoy "Last week, I was terrified at the thought of staying at a homeless shelter. Now I cringe at the thought of leaving."

@Nrhg05 "It's almost over and the thought of leaving the homeless shelter is making me sad. I will never forget the residents of COSAC."



Photograph by Noelle Haro-Gomez

By Bethany Barnes

Student journalists from 12 states chose to spend Labor Day weekend in the Charity of Sean Anthony Cononie (COSAC) Homeless Shelter creating this issue of the Homeless Voice.

20 college students and one high school student paid their way (we're running on scant grant dollars here) to Hollywood, Fla. so they could produce a newspaper and website in 36 hours.

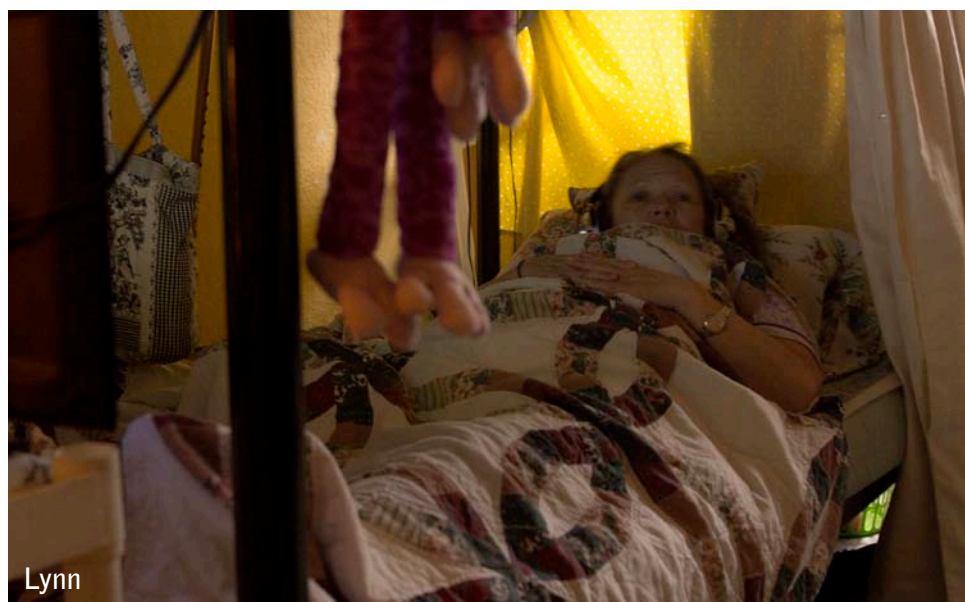
"Special thanks to the Society of Professional Journalists South Florida Chapter, SPJ SDX Foundation, SPJ Region 3 and the Florida College Press Association. Note: the content in this issue does not represent the views of the shelter or the views of its Founder/Director Sean Cononie."



For three women, happiness means friendship and a can of paint



Dianna



Lynn



Susie

By Shannon Reville
Photography by Noelle Haro-Gomez

Everything has been pulled away from the walls. A foot or so of space separates faded, yellow concrete from three black bunk beds, dented dressers, stacks of wicker baskets and word-search puzzle books.

Susie, one of room 205's three residents, plans to paint the room the perfect shade of "apple green." Not grass green, not celery green.

Roommates Susie, Lynn and Dianna are middle-aged homeless women living at COSAC Homeless Shelter, making a home out of whatever they can get their hands on.

In this way, Room 205 is different than the other rooms at COSAC.

A blue metallic wind chime hangs in the entryway, dangling moons and stars that jingle when someone opens and shuts the door.

Freshly washed coffee mugs lay drying on a towel next to pink, plastic water bottles filled with sugar for coffee.

A purple and pink afghan, the kind that everyone's grandmother has hanging over the back of her couch, is pulled up to Lynn's chin, her wrinkled fingers peaking out as she grasps the blanket's edge and watches old army movies.

What for many is a temporary place to stay, room 205 at COSAC has become a home for these three women. Lynn has lived in room 205 for 12 years and she doesn't intend to leave.

"I got used to it," Lynn says, "I got used to the people here."

Susie, who moved to room 205 two years ago, has acted as Lynn's "paid companion and aide," so she has learned to understand Lynn to finish her sentences.

"She has vocabulary issues, like, she

will think green and say orange," Susie says about Lynn, who had a stroke. "But here's the fun part: She can say orange, and I know she meant green."

Thinking about this, Susie lets out her classic smoker's laugh, dry and scratchy, and recalls all the odd things Lynn has said, and she's translated.

Susie compares her understanding of Lynn to a mother with a baby learning to talk. While others hear gibberish, the child's family knows exactly what she is saying.

It's Dianna's day off, so she lays in her top bunk and lounges. At her feet there is a pile of stuffed animals, one big white teddy bear, like the kind one wins at a carnival. Tucked in between the mattress and bed frame are two silver cans of generic diet cola—nobody messes with Dianna's, also known as "Lady-D", diet cola.

"She comes in and she just fits right in," Lynn says of Dianna, who grins at that compliment.

"I am lucky to have these girls," Dianna says. "One Friday, I wasn't home by six like usual, and these two were worried sick about me. They sent someone out to get me checked on."

These women believe their situation is simple: they understand one another, they are considerate of each other, they are making the best of what they've got and over the years, they've made this space their own.

"We are just so thankful to have a room of like-minds and like attitudes," Susie says. "This is just heaven."

She looks to Dianna and Lynn, all three smiling and shaking their heads. For now, the three are excited to paint their home apple green.

"I've painted the room a thousand times in my mind," Susie says. "If I can just paint one wall at a time, and paint them right, I think it will look good."

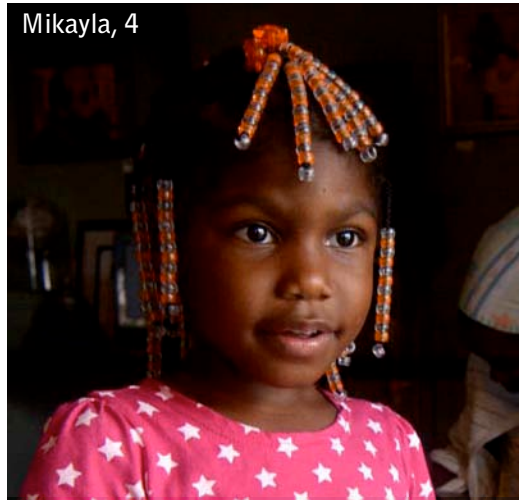
"It is going to be so good," Dianna quickly chimes in. "If I know you, Susie, it is going to be good."



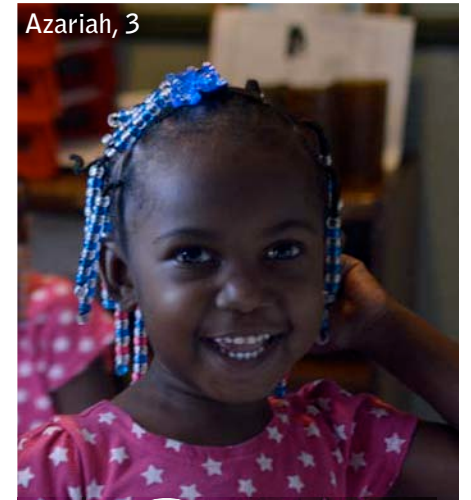
Ashley, 23, takes a moment to herself as her two children playfully run through the office of the shelter after their first night's stay. It is not immediately known how long they will be allowed, since the shelter doesn't generally take children.



Mikayla, 4, laughs as she playfully runs through the office of the shelter.



Mikayla, 4



Azariah, 3

A HOME FOR EVERYONE

People with children brave dangers of homeless shelters for a safe place to sleep

By Krysta Amber Loftis
Photography by Jacob Byk

Ashley, 23, slept on the COSAC Homeless Shelter floor with her two daughters, one 3 and one 4-years-old, and they were grateful.

After being turned away by another shelter which said it had no space for her family, Ashley was surprised that she and her daughters were welcomed into COSAC. Instead of spending the night on the street, Ashley and her children got a hot meal and a place to sleep.

"We slept in the hallway; they put mats on the floor," Ashley explained. "We didn't have nowhere else to go."

Ashley and her daughters are one of two families staying in COSAC. The COSAC staff shut off a section of the main hallway for the families to sleep in for the night.

While privacy is limited within the shelter, the COSAC staff does what it can to ensure the safety of children.

It is difficult to believe a family would be turned away from a homeless shelter, but the potential dangers of the shelter leave staff hesitant to take in anyone with children. COSAC takes a different approach by offering shelter and helping them move out as quickly as possible.

"We really do whatever it takes to get them off the streets," said Sean Cononie, founder and director of COSAC. "Our policy has always been expand, expand, expand; we aren't going to turn a family away."

The COSAC Foundation has helped support and house 221 families since its establishment in May 1997.

While having a roof over children's heads at night is a relief, a homeless shelter is far from 'kid-friendly.' COSAC takes in the homeless who seek assistance, including the ill and violent, whether or not children live in the facility.

Currently COSAC is not housing any registered sex offenders, but if it were to take one in, the parents of children would be notified immediately. If they decided to

stay, the staff at COSAC would photograph the offender and give a copy of the photo to the parents.

The violent and mentally ill residents of COSAC are housed on the second floor in a private room. People with children are set up in the nearby art gallery or in closed-off hallways. Although families are separated from potentially hostile residents at night, those residents are free to roam the facility during the day. The COSAC staff does what it can to prevent violence within the shelter, but some is inevitable. It is impossible to monitor every resident all the time.

Deltrecia, 19, spent her first night in COSAC sleeping on the floor with her three children, who range from 3 months to 2-years-old. When asked about the dangers of living in a homeless shelter with children, she explained that she does not want to stay at COSAC too long.

"It's not a good place for my kids," said Deltrecia, who was recently kicked out of her grandmother's house. "But we don't got nowhere else to go right now."

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FOUR WALLS ARE BETTER THAN NONE

COSAC residents lack privacy at shelter but enjoy amenities, community

By Emily Miels

Photography by Noelle Haro-Gomez

Living six to a room with no locks on the doors while under constant video surveillance may not be everyone's preferred level of privacy, but COSAC Homeless Shelter residents say it beats living on the streets.

"Hell yes it's got its bad points," said Greg Gaudette, who has lived at the shelter intermittently for 15 years. "But what are you going to do?"

COSAC houses about 250 to 300 people, according to Founder Sean Cononie.

Due to safety concerns, COSAC has many security measures in place that some may find objectionable. There are about 40 security cameras spread throughout the building and outside and no locks on the inner doors.

"There's no expectation of privacy," COSAC co-director and Homeless Voice editor Mark Targett said.

The close quarters can be stressful. People are often disrespectful and communication is sometimes difficult, said Felix Morales, a new COSAC resident.

"It's a hell of an experience, I'll tell you that much," Morales said.

Resident Judy Rowland said she's frequently woken up at night because all the people going in and out.

"It's not ideal but it's better than being on the street," she said.

Many residents put signs on the doors that ask people to knock before entering in hopes of gaining more privacy and respect, but that doesn't always happen.

"We don't have to knock," Cononie said. "I do, but not all the time. It depends what's going on. If I go in a woman's room, I'll say 'Man on deck.'"

Cononie said most of the cameras in the building are visible and located in public areas of the shelter.

"We have hidden cameras in the building but not in the bathrooms and not in the rooms," he said.

Occasionally cameras will be put in the bedrooms to keep watch on tenants who may have breathing issues or there are concerns about overdosing, Cononie explained.

Some of the bathrooms have curtains instead of doors so COSAC volunteers are able to quickly enter in case of an emergency.

"If we have somebody who's tried to commit suicide several times we want to be able to go in their bathroom if we think they've done something wrong and try and help them," Cononie said.

Residents can bunk with whoever they like, including opposite sex. The shelter doesn't get involved unless there is a dispute.

"However they can function and get along is what we're about," Cononie said. "I've lived with girls, I've lived with guys. It's no big deal."

There are some privacy concerns when people want to be intimate, according to Cononie.

For instance, if people are having sex in the rooms and making their roommates uncomfortable, "we kind of make it our business to get involved," he said. Cononie said he promotes safe sex and communication between roommates if this becomes a problem.

Because many of the residents develop strong bonds, open communication is encouraged, no matter what the issue, Targett explained.

"In here it's ok to let others know if your friend is making a mistake," he said. "It shows that you care about them."

Ultimately, concern for the safety of residents justifies the somewhat invasive measures that are taken.

"I know them. They're my friends," Cononie said. "This is my place. My job is to protect them."

In spite of the lack of privacy at the shelter, residents said they gain a sense of camaraderie after moving in. Just like anyone who lives together, they get used to each other and the awkward situations.

"You loosen up your standards," Cononie continued. "Just like on a submarine or a ship, you get used to people walking around in their bra or underwear. It just happens and you become family."

Like a family, residents and staff encourage and support one another. While residents get on each other's nerves and there are confrontations, everyone always has one another's backs, Gaudette said.

"In general what I see is that everyone respects one another," Gaudette said.



Photo Illustration by Noelle Haro-Gomez



HAUTE AND HOMELESS

What does homelessness look like? Not like I expected.



Robbie D. Robinson, 72
Former model and actress; likes quality, girly clothing and accessories

“I like to go down to the thrift store and pick out nice things. I need purses badly; it’s hard to find a good purse.”

By Shannon Reville
Photography by Noelle Haro-Gomez

Walking into COSAC Homeless Shelter at dinnertime on a Saturday, I expected to see a lot of desperation, people who had given up.

I expected to see jeans frayed around the ankle, splattered with paint or mud or the unknown. I expected to see worn and torn graphic T-shirts with holes in the armpits, articles of clothing so filthy I’d never touch. I expected

greasy hair, dirt-ridden hands and tired faces.

I was wrong.

Between the COSAC residents, the shelter staff and the student reporters, it was difficult to tell the difference between the ones with homes and those without based on clothes alone.

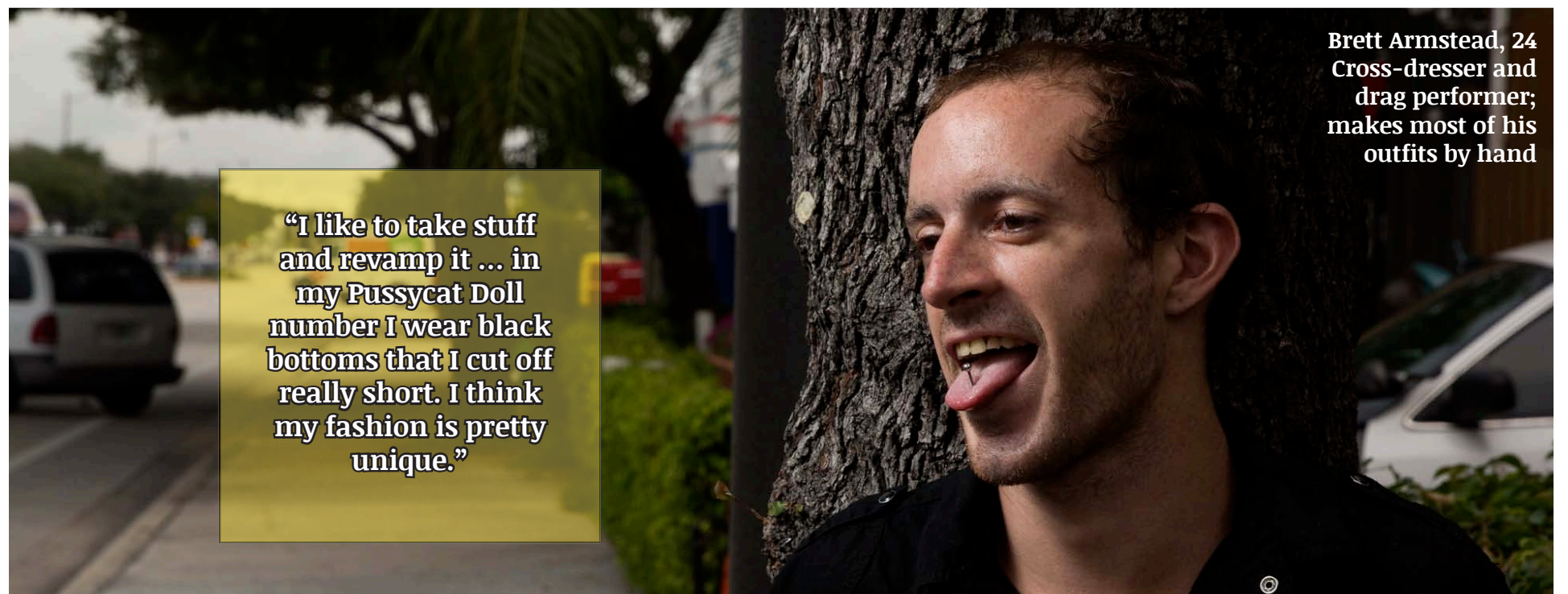
Robbi Robinson, Brett Armstead, and Rosemaria Yale are perfect examples of COSAC residents who contradict the stereotype I walked in with.

They dress, well ... just like I would on a Saturday night at my home in suburban New Hampshire.



Rosemaria Yale, 60
Beautician, born in Italy, raised in NYC; only wears Ed Hardy or Harley Davidson

“I was a licensed beautician in New York. I had my own shop, I was a spoiled Italian girl ... and I still buy my Maybelline.”



Brett Armstead, 24
Cross-dresser and drag performer; makes most of his outfits by hand

“I like to take stuff and revamp it ... in my Pussycat Doll number I wear black bottoms that I cut off really short. I think my fashion is pretty unique.”

DRUG USER OVERCOMES BATTLE

An unlikely candidate lands prime position inside COSAC Homeless Shelter

By Malorie Paine
Photo By Jacob Byk

From taking OxyContin to serving jail time for marijuana possession, Mark Targett seems an unlikely candidate to take over the COSAC Homeless Shelter.

However, the now straight-laced father of five is COSAC director and founder Sean Cononie's first choice.

Targett remembers the first day he met Cononie well. Cononie asked him to read a poem he'd written about cocaine.

"I don't remember exactly what it said, but I just remember it saying how cocaine ruins lives," Targett said. "It was just odd because the night before I had just tried it for the first time."

From that point on, Cononie invested his time into Targett. Though Targett had a long road of recovery after trying different drugs and substances; today he is the only person Cononie trusts to be in charge. Targett has become a face for what COSAC can do.

Targett spent three years in a program that most finish in just a year. After three months in jail, the court mandated a one-year rehabilitation program. Every four months Targett would get high forcing him to restart the program. Eventually, Targett landed himself back in jail.

"I was 18 or 19 years old and hanging out with people that lived on the street," Targett

said. "I knew that was where my life was going if I didn't get it together."

Targett's turning point came after his future wife dumped him and moved to New Jersey. She was done and couldn't deal with his drug use anymore, Targett says.

Targett has now been sober for nine years and is a walking demonstration for what the shelter can do for others. Without the help from Cononie, Targett could still be on a destructive path.

"I had all these problems and was playing the victim," Targett said. "It clicked that if I changed, maybe my problems would go away, and some did."

Today, Targett lives with his wife and children in Atlantic City, N.J. and works with the shelter from home. Even though he lives more than 1,200 miles away, Targett believes he gets more work done from his virtual office.

"This morning I spent an hour waiting around [at the shelter,] if I had been at home I would have taken care of fifty million things," Targett said.

Looking back on his life, Targett is sentimental of the first day he met Cononie.

"When you look back at your life in hindsight, it was so odd that when I met Sean the first day he was like, 'I wrote this poem about cocaine, I want you to read it' ... it was the night before [that I had first used cocaine,] it was weird," Targett said.



Mark Targett

FORMER STOCK BROKER LOSES EVERYTHING

Bruce Aronson had it all, lost it and gives 10 tips to help others avoid that fate

Invest in a mutual fund.

Keep some "ready cash" in the bank.

Save at least 10 percent of your earnings each month.

Budget 50 percent of your budget for living expenses.

Don't bank on receiving a retirement check when you're old.

Look into creating a C.D.

Increase what you save as your salary increases.

Plan for the worst.

Get medical insurance and be picky about finding a job with benefits.

Be careful.

By Catey Traylor
Graphic by Malorie Paine

Bruce Aronson used to have it all. He lived in a \$250,000 house on Hollywood Beach. He was raking in roughly \$100,000 per year as a stockbroker, and he used to "do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted."

Then he started doing cocaine. His bank account vanished. He lost his job, his wife, his child and his house. "I had plenty of money, but I pissed it all away," Aronson said.

Ten years later, he's 66 years old, paying about \$18 a day to share a room with four other homeless people. Instead of partying with his friends, he's now spending his days watching television in the dark and battling the debilitating pain caused by his diabetes.

And he wants you to know it could happen to you, too.

Aronson lives at COSAC Homeless Shelter, along with more than 200 other residents. Though they've come to COSAC due to various circumstances, many of them share the same sentiment: it's important to budget your money, especially when you're young.

"Get a job," said resident Althea Jones, who lives at COSAC and got laid off nearly

a year ago. "Set up a bank account, too. You have to pay your bills. Put yourself on a budget, and remember to always save. Always put some money to the side."

Jones outlined a sample budget, using \$100.

"Let's say you make \$100 a week," she said. "From that \$100, you need to pay your

priorities are in line."

Resident Sherry F. moved into COSAC in early August. She budgets using a bowl.

"Keep a bowl at your front door," she said. "Whenever you come home, empty your receipts into that bowl. Every week or so, go through and figure out how much you're spending. It'll put things into perspective."

Sherry said her biggest mistake was having a "f-k it" attitude when she was young. Now, she's focused on improving her life.

"If you don't try to make it better, it won't get better," she said. "Nobody's going to give you anything."

Aronson lost everything when he lost focus, he said. He partied a lot, stopped saving and lost track of his priorities.

His biggest regret?

"I wasn't careful enough at all," he said. "I had plenty of money, and I wasted it all away. I wish I hadn't done that."

Aronson hopes the rise and fall of his career can serve as an example of what not to do.

"Young people, they don't think about their future," he said. "They don't think about what it'll be like in 10 years. Will you get sick? Will you get fired? What would you do? It happened to me, and trust me, you need to have a plan."

“You have to pay your bills. Put yourself on a budget, and remember to always save.”

rent, put maybe \$30 aside for yourself, and put the rest in your bank account. Do that weekly, and you should be OK."

COSAC resident Judy Rowland isn't sure how she became homeless. She also isn't sure if she'll ever leave the shelter.

And though she can't offer a solution for her own homelessness, she gladly offers advice to keep others out of her situation.

"Pay your rent and utilities first," she stressed. "Put about \$100 in savings each week, if you can afford it. Make sure your

SEAN CONONIE: FROM “THANK YOU” TO “ASSHOLE”

Director of COSAC handles daily abuse and praise from shelter residents

By Dawn Heinbach
Photography by Noelle Haro-Gomez

As director of the COSAC Homeless Shelter, Sean Cononie has been punched, cursed at and spat on by residents. And he's forgiven them all.

"I'm human," Cononie said. "I get mad, I curse and yell, and sometimes I feel that I can't continue. So I'm no different than anybody else. I cannot judge them for their actions."

As a private shelter, COSAC is not required to conform to the rules and regulations enforced by public shelters. The management is unconventional — focused on the residents and visitors rather than finances and daily operations.

"When this shelter opened in 2002, he already had beds in here," said Mark Targett, editor-in-chief of the Homeless Voice — a newspaper produced and sold by the shelter residents as a means of income.

"Within a year, he was living here, even though he has a house in North Hollywood."

Cononie called a woman named Renata into the office.

"Thank you," she said.

"Do you have a couple dollars for me to get something to eat?" She continued. "I'm starving and I missed lunch."

Cononie pulled a few dollars from a roll on the desk.

"Thank you, Mr. Sean," Renata said, and left the office.

"She'll call me an asshole later," Cononie said.

Cononie attributes his ability to forgive on Christian teachings, although he doesn't consider himself to be particularly religious.

"When I don't like someone or what they've done,

I always come back to the fact that I'm not going to deny someone a place to stay based on what they've said or done. Because if my mother was homeless at 60, I would want her to be housed."

Cononie's heart is big, but he is no-nonsense when he needs to be. Officially, shelter residents are not allowed to use drugs or alcohol on the property.

"People sometimes get angry with my tactics," Cononie said. "Because I can turn a blind eye to things that happen here, and then the accusation is that I'm allowing them to continue with their addictions."

But Cononie explains his reasoning. "Of course, I

council them when they come in. I ask them: 'Do you want to get off heroin?' If they say 'no,' I can't make them. I will ask them the same question again in a few weeks."

This compassionate visionary continues to house and help Hollywood's homeless because of the people who depend on him: the 500 people a day who receive meals at COSAC, as well as those seeking refuge from the streets.

"I believe that it is what God wants me to do," he said. "We need to help each other."

THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE PRIVATE SHELTER

Why COSAC takes people other facilities kick to the curb

By Emily Evans

Merritt Thomas is 52 and homeless.

He was 26 when he started taking pain medication after a car accident. To alleviate debilitating back pain suffered from the accident, Thomas has taken Darvocet, Vicodin and Percocet—all needed to help him function throughout the day.

A government-run shelter forbid Thomas from taking the medication. This meant a choice between life on the streets or constant agony, he said.

So he went to COSAC, a privately run shelter that makes its own rules and strives to work around issues that get people booted from other facilities. Thomas is one of several COSAC

residents who was accepted despite problems such as, drug and alcohol dependence, mental and physical illness and history of violent behavior.

Sean Cononie, director and founder of COSAC, and his staff take in just about everybody, even violent offenders.

Usually, it just depends on the nature of their crimes whether they are admitted or not, Cononie said.

He estimates that 90 percent of his residents wouldn't make the cut at a government-run shelter, either because they have kids, mental health issues, or a drug or alcohol problem.

The government-run Broward County Outreach Center is first come, first serve and doesn't admit children, meaning families will have to go elsewhere. Cononie

believes the homeless treated at government-run facilities will most likely end up on the street again. Thomas was forced to leave Broward County Outreach Center because they would not let him take his pain medication.

"I don't want to be dependent on anything unless I have to be," said Thomas, who takes his medication under COSAC supervision.

Cononie believes everyone who walks through his doors at COSAC should be given a chance to be admitted.

"I have a house," Cononie said. "If I can have one, then everyone should have one."

As a privately funded homeless shelter, COSAC can set their own criteria as to who is admitted. This means people like Thomas, who would not gain entrance into

other shelters, are caught before falling through the cracks and landing back on the streets.

"Sean's philosophy and policy is, if you're here, you have a home here and you are part of our family," said Ron Gauthier, a staff member and former resident at COSAC.

"The public perceive shelters, particularly private shelters, that we harbor bums and indigents and people who don't have a future and I'd rather them look at the shelter as being a place that provides a home."

Before he became homeless, Gauthier was the "man with the three-piece suit." He had his own mortgage company and moved to Florida from New England to expand on his business, only to find out that a friend of his had taken all of his assets. Even

though Gauthier could have easily gotten into a government-funded facility, he chose to stay with COSAC because of the home and family atmosphere.

"It's important to us to make people feel that they are a part of a family," Ron said.

"It is very important from our standpoint that they understand they don't have to be alone anymore."

With policies and regulations in place, Cononie and his staff allow the rules to be bent to accommodate individual circumstances.

"If you are going to be a shelter, then you should realize [the homeless] are already troubled, so we need to adapt towards their behavior [rather] than have them adapt to our behavior," Cononie said.

RUNNING A TIGHT SHIP



Cliff Pieczarka, 15-year veteran of the COSAC Homeless Shelter and special security detail, stands over Lisa, who suffered more than ten seizures in one week. Director of Security Michael Payne assists while calling an EMS unit to shuttle Lisa to the hospital.



COSAC Security Guard and ex-Navy SEAL Michael Payne spends his nights ensuring the safety of the shelter residents.

Story and Photography by Jacob Byk

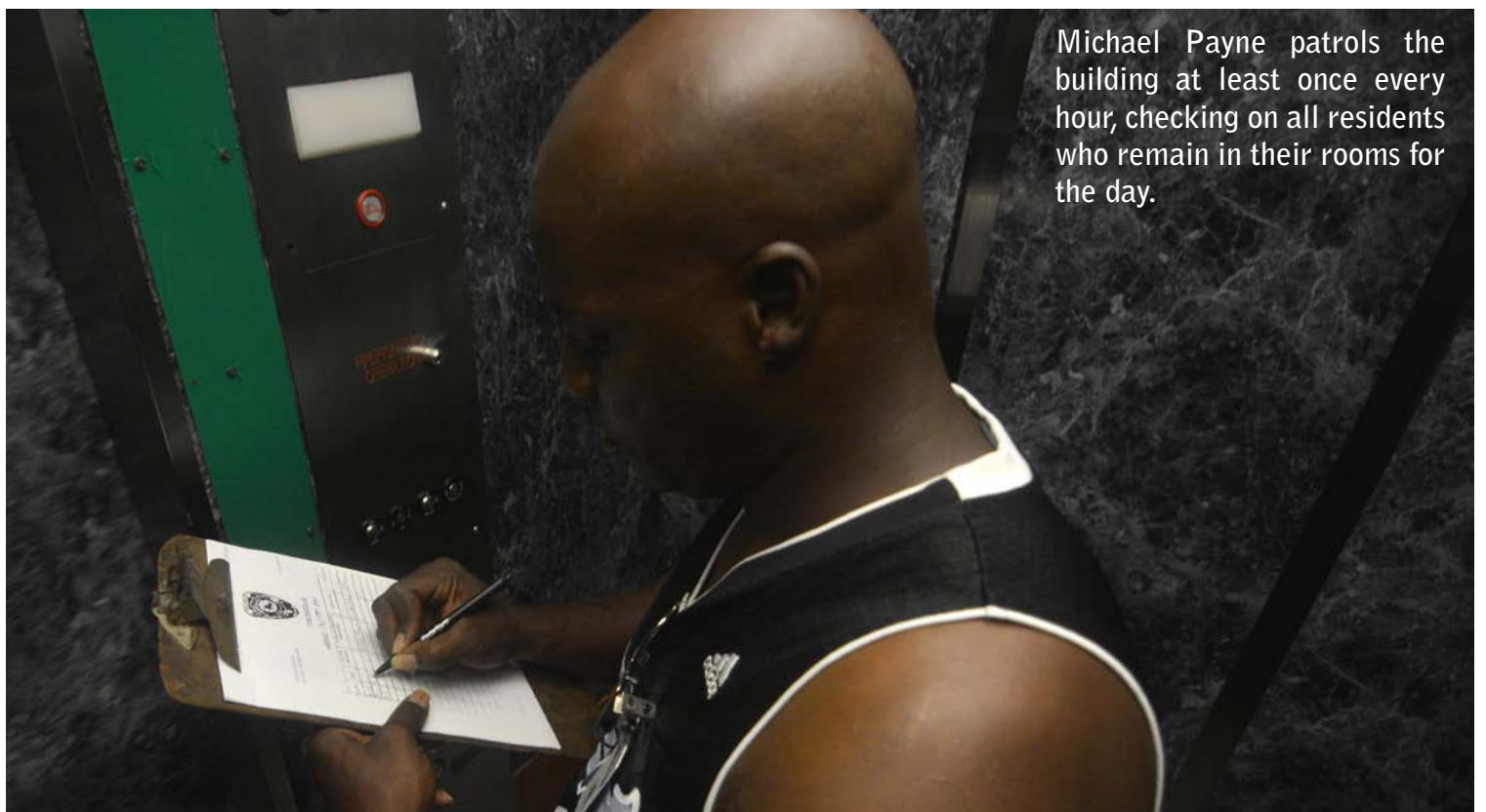
Michael Payne sits on the rusted out bench in the shape of a butterfly out front of the COSAC Homeless Shelter. The smoke from his cigarette clouds the view, and orange light filters through the palm trees and sends stripes across his face.

The 55-year-old Purple Heart Navy SEAL veteran just watched a resident have a code -3 seizure, a notation used for the most dangerous situations residents undergo. He has been living and working around the shelter for three years and recently began working as a security guard.

Seizures aren't anything new to Payne. His training and abilities range from being a dominant authoritative figure to talking residents out of committing suicide.

He isn't easily phased. In the '80s he took a bullet in the thigh during a military excursion in Lebanon.

"I have no sympathy for people who don't want to improve their position in life," he says, while leaning against the side of an old cop car.



Michael Payne patrols the building at least once every hour, checking on all residents who remain in their rooms for the day.



Michael Payne checks his motor bike while smoking a cigarette outside the shelter. "It's safer that I keep it here than at my girlfriend's," he explains. "Someone is always watching."



Michael Payne watches television with a resident while waiting for dinner.

GOT GOD?

I don't agree with organized religion, and I never understood the need for it – until today

Photography and article by Shannon Kaestle

Pictures include various members of the community Kaestle encountered. Some are homeless, some are not.



Larry Parchman, COSAC resident



Judy Rowland COSAC resident

They don't pray for money. They don't pray for homes. They pray for each other. Homeless people pray for other homeless people.

And when they pray for themselves, they pray for safety and health – for security.

What they want is the security and family associated with having a home.

In the COSAC homeless shelter, they've found a home. They've formed a community. They're no

longer alone. Some people have been here for a year, some 10 or 12.

Ten homeless people and a non-traditional church that looks like a sports arena changed my outlook on religion in one day. At least a little bit.

Everyone was smiling. Bright light indicative of a perfect sunny afternoon filtered in through the windows. Religious people whisked by and greeted me with a

"God bless you" as they passed.

It was weird.

I attended the Cooper City Church of God's Sunday service. Jason Naugle, a resident of COSAC, attends church there.

Naugle, 40, was dressed in a black suit, his face with a fresh sheen of sweat. Religion to him is vital.

"You can't match what happiness in the Holy Spirit,"



Anthony Williams, attendee of Cooper City Church of God



Jean Williams: lead usher at Cooper City Church of God



Rich Mcenery, COSAC resident



John Fetchik, COSAC resident

Naugle said.

The energy in the auditorium was undeniable. I felt an instant spark as I crossed the threshold of the double doors into the auditorium where service was taking place.

I noticed people in the crowd extending their arms forward, attempting to grasp the intoxicating, intangible feeling pulsating through the room – hope.

Religion gives people hope. And I now understand how important that hope can be.

I never believed in the typical white male God. I believe in a spiritual being that embodies the love energy that Christians say is indicative of their God. I don't believe a god who wishes for people to embody love and forgiveness is capable of sending someone to a fiery pit of death for all of eternity. Christians are taught to forgive others, yet their God will send someone to hell for being gay or having premarital sex? It never made sense to me.

Yet, my previous cynicism has been replaced by compassion. If religion is the reason these incredible homeless men and women are happy and content with their lives, I condone it. These people need religion to survive.

Sean Cononie runs the shelter. Cononie believes a majority of the shelter's residents are religious.

"I think they are like most sinners," he said. "They commit sin, they repent. I think they have as much God as anyone else."

These people are no different from those at the shelter. They've all committed sins - hell, I'd be willing to bet my left ass cheek on it – and they cope in the same way as most shelter residents: with the hope that stems from their religion



COME HOME

As long as there's a homeless person out there, COSAC doesn't have enough residents

By Shannon Kaestle and Kalhan Rosenblatt
Photography by Shannon Kaestle

You might piss off Sean Cononie, but he'll never turn you away. He'll even go out and find you.

Cononie developed a program called Outreach to convince those living on the streets to come to the shelter. He wants to make sure they know they have people who care about them, who want to help them.

On a warm Sunday night, the Outreach team set out for a routine patrol with two cop cars and an ambulance stocked with water, medical supplies and cigarettes. The water is to keep them hydrated and the medical supplies are to treat their wounds; the cigarettes are there to lure them to the first two.

The team found a lone homeless man named Mike. He refused the water, the medical treatment and the cigarettes.

But he asked for a six-pack of beer. The Outreach team told him they don't do that.

Cononie said this reaction is common. When they help someone, it's purely luck of circumstance. If Cononie can find you, he'll help you. If he can't, he keeps trying.

Many homeless on the streets prefer staying outdoors because they feel shelters have too many rules.

After an hour of driving, the Outreach team returned to the shelter without successfully aiding anyone.

Ron Gauthier, an Outreach driver, attributes the low headcount to the warmer weather. He said most homeless people either stay on the beach or fish in the canals on nights like this.

Despite the dismal turnout, Cononie will try again. And again.

Cononie's determination stems from his generous heart.

Jeremy Phipps, another Outreach driver and self-proclaimed COSAC minister, describes Cononie as a father figure.

The Cononie's and the Phipps' are long-time family friends. Their friendship stems back generations.

After getting in trouble with the law and missing two probation meetings, Cononie paid every fee to keep Phipps out of jail. Phipps stayed at the shelter for the next five and a half years in room 208. He started driving for the shelter in January 2006.

He now lives in a home, which he shares with another staff member.

Gauthier echoes Phipps sentiments. After having a heart attack three years ago, he says Cononie has given him a chance to do the right thing.

"I do it for the gratefulness – the thankfulness."

Failure does not deter Cononie. He will continue to seek those who need him, indifferent of the outcome.



Photography by Jacob Byk



\$32 AND A LOAF OF BREAD

I was homeless for 68 minutes. It was the most terrifying hour of my life

By Kalhan Rosenblatt

When I first stepped into the middle of the intersection Route 441 and Sheridan Street, I saw a cop car on the side of the road with lights flashing two blocks away from me.

I was told I should be afraid of cops. According to COSAC Homeless Shelter Founder and Director, Sean Cononie, Hollywood police are cracking down on people who look like me—homeless and asking for a handout.

I earned \$32 and a loaf of multigrain bread in one hour.

I did nothing but hold a piece of cardboard with HOMELESS scrawled across it in black ballpoint pen. I paced on the thin sliver of median separating the eight lanes – I was just six miles from COSAC.

It was the most money I've ever made in an hour. I was scared shitless.

I decided to pose as a homeless person to figure out what goes through the mind of a panhandler. When I drive past someone holding their scrap of cardboard, I avoid looking at them. I'm not proud of it.

The entire time I was terrified of being arrested for panhandling on the side of the road. At one point, another cop drove past me and I almost vomited my heart into my mouth. The officer's car was only three lanes away from where I stood, so I flipped over my cardboard sign and continued walking, hoping he wouldn't see me.

When the light turned green, he drove away. He didn't

take the time to notice me. I was relieved, but my hands were still shaking.

After that, I started getting some cash.

The first car to give me money was stopped in the lane closest to me. A ratty, navy blue sedan cracked open its door and a man in a green Publix grocery shirt held two single dollar bills out for me. I hurried over and took the money.

I felt guilty.

This balding, middle-aged man was either on his way to or from work, where he made less money in an hour at a grocery store than I did panhandling. I took two perfectly crisp dollar bills from him. Still, I was glad it had been so easy.

I had no time to relax because a big, sweaty man began walking up and down the road. I was worried he was going to tell me I was on his corner.

For a split second, I was annoyed he was taking over my territory. Then I realized how dumb that sounded.

In about two seconds my annoyance morphed back into terror and I resumed avoiding eye contact with him.

The majority of people refused to give me money. A few did. They shrugged their shoulders, said, "good luck," and were gone once the light turned green. I never felt someone pity me before, but I could see sympathy in their eyes.

I hated that. I would rather them ignore me than look at me with those eyes.

After 30 minutes, a guy with a Haitian accent pulled up

in a meticulously clean black jeep. He waved at me and I trotted over to his rolled-down window. He looked me up and down, and then fished through his wallet. "Why do you need to do this?" he asked nodding to the tattered cardboard sign in my hand. "You're so beautiful. You don't have any family?"

"No," I lied.

Then he asked me if I had a boyfriend and my heart began to race again. I thought he might try to proposition me and I wanted the light to change so this guy would give me his money and leave.

"Why aren't you in school?" he said as I walked away.

"Thank you," I said as the light finally turned green.

I had only been homeless for 30 minutes and I already didn't trust anyone around me. I could feel myself disconnecting from the people I would usually consider harmless. Honest questions felt too probing. I found the more people talked to me, the more I wanted them to go away.

People think panhandling is easy. I did. After all, it's just asking for money. But having to beg for cash, to have people either look at you as a stain on society or completely ignore you, was one of the most upsetting situations I've ever put myself in. In an hour I had to un-trust everyone around me because I suddenly felt my value was less.

I donated the cash to COSAC and the loaf of bread to a resident named Judith. Luckily for me, I got to leave after 68 minutes.



Photography by Noelle Haro-Gomez



Photography by Jacob Byk

GET A JOB!

Some drivers think the homeless people they see asking for money at intersections don't have jobs - but they do.



By Brittny C. Valdes
Photography by Jacob Byk

Judith Wolf hates when people tell her to get a job. She already has one. She hands out Homeless Voice newspapers in exchange for donations at various intersections throughout Broward County.

"I always tell them 'Good morning sir or ma'am, would you like to help the homeless?'" said Wolf, 62, a resident of COSAC Homeless Shelter. "They say, 'go get a job,' or 'no' with an attitude, and it makes me feel very low."

COSAC has been printing and vending its newspapers for 12 years. It supplies residents, like Wolf, with a reliable source of income that pays for food and rent – if the average driver only knew.

"Sometimes I find vending very demeaning, because it's like you're begging for money, and I don't beg. I ask," said Wolf, who became homeless two years ago after moving from New York with no money or a place to go.

The shelter houses about 200 people and nearly 70 choose to vend. Five white vans that seat 15 each drop vendors off throughout Broward and Miami-Dade County six days a week.

From 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., the vendors, wearing neon pink tees, proudly inhabit narrow medians on busy intersections.

Thaddeus Bastian, 36, came to the shelter seven months ago and likes spending his time under Florida's humidity soaked sunshine. Bastian's job doesn't just give him purpose. It's fun and occasionally flirty.

"A lot of ladies say they like my dreads," said Bastian, whose hair ends just above his knees. "One time, a lady said 'I'm only giving you money because I think you're cute.'"

But the job isn't without risk.

Vendors deal with the threats of reckless driving, dangerous encounters with illegal homeless solicitors and robberies.

Wolf recalled a time a man tried to pry the jar of money from her hand, and she fell on her tailbone.

"And I had no choice but to go back to work," said Wolf. "If you don't vend, how do you pay your rent?"

The shelter's rent costs \$23 per day, which is taken out of their total earnings. After the rent's removed, they keep 60 percent of what's left. On an average day, Wolf said she pockets about \$30.

And even when things do go right - the driver's hand is hanging out the window ready to drop a bill into the plastic

jar - it can all be left up to the fate of the streetlight.

"Sometimes somebody will have money in their hands," said Wolf. "And then the light changes, and they can't give it to me."

For that reason, Wolf looks forward to Sundays.

"It's an easier day, because the lights take longer to change since it's a weekend."

As she paced the stretch of median that divides Sheridan and State Road 7, she smiled at drivers, and if they donated, she told them "God bless you."

One man dropped a couple of bills in the jar and Wolf said, "I have no addictions, no diseases, I'm 62, and I have two grandchildren. I wish everybody gave like you did."

Wolf said those remarks could encourage them to give more.

But Bastian doesn't perceive it like that – he doesn't even approach the car windows as Wolf does.

"The more you make, the more you get back," he simply said. "Sometimes they say no, and they end up calling you back."

But sometimes, the most unlikely people donate.

"I've gotten donations from people on bikes, motorcycles and people waiting at the bus stop," said Wolf. "And I know it's from a full heart."

RECOVERING ALCOHOLIC STANDS

COSAC resident puts away the bottle to help others face their problems

By Alexa Epitropoulos

Photo Illustration Noelle Haro-Gomez

Six years ago, COSAC Homeless Shelter resident and staff member Christine Jordan couldn't go a day without a drink.

"I drank more in the first six months [at the shelter] than I had in my whole life," Jordan said. "I'd make \$1 or \$2 and I would go buy a tall beer and just drink it."

When Jordan arrived at COSAC, she was a statistic. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, 38 percent of homeless individuals are alcoholics and are not seeking treatment.

If Jordan had been at another shelter, she says her story might have been different. After a year of struggling with alcohol abuse, she recovered and is now helping other residents with the same problem at COSAC. While the shelter maintains an alcohol-free policy, in practice the rules are more flexible.

"I would have typically thrown out [Christine Jordan] in a heartbeat. She probably would have been arrested," said Sean Cononie, the founder and director of COSAC. "Now she's sober—now that's not her demeanor. She wouldn't do that."

For Jordan, drinking was an emotional crutch. While she wasn't an alcoholic before she entered the shelter, it soon became a refuge and a way to temporarily relieve stress.

"If you have something major go wrong in your life, then you may drink," Cononie said. "A lot of the homeless people will come in as social drinkers and become heavy drinkers once they enter into this lifestyle."

Chronic alcoholics represent 15 percent of the shelter population. At another end of the spectrum are the "overnighters," the residents who come into the shelter solely to sleep off the alcohol.

Before Jordan came to the point where

she recognized she often fell into Cononie said that of the individuals the shelter arrive

Residents who are not immune to that alcohol can residents can or violent once they

"Some can be the in the world when and they have one become a nasty Cononie said.

Jordan struggled depression and used

"I wanted to feel good. I was very depressed. I thought alcohol would help," Jordan said. "It was ruining my life."

Jordan's personal experience with the

her problem, this category. 80 to 90 percent who come into drunk.

drink socially the problems create. Many become mean have a drink.

nicest people they're sober drink and bastard,"

w i t h alcohol as

disease can make her interactions with alcoholics both more rewarding and more painful. The empathy she feels for residents can open old wounds.

What can hurt the most are the individuals who choose to disregard or even defy the help they receive.

"You have to be sober to get your life together," Jordan added. "One drink and the next thing you know they're back in the same thing."

As a staff member, Jordan sees that alcoholism creates a cycle that isn't easy to break.

Many of the residents can be sober for weeks or months and veer back into heavy drinking without warning.

"We try to help them. Some of them want the help. I've seen a lot of people just get better," Jordan explained. "For some people, that's just going to be their life."

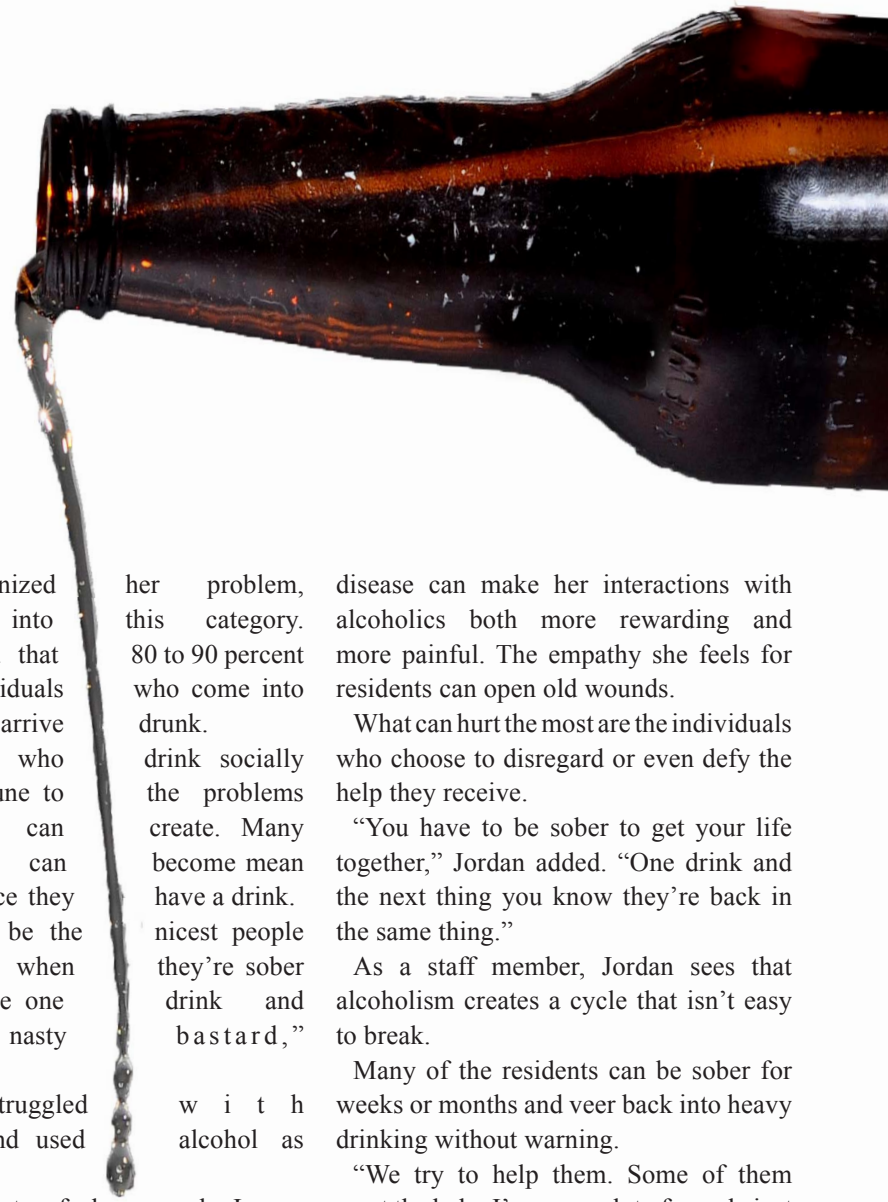
*It is the Time of Day
To Make Cancer Go Away
Every Day at 3pm This Prayer We Shall Say*

*Dear Lord, we ask that you send us a cure
To make all our bodies pure
To the Devil we say
Your cancer is done
To Jesus we pray
For all cancers be gone
Dear Lord we claim
This in Your Holy Name*

It is our goal that this catches on and before you know it thousands will be praying each day for a world prayer to stop cancer and for there to be a cure for all cancers.

To my sweetheart, this is for you and know that I love you and thank you for helping me all these years making our shelter system grow and grow and not only helping me with the homeless but just being by my side all these years. I love you, you know who you are.

Love, Sean



PEACE OF MIND

Mentally ill members of the homeless community find solace at COSAC

David Rice, Columbus, Ohio



Renata Rodriguez, Mt. Olive, N.C.



Brian Hernandez, Denver



Robbi Robinson, Waynesboro, Va.



Kermit Sands, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

By Daniel Moore
Photography by Jacob Byk

"If they try to choke you, just scream real loud," COSAC's Homeless Shelter director and founder Sean Cononie tells me. I had asked if he thought I could go by myself into two rooms at the end of the second-floor hallway. I was told that in those rooms – 221 and 222 – the most mentally ill tenants reside.

But I would soon discover that mental illness in the shelter, much like the streets outside, is not confined to a room. It knows no physical walls, nor does it submit to any preconceived notion. From a street musician to a cosmetology student to a former model, what defines them is their character, not their disease.

David Rice, 43, Columbus, Ohio

Just before lunch, David Rice walks into COSAC's operations office with a rigid face of pure anger – someone has taken his laundry detergent, but he doesn't want to talk about it. He doesn't want to vent. He doesn't like to be around people when he's having a bad day.

Later on, Rice explains how he tolerates these frequent infringements to his right to privacy. He lived for a decade in Jacksonville and watched drugs fill the street. Although he was involved with more than 30 women, no one ever got close to him, Rice said. He knew he had to get away to someplace better – someplace where he could find what he calls "a foundation" – in order to find that someone special.

"I choose to be here," he says

emphatically. Rice was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic in 1991, and the shelter provides him medication for his illness. After lunch, his face breaks into a smile.

"I'll stay here as long as I can," he says. "I know they can provide assistance."

Kermit Sands, 29, Ft. Lauderdale

Kermit Sands rocks slowly back and forth in the afternoon humidity, mumbling about the pentatonic scale, rubbing the blistered calluses on his fingertips. Another man collapses from his perch on a cinderblock, losing consciousness for a moment, then rolling up on one elbow and shaking his head in a daze.

"That happens," Sands says, returning to his bench, unfazed. He then calmly explained his story as an off-and-on resident of the shelter for nearly 10 years. Sands believes everyone needs a skill in life, something to give them value. His is music. Growing up with Nirvana, Jimi Hendrix, BB King, Bush, Oasis and many more, he performed on street corners in South Beach.

"It takes a lot more to play for that hour and make that \$20 or \$25 than to go in that studio and play, and maybe no one will hear it."

Sands' mother died from a drug overdose when he was 4 and his father passed away in 2003 – "this is where I got defeated," he says. He was diagnosed as a schizophrenic at age 13 and went to a hospital where everyone was "angry, mad at the world and wanted to kill everyone."

But unlike the other patients, Sands learned respect for the doctors and nurses. When the institution released him, he had nowhere to go so he went to COSAC.

"I just think of myself as going along in life," he says. "As long as I'm humble, honor will come some day."

Renata Rodriguez, Mt. Olive, N.C.

Renata Rodriguez's words can't seem to satisfy everything that's in her head. Her voice can't convey everything in her heart. She speaks in waves of outbursts, touching my shoulder, spelling out the names of her children, father and grandfather. She asks if I could come to her upcoming graduation from school.

She knows she was sick for a while in North Carolina but believes she's getting better at COSAC.

"Remember, when people talk, Mr. Sean, remember that you saved me," she says to Cononie in his office. "Remember that."

After being diagnosed with "the voices" at a psychiatric hospital, she came to Pompano Beach with her husband George and four kids. When George left her, she came to the shelter. She spends her days wandering through the halls, reading the Bible and studying for a cosmetology degree from ASM Beauty World Academy, Inc.

"I have a lot goin' on," she says. "But I still thank God because God keeps me humble."

Robbi Robinson, Waynesboro, Va.

The traffic, the boss, the baby, the dog. So much stress for a grainy, technicolor Robbi Robinson, who stands frustrated in the overlapping noise of all these distracting parts of her day.

"That does it! Calgon, take me away!"

A magical xylophone accompanies the transition to a camera pan of Robinson lounging in a bubble bath full of Calgon

soap, a product from 1980 that she still brings up to this day.

"Lose your cares in the luxury of a Calgon bath," says a soothing, unseen voice.

Much has changed since Robinson graced television commercials, feature films and the Playboy mansion. The 72-year-old is on medication for depression. She asks me to sit on her bed, and she shows me her missing bottom teeth.

"The dentist is going to give me my smile back," she says, adding that she'd love to be a model again, this time representing senior citizens. Despite the ambition, she thinks practically of her future at the shelter.

"This is my last destination in life," she says. "I have to learn to accept it."

Brian Hernandez, Denver

Brian Hernandez has eluded capture for his provocative art. One of the newer additions to the shelter, he claims to have tagged "millions" of buildings with scrolling graffiti.

Squatting under the water cooler and refreshing himself, Hernandez says he entered the shelter 10 months ago. He got in fights, and the shelter told him he must be medicated. But he says he hasn't been officially diagnosed with an illness; he's just had problems with drugs and alcohol.

His favorite marking consists of three flowery letters – "CWD" – that stand for "Crazy World Destroyers." He did not elaborate on the enigmatic meaning of the phrase, but promised that more of them would appear around Hollywood.

"I plan to do that one tonight," he says, pointing to a structure down the road. "Look tomorrow. You'll see it."



ALL TOO COMMON

While many people are surprised at the sight of a seizure, those at COSAC aren't

**By Brittney Charity
Photography by Jacob Byk**

Michael Bayes noticed the shaking woman walking up to the COSAC Homeless Shelter. As he opened the door, her body began to fold and her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

Bayes, 61, in a wheelchair, attempted to grab the woman and guide her body to the pavement. She was having a seizure.

"With Lisa this happens everyday," Bayes said. "I try to help as much as I can. It hurts to see people sick."

The woman is Lisa Michne.

She is 41 years old, and like Bayes, lives at COSAC, 1203 North Federal Highway.

She'd been released from the hospital the night before for the same thing. Seizures.

Michael Payne, the head security of the shelter, said Michne has had more than 10 seizures this week. For anyone unfamiliar with homeless shelters, the figure seems outrageous. But for Payne, it's routine.

"Seizures are a part of the job," Payne said. "It happens three to four times a day."

Because the seizures are constant, and because the reasons for the seizures vary, the staff

created different codes by which to call them.

Clifford Pieczarka, a special security guard who's been with the shelter for 15 years and responded to Michne's call, said each code corresponds with different pain levels.

"Code one starts at a lesser amount of pain, and code three is a dire emergency. Their well-being is in danger," said Pieczarka.

Michne's case was dispatched as a code three.

For all seizures, the staff keeps what they call a "cardiac box" beside the front desk. It stores a portable defibrillator, a blood

pressure cup, and trauma kit among other things.

Daletha Brown, a certified nurse at the shelter, explained that in some cases the staff needs to resuscitate the person before the ambulance arrives.

"We use CPR and sternum rubs," said Brown, adding that's when the cardiac box becomes necessary.

But Michne was coherent as paramedics arrived. Her code three slowly dwindled as she recognized faces and understood what had just occurred.



Brown attributes Michne's frequent seizures to changes in medication.

"If you take medications for so long, your body slowly becomes immune to them," said Brown, who's seen Michne - and the medication she takes - come and go from the shelter for over two years.

The Hollywood Fire Rescue truck lifted Michne before the setting sun, and before a day went by she was sent back to the hospital again.

"This is just something you grow adept to," said Pieczarka.

The fifth annual Will Write For Food program would like to thank Sigma Delta Chi and SPJ South Florida for all the support they have shown.

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