

# THE HOMELESS VOICE

FLORIDAS LARGEST STREET NEWSPAPER



COSAC Foundation | PO Box 292-577 Davie, FL 33329 | 954-924-3571

## Remembering My Friend John...

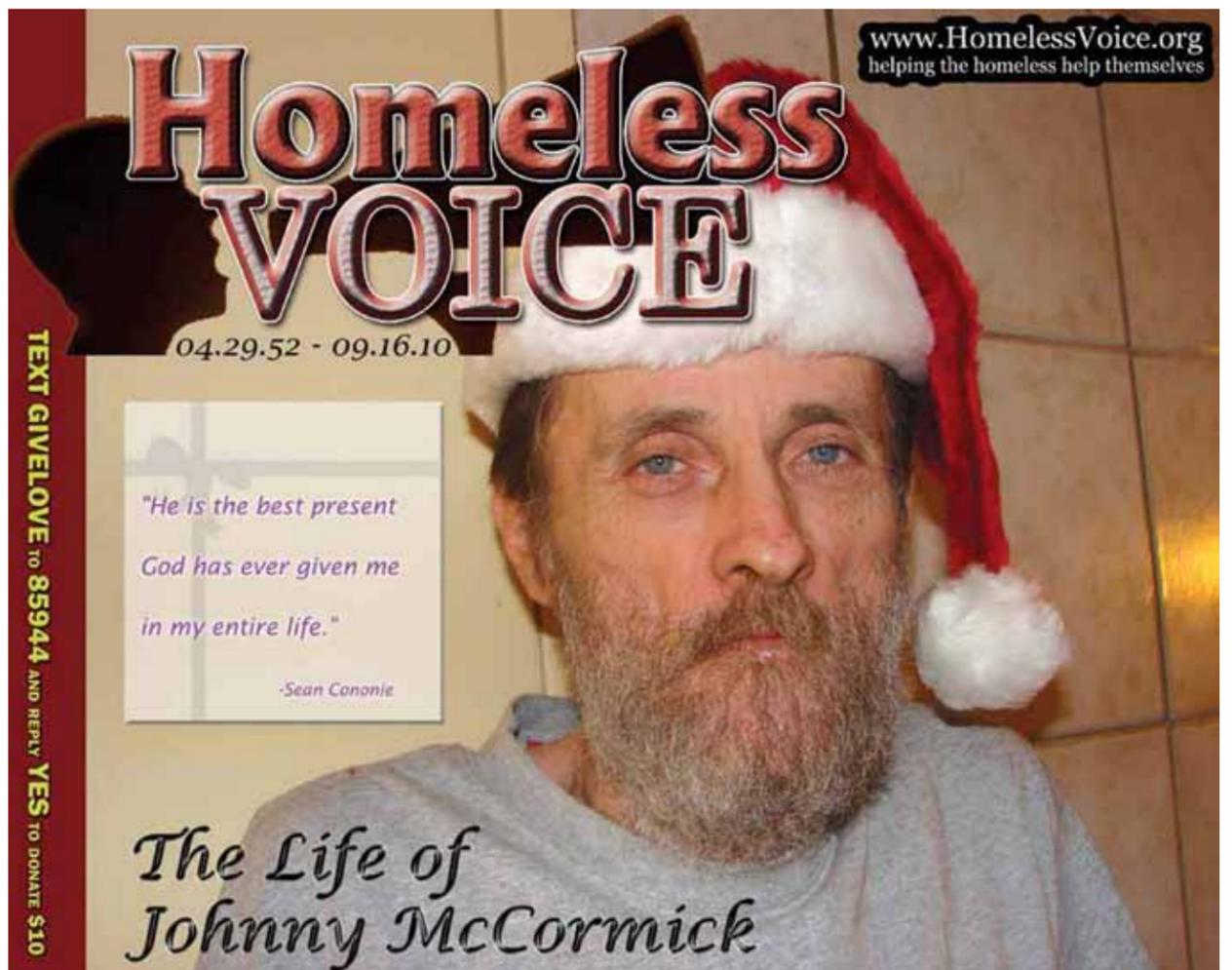
Robert George

Every two years we rerun the “My Friend Named John” story because it is such a meaningful story. It’s for sure a story to give thanks and praise for allowing us the chance to be a friend of John. We work all kinds of crazy hours here and no matter what time of the day it is you will see Johnny hanging out outside my office. My Friend Named John has so much peace in his eyes and love in his heart that no matter how big of a guy you are, or no matter how tough you are, Johnny is Johnny and you will fall in love with him as a warm heartfelt individual that will always bring peace to any. To be truthful there have been many times over the years that I just wanted to walk out the door and never look back but then John walks by or he knocks on my office door always saying something funny and from this, from his pure need you just can’t and you start to wonder where would he be or where would the others be if you exited and never came back. Some of my friends have asked me over the years, “Sean, don’t you feel taken for granted by these people?” I have said sure and when it comes to Johnny there is only pure need of him using us and is what makes it so beautiful, he needs everything. He needs to be told when to go shower and it is us who gives him his bath. From the article will see getting him to take a shower can be a long journey but with the extra help I hired it only takes a few days to get him to do that and now the aide we hired gives him his bath, making it a little easier for me at times. Some of the times I have to even treat him as if he were a child but that feeling of him needing me also means using him for my own sense to be needed as well. Even when I get my well-deserved break trying to get an hour of sleep in the day time and I hear his knock on my door with his soft voice calling out to me “Sean I need a soda cause I left mine on the plane” you get that daytime smile. He always says something that means nothing. Just last week he said he swallowed soap while he and I were scuba diving in the Nile River in Egypt.... I almost died from laughing to death.

He seems as peaceful as Jesus. You could be in the middle of a stressful day and want to just walk out the door and then you run into John and the whole world stops and the stress is erased by John’s presence. This and many Thanksgivings now eleven years later since I found Johnny just sitting there, there is not a day that I don’t thank Jesus for meeting Johnny.

We urge you to read this story and then give this story to your friends. It was written by Robert George of the Sun-Sentinel in 1999. Happy Thanksgiving!

*Here at the end of a tired day, it turns out that Johnny McCormick, the neediest, is the one Sean Cononie, the givingest, is needing again.*



Although it’s been 7 years since Johnny left this world, and 18 years since this story first ran, Johnny still makes just as much of an impact to COSAC, the Homeless Voice and to those who knew him.

Love Sean....

Sean Cononie, almost a millionaire and just 35, works 20 hours a day finding homes for the homeless, hope for the hopeless. And when he loses faith, he turns to the neediest one of all to restore it.

Johnny’s feet are black again; his stomach, bare beneath his unbuttoned shirt, is shiny with sweat; and he’s swearing, which he never does, and threatening to leave if Sean doesn’t back off about him needing a shower.

“I don’t wanna be tossed around by anyone,” Johnny says, and then he leans back on the couch in Room 8 of Sean Cononie’s homeless shelter in Hollywood and folds his arms across his chest.

Sean swivels around to look into Johnny’s face. Leave? Is he serious? Sean knows that Johnny Mc-

Cormick, who, at 47, had long ago fried his brain on drugs, would be lost without the shelter. And Sean would be a little lost too, since he has decided he wants to take care of Johnny forever.

There is no smile on Johnny’s face, and he turns away when Sean keeps looking at him, and so Sean softens his

tone, uses baby talk.

“Why don’t you get wet in the shower?” Sean asks, very gently this time. “We’ll go out to din-din.”

“Well,” Johnny says, uncrossing his arms, “if I take a shower I need pants.”

“I just gave you pants yesterday. I took off my own pair and gave them to you.”

“I might shower in the future if I get a sharper razor.”

Sean smiles. His cell phone rings. He clicks it open and listens while rolling his head around in a circle to loosen the knot in his neck.

The hospital is calling again. Is there room for one more? That makes 10 and its still lights out.

“It’s gonna be a helluva night,” he says, and then he hangs up. Patting Johnny on the back, he lifts himself up from the couch and heads down the well-worn path through the patch of trees and the gap in the chain-link fence and to the stairs that lead to Penthouse 4.

Sean anchors himself in the chair behind an old desk cluttered with phones, an ashtray spilling ashes and three packs of Prozac someone found in the trash. Cases of cranberry juice line one wall from floor to ceiling. Paper cups and cookie jars separate

(Continued on pg 6)

# ~Monthly Angels~

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## About the Homeless Voice

The Homeless Voice houses, feeds, and finds jobs for anyone who is homeless. We serve up to 500 homeless daily and serve over 45,000 meals each month.

The Homeless Voice distributes a street newspaper in all major cities throughout Florida including Tallahassee, Lake City, Jacksonville, Tampa, Orlando, Daytona, Ft. Lauderdale, and Miami.

**The Homeless Voice Newspaper has three functions.**

- 1-Educate the public on homelessness and poverty issues
- 2-Provide temporary employment to those without a job
- 3-Raise additional funds for the Florida based shelter

We have grown into a multifaceted agency that feeds, shelters, and arranges for each homeless person to receive the necessary access to social and noncompulsory religious services to enable a return to a self-reliant lifestyle.

For the small percentage of people incapable of living independent lives, we provide a caring and supportive environment for their long-term residency.



### *Homeless Voice Newspaper Staff*

**Publisher-** Sean Cononie

**Editor in Chief-** Mark Targett    **Executive Editor-** Sara Targett

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# Community Corner

## A Heartfelt Thanks

When I arrived at the COSAC homeless shelter, I wasn't on drugs or a drinker like most people think of all homeless individuals. I had never done drugs and wasn't much of a drinker. I had worked in a few different fields, but I had always worked. Then I broke my ankle and was on unemployment, lost my apartment and my car. That's when I showed up at COSAC I was healing nicely, but a hot mess emotionally. Sean kept me busy volunteering, around the shelter and later helping other clients until I was able to get all healed up.

Later I was awarded my widows benefits and moved out but still do volunteer work for the homeless foundation and its clients.

Yesterday Sean Cononie and his family gifted me a car. His mom donated it, and his sister had it fixed up with some work it needed. It is such a blessing to be able to get around with ease. At 62, dragging your groceries on and off of a bus when you can barely get yourself on and off due to arthritis is not an easy task.

I don't even have the words to express my thanks to everyone involved. I can hardly believe this. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before, but it proves that there are silver linings to the worst of times if you are patient and have faith. May God bless the Cononie family and the foundation for the homeless for all the hard work, and love they spend daily on everyone and anyone who is in need.

Sincerely,  
Mary Derr

## Veterans Sleep on the Streets

Elly Vos

Did you know that 39,471 of our veteran service men and women spend their nights without a bed to sleep in or a roof over their head? The people who have protected and defended our country go without food, water and shelter. These are basic human rights! Progress has been made to end homelessness, but there is much more that can be done.

People become homeless for a myriad of reasons. For veterans, the most common causes include an extreme shortage of affordable housing, finding a livable income, and access to health care. Many of these homeless or displaced veterans live with lingering effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse, compounded by a lack of family and social support networks.

The VA does address the needs of veterans to a certain extent. According to National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, "VA's specialized homelessness programs provide health care to almost 150,000 men and women who have served our country". Many veterans reach out to nonprofit or community-based organizations for assistance such as "veterans helping veterans" groups. These programs feature substance-free transitional housing with fellow veterans who are working towards the same goal- a better life.

While veteran homelessness dropped by 47 percent (nearly 35,000 people) between 2010 and 2016, and by another 8,000 between 2015 and 2016, much work still remains to be done to end veteran homelessness.

What can I do?

1. Volunteer with a homeless or domestic violence



shelter like Another Way Inc. Your expertise could be used in so many ways. Writing resumes, cooking, cleaning, playing games with kids, and office assistance. Even sharing coffee with someone in need will make someone's day.

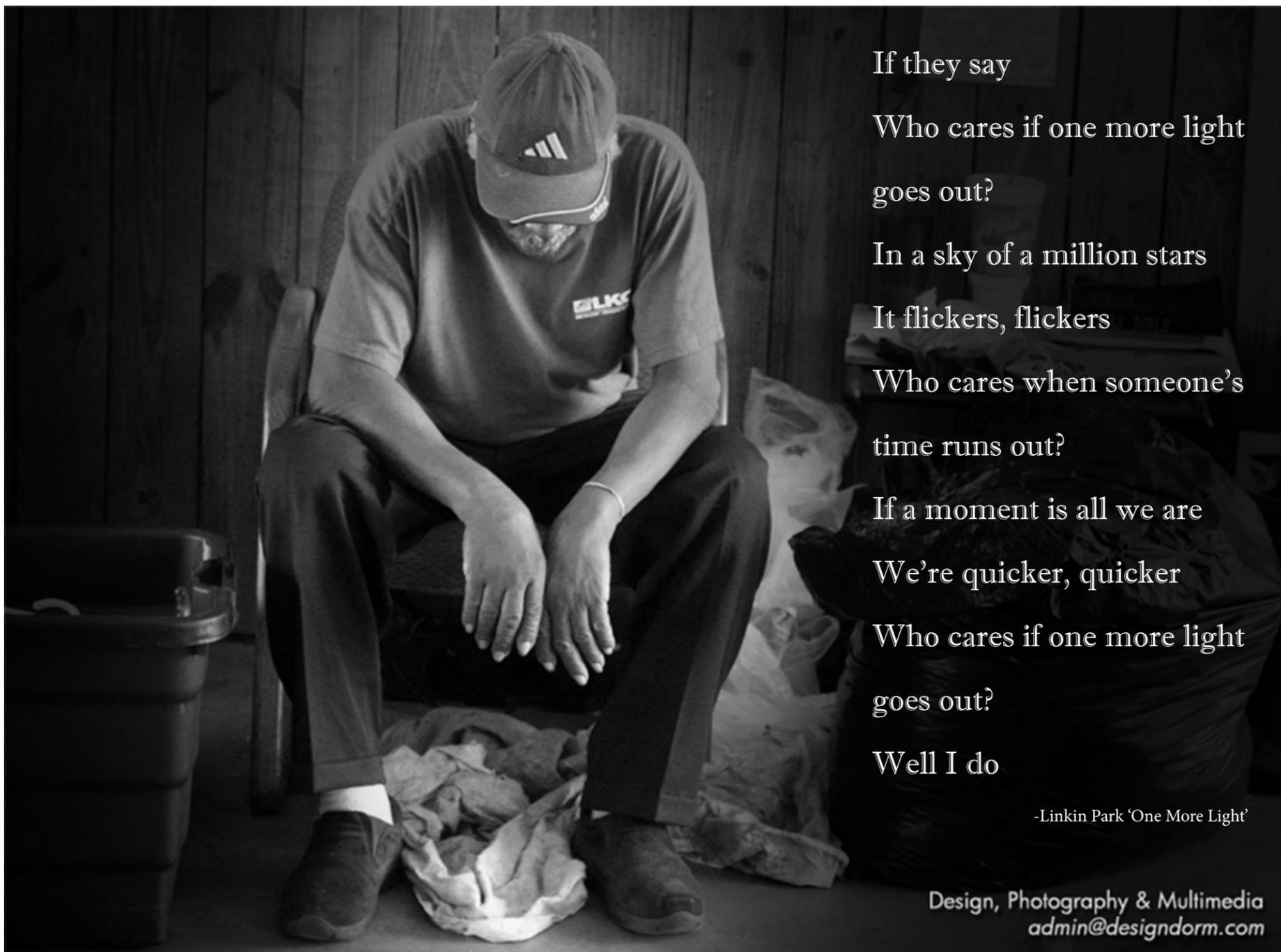
Lad Soup Kitchen - 127 W Escambia St

Veterans Inn - 5329 US Highway  
441 S Lake City, FL 32025

About 1.4 million other veterans, meanwhile, are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or sub-standard housing.

2. Involve others. If you are not already part of an organization, align yourself with a few other people who are interested in confronting this issue. Invite friends to a dinner party and have them bring new socks and underwear to donate to the homeless.
3. Participate in events with Coalition for the Homeless Central Florida
4. Raise awareness through education and participation by volunteering with your children.

5. Contact your elected officials, Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio to discuss what is being done in your community for homeless veterans. Nelson: (202) 224-5274. Rubio: (202) 224-3041.



If they say  
Who cares if one more light  
goes out?  
In a sky of a million stars  
It flickers, flickers  
Who cares when someone's  
time runs out?  
If a moment is all we are  
We're quicker, quicker  
Who cares if one more light  
goes out?  
Well I do

-Linkin Park 'One More Light'

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# Remembering My Friend John...

(Continued from pg 1)

the soda money from the cigarette money from the rent money from the street collection money.

From the clutter, he picks up the list of today's new arrivals.

Lois, the mugging victim, with open wounds on her skinny knees from the dragging she took though an alleyway.

Tom, who likes to tell people he is bisexual. Joe, with a perforated ulcer.

All people who are too old, or too sick, or too troublesome for other homeless shelters to bother with, and too poor for the hospitals to take care of.

It's sort of a rogue shelter, this place Sean Cononie has set aside for them. It is made up of pink bungalows that were once an Army barracks and are now a rundown apartment complex in a tidy downtown neighborhood. To pay the rent, it sends its people out to beg for money. It turns no one away. And it seems to grow attached to the most needy, the ones who will almost certainly end up back on the streets without its help. Even if one of them breaks the rules, even if one of them refuses to take a shower for 10 days straight, The Corporation of Sean Anthonic Cononie (COSAC) doesn't let him go without a fight.

At 35, Sean is wealthy, a millionaire almost. And he doesn't know why, when he could do whatever he wanted with his life, he spends his time here, 20 hours a day, seven days a week, here among the rejects. It makes no sense, other than it's important to help people, especially people who really need help, and most especially, Johnny.

When someone at the shelter gets drunk or high again, or when someone dies or goes back to the street, Sean knows that Johnny will still be there, probably refusing to wear a belt and pulling his pants up with his left hand, or maybe holding the newspaper upside down and pretending to read it, or saying one of those funny things, like he did the other night at the ice cream shop.

On most nights, he takes in more people than any other shelter in the county. He wants to take in even more, shopping around to buy a building of his own, applying for grants, while at the same time trying to figure out ways to run the shelter without government money and all the rules that would come with that.

Sean wants his shelter to always be the sort of place that doesn't pretend every single person has the ability to make it on his own, the sort of shelter where people like Johnny never have to leave at all.

And so he has fewer rules and more of the classes where homeless people go to learn how to balance a checkbook and make a grocery list. Instead, those without disability checks to contribute to the rent can either join the day labor pool digging ditches or they can take one of Sean's plastic cookie jars and one of his red, white and blue "Helping People in America" T-shirts.

Hollywood Boulevard, or Andrews Avenue, or Arvida Parkway. At rush hours across the county, Sean's people wait for the lights to turn red and then, ID badges dangling, they walk among the rows of cars, their jars stretched out for change.

Jose, the first of the collection crew chiefs to finish this day, comes into Penthouse 4 a few minutes after Sean. He plops down on the couch, plunks a plastic cookie jar on the carpet and picks out the dollar bills.

Della is drinking other people's soda again, he says, without looking up from the cookie jar.

Sean rolls his head. He looks down at the bed list, assigns Lois to No. 11, Tom to No. 17, Joe to No. 10, and the rooms at 2707 Lincoln St. quickly fill

up.

Sean had prayed once to have a child of his own. Now he has dozens of them without even having to get married, which is good because dating and courtship take up a lot of time. And even before the shelter he was too busy for romance.

Quick to help

He grew up in Hollywood, the youngest son of an airline mechanic who coached all of his Little League teams and a mother who stayed at home to raise the kids.

Helping people came natural to him. In his teens, he stopped at every accident he ever saw, pulling one baby from a burning car and bringing another back to life with CPR. He was even a bit stubborn about helping people and doing the right thing, like it was the only thing, the only choice. He actually sought out old ladies to help cross the street, found homes for stray dogs and, when that didn't seem enough, he made sandwiches to hand out to homeless people he might come across.

In his 20s, he got a half-million dollar worker's comp settlement after he slipped and fell at his job as a store security guard, rupturing disks in the neck and back. He invested the money in stocks just as the market took off and then watched his portfolio grow so fast that he could buy a Lexus, a Rolex watch, and his own house in his own hometown with a swimming pool and Jacuzzi in the back yard.

He even had enough money to write a \$60,000 check just so he could fly out to California for Liz Taylor's birthday party. It was a fund-raiser for her AIDS foundation and he found himself climbing out of a limousine in a tuxedo, chatting up with one beauty, sipping champagne with another.

But the best part of the night came when Liz Taylor said "each and every one of you" were doing a tremendous amount of good. That had to mean him, too. And he felt just so elated and so proud and he realized the best part of his good life came when he was being stubborn again about doing the right thing.

He flew home and filed the papers to start his nonprofit charity, naming it after himself. Not one to think much

about the why and the what next of things, he simply started stuffing the trunk of his Lexus full of sandwiches, driving down to the slums of Overtown and handing them out to homeless people.

That seemed like a good idea. After all, God must have put the homeless here on Earth to give people like him, people with everything, an opportunity to do something sacred. What was it that Jesus said in the Bible? Sean could never get the words exactly right, just the meaning. What was it? If you feed the hungry, if you feed the best of mankind, you're feeding me, too?

The Answer Man

Meals are served out of Room 16, he tells the newcomers. No gourmet meals, but donated doughnuts for breakfast, bologna sandwiches for

lunch and macaroni and cheese with hot dogs and beans for supper.

Sean rents five bungalows worth of beds, small buildings in two parallel rows separated by a littered courtyard. And behind one row, separated by the chain link fence with the gap in it, in the two-story white complex where Penthouse 4 is, Sean has even more beds.

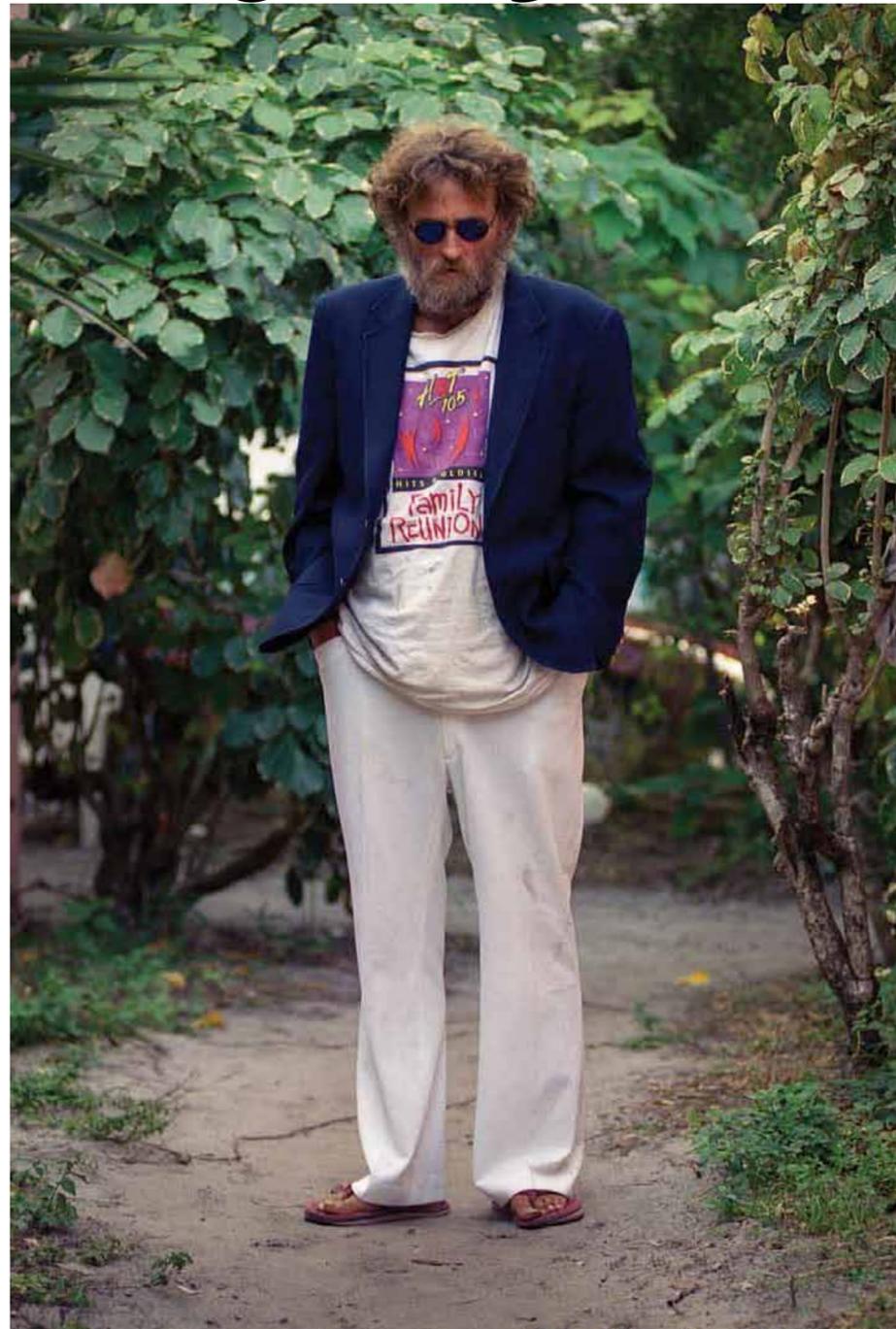
Beds for 79. In a pinch, beds for 85. In a real pinch, 89. And when the 90th comes, he somehow digs up a 90th bed.

The place gets so crowded sometimes, with people sitting on the cement stoops, bumming cigarettes at the gazebo, watching cartoons in their living rooms, making piles of aluminum cans to sell to the recycling company.

And stopping Sean. They're always stopping Sean as he tramps from bungalow to bungalow, from problem to problem, this curly red-haired man with a doughboy face, muscular shoulders and thick hands that pat them on the back, tussle their hair and massage their shoulders.

He has the answer to whatever the question might be.

No, it doesn't matter that you went on vacation, he told a man one day earlier this fall, you were still supposed to pay the rent. And to another: Just because you weren't driving the car doesn't mean you didn't have to make the payments.



Wear nice clothes to court, he says to a third, but not so nice that it looks like you're sucking up. The normal practice in America is for people to work an eight-hour day, he told a labor crew that called in at noon to complain, "we're getting tired."

He keeps track of their doctors' appointments, hands out their medications, tells them what to say to their shrinks and social workers, to their judges and probation officers, their mothers and fathers.

Sure they are using him, but they are needing him too, and none so much as Johnny.

The very least of the least of mankind. Johnny, who smokes five packs of cigarettes a day, whose disability check costs taxpayers \$500 a month, who volunteers for nothing, who produces nothing, accomplishes nothing, aspires to nothing.

Junkie, human trash, that's how Sean figures Johnny must appear to other people. To him though, Johnny is the cutest one of all, "the cutest little thing," in fact. And Johnny is a saint, very very close to God. Why? Because Johnny never lies, never talks to impress people, and couldn't if he tried. He can't pretend anything.

He calls nothing of this world his own, except for a single possession, a small blue blanket that he holds onto each night when he goes to sleep. He has had it for years and has never washed it and yet it doesn't smell. Even now in the midst of Johnny's longest shower less streak ever, the blue blanket has no smell. Johnny does though, and people are starting to complain.

A gentle push

All the beds are filled and the sun has long set upon the pink bungalows and Sean is alone in Penthouse 4 with Jenny Scott, who was Principal of the Year once up north, and then she had some family problems and then she was a homeless woman in South Florida and now she is Sean's assistant.

"Am I pushing Johnny too hard?" he asks her.

"I could smell him all the way across the courtyard," she says.

"I really don't want him to leave again."

The last time Johnny left, Sean had half the shelter out looking for him for two straight days. He was covered with sand fleas when they found him by the beach and Sean had to put on rubber gloves and scrub his body from head to toe.

"It's up to you, Sean," Jenny says, going through the door to the back room where her bed is. "It's up to you."

Well, it's important for Johnny to keep clean, Sean tells himself after she shuts the door, and not just for everyone out there having to smell him, but for himself, too.

Sean tallies the last of the cookie jars. About \$500. Some days the cookie jars fill up with as much as \$1,000 and some months the pennies and dollar bills add up to \$20,000, almost enough to pay the rent, and buy the gas and the medications for people without insurance, and the hundreds of packs of bologna in Sean's refrigerator back at his house, where he rarely gets to use the Jacuzzi anymore.

Midnight comes and goes with Sean still awake and scanning through the proof sheets of the first edition of the new shelter newspaper. He plans on selling The Homeless Herald at churches and on street corners.

"I'm Homeless, But Not Lazy," is one headline. The paper has some poems, a few ads (not nearly enough) and, on Page 6, Sean's own article, "My Friend Named John."

Who still needs to take a shower.

Sean resolves as he drives home, wondering if he'll be able to sleep this night.

Sleep comes hard

But this night is like the rest, he gets two hours.

First it is the sleep disorder that came with the pain that came with the injuries to his neck and back. His stomach is a mess again, too, so when he does nod off he gags and jolts awake in a panic. His two precious hours start just before dawn in the semi-darkness and semi-quiet of a bedroom with the television on.

He worries more than he dreams, worries about all of the things on all of the lists that come with this shelter of his. And is he doing the right thing?

It's not as though he ever planned on starting a shelter. In fact, it happened by accident almost, a thing of impulse born into a night three years ago when it was worry what to do with his new foundation that was keeping Sean Cononie up late, driving him from his bed and into his Lexus and down darkened streets in search of a purpose. Around midnight he spotted a homeless couple huddled beneath a highway bridge.

"Need a place to stay?" he had asked.

It happened just like that. An impulse, a question, a shelter.

He put the couple up in an apartment at 2707 Lincoln St. And then, on another sleepless night, he found another homeless person. And then two apartments, then an entire bungalow. And then, when there were just a dozen or so people, Johnny came. Then another and another.

And then the other shelters heard about this Sean guy who had his own shelter, and they began calling him, asking him to take in the drug addicts and the mentally ill, the old senile drunks and the young troublemaking ones, while at the same time demanding to know when he was going to get a board of directors made up of people other than the people staying in the shelter. Maybe then he would get some proper

funding. And when was he going to quit sending them out to beg? That gave everybody a bad name.

And the police began calling, too, asking him to pick up drunks passed out on the streets where they would ban Sean's collection crews on the very next day. And the hospitals called with their poor patients and a warning they wouldn't keep them, and so Sean had to take them too, didn't he?

Is he doing the right thing, taking in people no other shelter would touch, sending them into that rush-hour traffic, publishing a newspaper written by them? Is he doing the right thing?

Sean's two hours of rest and worry end just after dawn when his legs start to jerk up and down. That happens a lot, too. Up and down, up and down, so hard it's impossible to keep his eyes closed a minute longer.

A clean start?

On this morning, Sean stays at his house pouring jars of coins into sorting machines while, back at the shelter, Johnny gets caught faking a shower.

His roommates, Eddie and Pete, bug him so much that he finally goes inside the bathroom and shuts the door. Eddie, whom Sean had found passed out by a fire hydrant, and Pete, whom Sean had found in a dumpster, hear the water running.

When Johnny comes out a few minutes later, the blackness of his feet, once uniform from toes to ankles, is streaked as if splashed, however briefly, by a stream of water. Johnny is wearing the same soiled jeans, the same unbuttoned shirt. Eddie and Pete poke their heads inside the bathroom and notice there is no bar of soap.

"What do I gotta do, throw you in the shower?" Pete says to him.

Sean hears about the phantom shower when he gets to the shelter later that day and calls Johnny up to Penthouse 4. Johnny shuffles into the front room and searches out the one vacant chair, a light-

ed cigarette in his hand, another unlighted one in his mouth, a third sticking out of his hair, next to, but not actually behind, his ear. The phones are ringing, the smoke is thickening, the line outside is getting longer, and Della is standing off to the side by the crates of cranberry juice.

"We're going to have to hose you down," Sean says to Johnny, who is using the last ember of one cigarette to light up another.

Johnny furrows his brow, and then he smiles a bit.

"If you scrub me," he says, "put on the rubber gloves."

Della giggles. With her hands clasped in front of her, that sheepish smile on her face, she looks almost girlish, despite being middle-aged and world-weary.

"Della, the Miracle," Sean calls her, sober and off crack for three months now, and able for the first time in the year he's known her to follow a conversation.

She had come home drunk last night and now she was swearing to God, for the fourth time, that she never had a single drug, even though, reeking of booze, she had banged on the door of Penthouse 4 and woke up Jenny at 3 a.m.

"Can you just not discharge me, please?" she begs Sean.

Sean just stares at her. Della shifts her foot, opens her mouth, as if to repeat her oath, closes it back up. She fixes a smile on her face, and then tries out a frown, and when that doesn't work either, she looks at the floor. Sean stares. She looks at the ceiling. Then she looks away altogether.

"OK, Sean", she finally says, "I was drinkin' last

(Continued on pg 11)



# Orlando News

## Affordable-housing panel starts looking for fixes

Mary Shanklin

Eyeing reforms of everything from building codes to land-use rules, a new Affordable Housing Task Force met for the first time this week on a tight deadline to help fix the state's housing needs.

The Legislature this year called for the creation of a group charged with suggesting fixes aimed at easing Floridians' housing needs. The 14-member panel has until January to propose changes to, for instance, the way Florida has spent affordable-housing funds on the general operating budget to keeping the state running. The group can also propose changes to rental programs, building construction, tax credits and the placement of low-income apartments or subdivisions.

"At the state level, where we can have the most influence is using affordable-housing tax dollars for affordable housing and looking at land use and incentives," said Ability Housing president Shannon Nazworth, who was appointed by Gov. Rick Scott to the group.

During the task force meeting Wednesday in Tallahassee, two areas that drew attention were dedicated

spending for affordable housing and regulating land use to dictate the size and location for residential projects.

Osceola County programs drew interest too, Nazworth said. That county has tried to strengthen educational opportunities and other support services for nearby struggling families. Like other counties, Osceola has also tried to lure higher-paying jobs and take advantage of linking wage earners with new transit lines.

Central Florida has been noted nationally for its lack of affordable housing. With just 18 rentals available for every 100 very low-income families, only Las Vegas and Los Angeles were more pressed for units than Metro Orlando, according to a recent study of the country's top 50 metropolitan areas. The hardest hit of Metro Orlando residents were those earning less than \$24,000 a year — or \$11 per hour for one person working full-time, according to the report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Archive: Fed-backed apartments block parking, tack on fees »

Archive: Housing gives homeless Osceola families hope, dignity »

Osceola County Commissioner Peggy Choudhry, who has advocated for affordable housing projects, said she would like to see this new group devise a way

With just 18 rentals available for every 100 very low-income families, only Las Vegas and Los Angeles were more pressed for units than Metro Orlando

to get more funds to local governments and nonprofits providing assistance. She said she supported an investor's recent purchase of an old hotel on U.S. Highway 192 with plans to transform it into affordable apartments. The state should look at opening more doors for that type of investment, she said.

"In Osceola County, we have a lot of families who are working but they are living in hotels," Choudhry said. "We want them to be working but in more permanent housing. Tiny studios and tiny houses have become very popular."

# Miami News

## INVOLUNTARILY COMMIT THE HOMELESS DURING HURRICANES?

DAVID M. PERRY

As Hurricane Irma bore down on Miami, officials from the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust fanned out into the city, accompanied by police and mental-health officials. In order to protect homeless individuals from the worst effects of the storm, the Homeless Trust had decided to use the Baker Act, a 1970s-era Florida law allowing for the involuntary commitment of people suspected of mental illness, to lock up any homeless people who wouldn't voluntarily go to shelters. Ron Book, chairman of the Trust, told the Miami Herald: "I'm not going to be the mayor of Houston. I'm not going to tell people to take a Sharpie and write their names on their arm." (It was actually the Mayor of Rockport who told non-evacuees to take this step so that their bodies could be identified.) Instead, Book asserted that anyone who was still on the streets must be mentally ill, and that he intended to "have all of them Baker-Acted." A day later, homeless people were being cuffed and taken away, after psychiatrists working with the Trust stated that the decision to stay outside in the face of a hurricane merited incarceration.

All this might sound like reasonable policy. No one wants homeless people to die for want of shelter. Fred Friedman, however, has questions. Friedman is head organizer of Next Steps, an organization dedicated to ensuring that those with "lived experience of homelessness, mental illness, substance use, or addiction" drive all policy discussions about people with those experiences. Over the phone, he describes himself to me as a person who has experienced both homelessness and "active symptoms of mental illness" at various points in his life.

Friedman is concerned about homeless people in Miami. But he also knows that the risks don't come only from the storm. "It's scary," he says, "when people make decisions that others don't like, they define it as crazy. In this case, they lock them up without any due process." He wonders, now that this precedent has been set, what other moments will justify trawling the streets of Miami to "Baker-Act" homeless residents.

Friedman says that, although protecting life is a good goal, we shouldn't view this implementation of the Baker Act without being troubled by two things: First, it's a sign that all the systems leading up to this point have failed. Second, the Baker Act sets a dangerous precedent for whenever the government next



wants to sweep homeless people out of the way. Florida is a state that experiences hurricanes all the time—so why, Friedman wonders, wasn't there a plan that didn't involve involuntary commitment? Friedman points out that Florida officials issued a general evacuation order, and even though some able-bodied people stayed, the state is "not locking those people up." Only homeless people were treated as necessarily mentally ill for choosing not to evacuate. He thinks it's an obvious misuse of the law to deem these people "crazy now and [not] five days ago."

Bethany Lilly, deputy director of policy at the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, also wants to understand why this happened and how to prevent it in the future. Over email, she points out that news reports indicated that state psychiatrists already knew many of these men from prior interactions. Lilly writes, "This is

an example of how constant and consistent service failures are treated in the mental-health system—by blaming people with mental-health conditions and forcing them into treatment." They need health care and housing at all times, not just in the face of natural disaster, but, as Lilly points out, Florida did not expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act and "only 1.4 percent of people receiving services from the Florida public mental-health authority received supported housing in 2016, despite the overwhelming evidence that [housing] is one of the most important mental-health interventions." Is it really surprising, Lilly asks, when the system has failed people time and again, that they might be reluctant to deal with the system?

As pointed out by the mental-health advocacy group National

Association for Rights Protection and Advocacy, in a statement on this use of the Baker Act, this is not a new problem. In collaboration with the National Council on Disability, a federally funded advisory body, NARPA released a position paper on the needs of people with psychiatric disabilities after hurricanes Rita and Katrina back in 2006. They found numerous failures and violations of rights of disabled citizens. In other cases, NARPA said, state negligence led to injury and death or premature termination of support operations. Any emergency plan in any hurricane zone should already have drawn from the lessons of Katrina, Rita, and other disasters, in planning to provide support for disabled individuals. Miami's involuntary detention demonstrates a lack of planning.

In the end, officials at the Homeless Trust told me, six people were committed. It's not a huge number, but each of these individuals has rights, and in each case those rights were violated. Those violations could be prevented with better planning. Advocates worry about the potential for similar misuse of involuntary commitment, especially given that none of the widespread news coverage of the Baker Act reached out to experts like NARPA, Next Steps, or the Bazelon Center.

Meanwhile, as of the time of publication, no one in Miami could tell me whether the people committed under the Baker Act had been released. The storm had knocked out access to email and phones, so the victims of the Baker Act were, at least for now, rendered not just invisible but unreachable.

*The Baker Act sets a dangerous precedent for whenever the government next wants to sweep homeless people out of the way*

## Dope Church pastor takes God's message to addicts, homeless

Amanda Williamson

On the cracked, hot pavement of the Diamond Inn motel on Ramona Boulevard, Manny Rios huddled next to an elderly man and whispered prayers into the dense Jacksonville air.

Sweat already formed on his arm as Rios rested it on the man's shoulders. There, between his elbow and his wrist, a cursive tattoo — "Saved" — shone fresh and dark in the afternoon sun.

Not too long ago, the cartography of Rios' skin resembled another life entirely: one of an addict, a drug dealer and a gang member.

Those marks remain, permanent but fading.

With the bold white cross of a nearby megachurch piercing the skyline, Rios finished his prayer and stepped away from his newfound friend. A line of people now formed beside him, all waiting for a free barbecue dinner courtesy of Dope Church, a ministry of The Well Church of Jacksonville.

Approximately 75 people left their hotel rooms to join the gathering.

"This is just hamburgers and hot dogs. We are trying to introduce them to the real food: Jesus Christ," Rios said. "They don't need someone who is just going to preach at them. They need someone who is going to get down into the hole with them."

That is exactly what Pastor Tone Benedict did for Rios — and for Rios' wife, and for his fellow congregation members, and for all the people down and out at the Diamond Inn motel.

Hanging with the Sinners- Maybe Benedict attended church once when growing up in Chicago. He isn't sure. Any recollection that might exist has fallen into disuse, consumed by time and his own uncertain memory.

What he does remember, however, is the life he lived. Benedict followed only one commandment: Never leave his children the way his father left him.

That life rule left a lot of vagueness and freedom for the young 20-something Benedict. So, he sold drugs, drove recklessly, racked up DUIs, philandered with women. The list, he said, continued.

"If you had asked me, 'Tone, are you a good person?' I'd probably have said no," Benedict said. "If you'd asked me if I was going to heaven or hell, I'd probably have said, 'Hell. That's where the bad people go, right?'"

Until, one day, he received what can only be described as a spiritual wake-up call.

The woman the 26-year-old Benedict was seeing told him she was pregnant. That by itself wouldn't necessarily have bothered Benedict — except, the woman was married to someone else. Quickly, he realized his one life rule would be tested. So, he turned heaven-ward.

"God, if you're real, you have to help me," Benedict said.

To his surprise, help did come. Shortly after, the woman called again to tell Benedict she was no longer pregnant. He didn't ask questions — but suddenly, Benedict felt he owed God. He found a church and he attended. Nothing. He didn't feel any different inside than before attending the service.

Benedict left disappointed.

On his drive home, he clicked on the radio and started scrolling through the stations. He paused on a local evangelical station. The preacher lectured about Jesus visiting with and befriending the sinners — and Benedict just knew. That relationship was what he needed, was what he missed.

"It's the sick that need a doctor," he said.

Almost on cue, a friend invited Benedict to a Christian singles weekend event. He went. He listened to men repeatedly ask their fellow male attendees to pray for them — to pray for forgiveness for any lustful thoughts. Among those men, Benedict realized he was sleeping with a married woman and feeling fine about it, but these men were asking forgiveness for their thoughts.

Guilt washed over him. He told the woman he could no longer see her. God, he said, made him feel bad.

"That's a spiritual awakening. When you realize he's there, and that he sees you," Benedict said. "If God's



not communicating with you, then what you're doing is religion."

He finally held the power to say "no" to what his body wanted him to do. One either lives by the flesh or lives by the spirit, Benedict said, and his past allows him to connect to recovering drug addicts in a way many may not understand.

GATHER AT THE WELL- Cattlemen looking to count their free-range livestock often established a well in the pasture. The water drew the cattle to a central location — and the ranchers could get a sense of what was out there in the pasture.

The Well Jacksonville, located at 2001 Ernest St., is Benedict's way to do just that.

"We want to be that source of life," he said. The church stands for four central pillars: Worship, Eat, Live and Love.

After his spiritual awakening, Benedict, now 51, later had a second realization.

"Things started to change right away, but I never really thought I would be a pastor," he said. "But, I started to work with different ministries while getting my master's degree ... just putting into practice what I was learning."

Benedict was 33 when he married his wife, Missy, and became a full-time youth pastor. Eventually, he became an associate pastor.

Ultimately, Benedict realized he wanted to start a church service for people like him, for people who may feel judged at traditional services or for people who have attended church in the past but maybe never connected. Benedict has two master's degrees — one in Biblical studies and one in missional leadership. He obtained a "Church Planting Assessment," which was conducted by Jacksonville's Emmaus Church to see if Benedict was qualified to open his church.

In 2012, The Well officially started with a small group of people in Tone and Missy Benedict's Riverside backyard. The church has survived since through the "Kingdom mindset." Many of the men and women The Well ministers to don't have the money to keep a church in operation — but other Jacksonville churches donate to Benedict to keep his vision a reality.

On his website, Benedict calls The Well Jax a Jesus community "where people would worship Jesus, eat meals together and learn how to love God and each other as they served the 'least.'"

The service meets every Sunday. Missy Benedict helps her husband with nearly every aspect of The Well Jax, including mentoring women and the children's ministry.

That last component, loving and serving the "least," reflects in nearly everything Benedict now does, including Dope Church.

The church meets every other Saturday at a Jacksonville hotel, usually one where tenants stay long-term or where there are high crime rates. Benedict and volunteers bring food, clothes, toys and prayers. At the beginning of the event, Benedict gathers his volunteers for prayer — and then everyone knocks door by door throughout the hotel to let people know food is in the parking lot.

No one nags about religion or church, but everyone offers to pray for the hotel's tenants.

Dope Church is an extension of Benedict's other missions. He wants to love people where they are. That, he realizes, often means going to places he wouldn't normally go to connect with men and women. He also approached Gateway Community Services to see if he could bring food to the residents going through recovery at its drug rehab program.

Because of these relationships, Benedict said he has lost 50

or more people to the opioid epidemic in the last year alone.

Opioids killed more than 33,000 people last year — and tens of thousands more lived daily with physical and mental side effects of opioid addiction. In Jacksonville alone, the fire and rescue department responded to 3,411 overdose calls, more than triple the number from 2014. Opioids accounted for 544 deaths.

Even though opioid prescriptions are down in Florida, those found illegally on the street are more often than not being sliced with even more dangerous substances, like fentanyl.

"The reality is opioids are so strong in their bodies," Benedict said.

Most drug rehab programs include a spiritual component, he added.

Benedict said he feels his services just help to remind these men and women someone who cares exists outside the drug rehab world. Manny Rios, who said he took any and all drugs, attributes his ability to maintain a drug-free lifestyle to The Well Jax.

Brian Perry, who now speaks publicly at The Well Jax, shares the same story as Rios.

Perry used to have trouble with the law frequently. He's been to jail, to prison, to rehab programs. He kept relapsing, but now he remains clean. He tells his story at The Well whenever he is able.

"It's a crazy thing. Since I got sober, I haven't had any run-ins with the law," Perry said. "God took me under his wing."

Benedict said addicts must find this connection to something bigger than themselves.

"If they had the power within themselves already, they would have fixed their addiction," he said. "For them to wake up and say, 'OK, today I'm going to be a better person, and I'm not going to do drugs.' Well, that hasn't worked for them. That hasn't worked for anyone really."

LIFE SENTENCE- Imagine: You've just committed a terrible crime and now, you're on Death Row. Someone comes to your cell and tells you they will not only be taking your place, but take the guilt and responsibility you may feel as well.

Wouldn't you owe that person?

That scenario is what Benedict tells the men and women of his church who lived on the streets or on drugs. He uses the example to connect them to the much bigger picture.

Manny Rios used drugs every day.

"It's a spiritual disease — addiction, the streets and that whole lifestyle," he said. "We are trying to fill ourselves with things, and it's a God-sized hole."

When Rios walked out of his nine-month drug rehab program, he immediately walked into The Well Jax. It's been his home ever since.

Benedict married Rios and he baptized Rios' wife. The two consider themselves core members and steady volunteers. Heather Rios is often called to be a prayer warrior, a volunteer position requiring her to meet one-on-one or in small groups with individuals who need prayers.

"The Well loved me back to life," Manny Rios said. "I won't turn my back on that. We have real friends today. You don't get that on the streets. Why trade something that is free for something that costs so much and takes everything? I mean addiction and all the rest. God is better."

# Tampa News

## Former Homeless Stylist Gives Back

Hasani Malone

When Giving Hands Beauty Salon opened its doors in 2013 in Tampa, Fla., there was no question that the goal would be to give back to those who needed it most — society's most vulnerable and often overlooked.

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Tampa had the highest rate of homelessness in the nation in 2016. Among its 16,000 homeless, one in five were children.

This came as no surprise to Vanessa Howard, founder of Giving Hands, who experienced homelessness nearly two decades ago with three children by her side.

"I've always wanted to own a salon back when I was a teenager," Howard said. "When I moved to Florida in 2008 is when the Lord called me to actually open up a salon. He gave me the name Giving Hands Salon and asked me to open up a salon that would give back to the community."

Howard, who also experienced domestic violence and depression, draws her compassion from the struggles that she's faced and a need to help others.

Vanessa Howard also plans to open a homeless shelter and a shelter for victims of domestic violence.

"People don't care about what you know until they know how much you care," Howard said. "When people

are going through [homelessness], they tend to not feel good about themselves.

"I believe when you look good on the outside, you feel good on the inside as well."

But she wants others to know that Giving Hands does more than just change outward appearances.

Those who come in get a six-to-eight-hour beautification experience. Howard and employees work to build the self-esteem and well-being of all who come in, through prayer. At the end of each appointment, they receive a gift bag that contains bibles, journals and toiletries.

The salon also puts on events to reach out to more women in need, such as for victims of domestic violence, sex trafficking and survivors of cancer.

One event that's gaining attention is the Back to School Princess Party for homeless and foster children. The salon provides the students with school supplies, uniforms, if necessary, and a salon experience.

"God has given me a heart for the broken, the forgotten and the downcast," Howard said.

In the future, Howard plans to open her own homeless shelter. She also plans to open a safe haven for women who are escaping domestic violence.

"I truly believe that our pain has purpose, but it's what you do with what you go through that makes a difference," Howard said.



## Nation's First Girl Scout Troop For Homeless Kids Looks To Grow In NYC Shelters

The nation's first Girl Scout troop for homeless girls is looking to expand in shelters across the city.

Troop 6000, based in a Long Island City hotel used to house homeless families, plans to hold its first training session for volunteers Sept. 30, as it prepares to launch chapters in 10 more homeless shelters around the city, Ashiyah Cays-Cavan, the troop's logistics manager, told Patch in an email.

The Girl Scouts of Greater New York organization hopes to recruit 125 volunteers to help lead scout meetings, accompany girls on field trips and communicate with the local Girl Scouts council, Cays-Cavan said.

"Even if someone is not able to volunteer that amount of time, we are looking for volunteers in any capacity, even if that's a one-time chaperone or program offering," Cays-Cavan told Patch.

Troop 6000 was launched this past spring as a partnership between the Girl Scouts and the city's Department of Homeless Services. It was started by Giselle

Burgess, a homeless mother of five who works for the Girl Scouts and was then living at a Long Island City shelter, The New York Times reported.

As of this summer, the troop — the first ever created for homeless girls — had 28 members, all of whom lived at the Queens homeless shelter, according to NPR. It now has around 40 active scouts, Cays-Cavan said. Burgess now serves as the Troop 6000 program manager.

Three homeless shelters now have active Troop 6000 groups, and 10 others have said they want one, Cays-Cavan said. In July, the city committed more than \$1.2 million over three years to facilitate Troop 6000's expansion, according to a news release from Mayor Bill de Blasio's office.

The program seeks "to utilize the leadership skills of women living in" city shelters, but anyone from within or outside of the shelter system can volunteer, Cays-Cavan said. Volunteers can help troop members earn badges, go on trips to museums and camps with the scouts, and help older girls with college applications, she said.

"But if someone has a special talent or knowledge they want to share we may be able to work with them to provide that

*a Girl Scout troop in a shelter brings joy to girls, but more than that, it helps prepare them for success in school, in their communities and for the future*



programming," such as a yoga class or CPR training session, Cays-Cavan told Patch.

The Troop 6000 volunteer training will run from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Girl Scouts of Greater New York offices, located at 40 Wall St. in Manhattan. Anyone interested in participating should complete the group's volunteer interest form.

"Having a Girl Scout troop in a shelter brings joy to girls, but more than that, it helps prepare them for success in school, in their communities and for the future," Burgess, who has three daughters in Troop 6000, said in a statement in July.

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# Remembering My Friend John...

(Continued from pg 7)

night.”

It was a bottle of schnapps. Her disability check came in and she cashed it and her boyfriend came around and they decided to get drunk. It just happened.

“You remember that I told you not to sneak out?” he says.

“Yes, Sir.”

“You wanna end up brain dead?”

“That’s why I’m bipolar,” she says. “Because of all those drugs I’ve done and all the booze I’ve had.”

“You’re gonna come back with a wet brain. You’re not even gonna know when you pee.”

“I’ve already got cirrhosis,” she says, as if to compliment Sean for being so perceptive.

Susan knocks on the door and lumbers in. Sean yells at her for smoking when she’s so out of breath. Jeff, a day laborer who attributes his perpetually bowed head to his chronically low self-esteem, comes in to pay his \$16 in daily rent. Sean tells Annie, who is about to spend her first night ever at a shelter, to wipe the toilet seat before using it and to sleep with her money on her, even if she has to put it in her bra, and to not be afraid, that everything is going to be OK.

The line keeps coming and the phone keeps ringing and Johnny shuffles away, still smoking, still dirty.

As darkness falls, Sean hands a slip of paper to Della for her to sign.

Thirty days of no visitors and 10 days of AA meetings, that was her punishment. When she signs, Sean notices a black mark on her fingernail, the sort of burn caused when the lighter held over a crack pipe flickers up between each inhale.

It’s an old stain, Della says. She swears to God it is. But it doesn’t look old to Sean.

A new man

Four more two-hour nights and Sean is exhausted. Four more shower less days and Johnny is rank.

Then comes Day 15 of Johnny’s shower less streak, the day when Johnny goes inside the bathroom of Room 8 and the water goes on and stays on this time.

“Hey,” Pete says, smiling through the door after a half-hour has passed. “you’re going to have to pay the water bill!”

When Johnny finally comes out, he is wearing a new T-shirt and he is holding up a new pair of pants, Sean’s black jeans, size 42, at least two sizes too big for Johnny.

Eddie and Pete talk about boiling his old clothes

while Johnny brags about his new ones, offering in his quiet mumbly voice to buy a soda for anyone who wants one. No one says a word about the T-shirt being on backwards.

Sean is sorting change again and misses the whole thing. And then the next day, before he can even sit down at the desk in Penthouse 4, he is distracted by news that Carol got a \$20 bill from somewhere, and that it is gone now, and that ever since it disappeared her jaw has been wobbling.

That can mean only one thing. Crack in the shelter. And he sends for Carol, whose middle-aged world-weariness shows a lot more than Della’s does.

Carol comes up the stairs and through the door. She gave the \$20 to Caroline, she says. Caroline is Carol’s friend. No one has ever seen Caroline. No one even knows who Caroline is.

“I gotta problem,” Sean says. “I know you’re lyin’.”

He empties Carol’s purse, opens her lipstick, looks inside her half-crushed pack of cigarettes. It will take Sean seven hours before Carol finally admits to smoking crack. It is past midnight when Carol, jaw wobbling like mad, finally says where she got it.

Della has it, she says. It’s Della.

Sean smashes Carol’s crack in front of her, tells her if she wants to stay she’ll be confined to her room for 30 days.

“I wanna stay, Sean, I wanna stay,” she says.

But Della won’t give up her crack. She won’t agree to room confinement. She lets Sean give her a hug, but she won’t give him any excuse to keep her and she walks away — Della the Miracle, a bundle of clothes, unbrushed hair, smiles, frowns, swearing to God with her hidden cash into the night.

Jenny goes into the back room to fall asleep and Sean is left alone, knowing his own bed will offer no comfort. He goes into that hot night, down the stairs and through the gap in the chain-link fence where Johnny’s old jeans, freshly cleaned, if not boiled too, have been set out to dry.

He opens the door to Room 8. Sean knows Johnny would be asleep. Johnny can sleep anywhere, either where he is now — on the couch, holding his blanket — or beneath the gazebo, or in the lawn chair outside, anywhere, anytime, bucketfuls of slumber on demand.



Sean snaps on the light and Johnny opens his eyes.

Here at the end of a tired day, it turns out that Johnny McCormick, the neediest, is the one Sean Cononie, the givingest, is needing again.

“Wanna cigarette?” Sean asks, and of course Johnny does, and he takes a light, too.

Sean pulls a copy of The Homeless Herald out of his back pocket.

“Look Johnny, you’re famous,” Sean says, opening to Page 6. He holds it out for Johnny.

Johnny rustles it, turns it this way and that.

Sean’s story, “My Friend Named John,” tells of how they had met on the curb by a bus station, and how Sean had tried to get the psych ward at the hospital to take Johnny in, but the hospital had refused and how, over the months, people had come and gone, hundreds of them so far — Annies and Carols and Toms and lots and lots of Dellas — and Johnny was always there holding his pants up with his left hand and making Sean smile.

Johnny’s eyes, flickering beneath the tangle of his hair, scan back and forth across the upside-down newspaper. To Sean, he looks like Jesus Christ. It doesn’t matter that Johnny’s feet are already turning black again. Hadn’t Christ’s feet gotten dirty in the Bible and didn’t someone have to wash them off, or something like that?

And there it is in black and white and in Sean’s own words. “He is the best present God has ever given me in my entire life.”

“Johnny, I love you,” Sean says.

“And I hate you, too,” Johnny says.

But he can’t help smiling when he says it and then he gives himself away with that soft laugh of his.

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*Here at the end of a tired day, it turns out that Johnny McCormick, the neediest, is the one Sean Cononie, the givingest, is needing again.*

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*Remembering my Friend John*

The man who inspired it all