

"I'm a human being."

Words from the Curbs

volume 4

Life on the Streets: Home at Last

The Preble Street Writing Project

\$3 suggested donation



Introduction

The Preble Street Writing Project began its most recent incarnation in May 2009. We began slowly with just one or two contributors, but over the next few weeks, we were averaging between three to six people each week, with people coming and going over successive weeks. In all, there are 23 contributors represented here.

Writers' groups have been present at Preble Street for many years, and have produced multiple editions of a publication entitled "Words from the Curbs." In the past, these small books contained poetry, stories, essays, and drawings from the contributors of the writer's groups. For this volume, it was decided by the contributors to focus attention on the various aspects of being homeless.

Being part of the Writing Project has been an awesome experience for me. Literally, I am in awe of people who stay at a shelter or live outside, who eat at a soup kitchen, who depend upon donations for clothing, and who live in an environment of constant change, relocation, and uncertainty, who, despite these formidable odds, choose to take time out of their daily lives to share their innermost thoughts and feelings with others through the written word.

Not all who are participants in this group are currently homeless, but all have been and all understand this way of life, whether it lasts for a few days, a few months, or is measured in years. I admire these individuals who, in this circumstance, where they always have to be at least a little defensive and watchful of their surroundings, can dip into their life experiences and write creatively about what they've been through.

The goal has been to develop their writing skills and to communicate something about their lives to you, the reader. Hopefully these words, primarily in the form of questions and responses, will be of benefit to you.

Thank you for your interest.

—*Bill Goodykoontz, Facilitator*

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What memories do you have of your childhood?

Fond memories fill my mind as I think back on my childhood. Love is the only word that permeates my soul when reminiscing about how I was raised. The love I received from my parents can only be expressed through my actions. To receive love is to give love.

Life growing up was absolutely grand. Just being a kid was awesome. The first nine years of my life was in Galveston, Texas. Picking plums, shooting marbles, playing tag and spending time watching my mother cook. Sports came later. Family was number one in our household.

After moving to California, my mom made sure to expose our family to exciting places like Hollywood, Venice Beach, the L.A. Zoo and most importantly, different people of different cultural backgrounds. Summers were spent in Daytona Beach, Florida with my dad. He was adamant about education. He could not read or write very well, but he learned to write “I Love You” in his letters he mailed to me. Sometimes a letter might only contain three words: “I Love You.”

School was pounded into my head all summer long. Of course, he explained to me why it was so important. I can't leave my grandmother out of the equation. All I can say is she always told me, “Love don't cost a thing. You are loved so always give love.”

I graduated high school in Los Angeles and joined the Army right after. A year and a half of college remains under my belt. After getting out of the Army I needed more life experiences before returning to school. Now, I'm ready.

—*Michelle Thomas*

I was spoiled and treated like a princess by my parents until my father died. I was devastated. When I was young, I was very content and happy. My teenage years were rough because I had substance abuse issues. After my dad died, I spent much of my time with my mother. I got my GED and had some college and went to nursing school, but didn't finish.

—*Janet Turner*

I did not really have a childhood. As far back as I can remember, there was some type of pain associated with growing up. I believe I had to become an adult at a young age to survive my childhood. I spent most of my time with myself. I had protective walls to surround myself with.

I did graduate from high school with high grades. The blessing of all of this is now, at the age of 57, I am child-like! I am being a child now and enjoying my life.

The other person I spent a great deal of time with was my twin sister. We protected each other. She is my best friend.

—*Bernice Kidd*

What were your teenage years like?

With homeless teens I don't know what that must be like. When I was young I was kind of a hippie and lived on the streets by choice, hitching around the country, checking it all out, but to be really homeless at that age in a shelter and eating at the soup kitchen out of necessity, I can't imagine. It's just too sad.

—*Reb Brierley*

Growing up in Pennsylvania is no different than growing up here. We have differences in my family, like yours. Most of my favorite memories are of mother; when we would talk or when we would be out in the garden.

—*Linda Burnham*

What do you remember about your family

I knew my great-grandmother a little—she was an American Indian Blackfoot. I was raised by my grandmother, Cecil Marie Smith. I didn't know my uncle, aunts, or cousins. I knew my mother, brother, and my Uncle Tom—we like picking on each other. I also knew my grandmother's twin sister, Mabel. My great grandmother was 99 when she passed away.

—*Jeanna Roath*

Eduardo Briales was my great grandfather, a highly decorated Civil War hero. There's even a plaque to his accomplishments in my home town's town hall. I met him only once when I was a kid. It was about 1957—he was pretty old then and did shortly after. It was neat to talk to him and he was still pretty spry and I believe he was 106 when I met him. He told me he joined the Cavalry at 11 years old—I imagine it was near the end of that horrible war. He remembered the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley. He met Teddy Roosevelt at some Armistice Day get-together, he lived in a time that is distant history to us and left me with a feeling of being connected to that time—a time I have always been interested in. His wife, Margaret, died in 1909 and he never remarried. He spent the better part of his life selling bait and renting out boats on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. That's all I really know about him. He was one of the most interesting people I met when I was a kid.

—*Reb Brierley*

There's nothing like babysitting an alcoholic grandfather who is prone to seizures. Until he had his surgery, I got to stay just for one afternoon. Did it ever help the relationship. NO. I grew up expecting to help everybody. But who wants to help me. Don't get me wrong—people have helped me along the way.

—*Linda Burnham*

My father died on November 11 (Veterans Day), the year of 2000. Although my father and I were never really close, I miss him very much. He always helped me financially. I did get a chance to tell him goodbye about two years before he died, explaining I did not want him to die and not be able to understand it.

—*Frank Higgins*

My parents were really something. They were both workhorses. They were strict at times but that is what holds a family together. My dad would always play badminton with me every night weather and time permitting. My mom was the finest cook and very talented. She made our clothes, cooked, cleaned, ironed, and enjoyed reading, knitting, and crocheting. My mother's brother was a Baptist minister. Her mom—my Nana—was a very special lady. I never met my father's mom or remember his sister Elizabeth, but his two sisters, Ada and Aunt Eva, were full of it. My family was a close knit family, but even close families have arguments now and then. Sometimes things got resolved quickly and sometimes grudges were held forever. We always had the best of everything and they always did the best they could with only my dad's income.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

The grandparent I remember most fondly would be my mom's mom—my Nana—Ida Belle Hubbard. From an early age, my twin sister and I spent a good percent of our childhood spending weekends with Nana.

As far back as I can remember, she always had soft skin and a fragrance one loved. Nana spent so much time with us truly nurturing and loving. Stubborn at times, she always had an encouraging word. While growing up, I loved spending weekends at her home. She was extremely old fashioned and as the years went by, I fell in love with all her stubborn, old fashioned ways. Nana had a way of bringing out the child in us, no matter what age we were. I loved to listen to her speak about her youth and her love of life.

Although her own youth was hard, she had many fond memories she shared. Nana was always a hard worker but when we were in her home she showed her gentle nature.

She died at the age of 78. I was 29 years old and still miss her dearly. She helped to instill a sense of self-love within me. She taught me great values, most of all the importance of being honest. My grandmother loved me in so many ways I would have to write for some time to share them all. She took care of not only her grandchildren but animals, other peoples' children, and anyone or thing she could nurture. I thank my Nana for some of my best qualities, and yes, I am also very stubborn. I always smile as I think of her and to this day, my twin sister and I still share many funny stories of our Nana.

—*Bernice Kidd*

I was born and grew up in Exeter N.H. It's home to Phillips-Exeter Academy, one of the world's top preparatory schools. It's an extremely expensive school but Exeter natives can go there, as long as they can Pass The Test, for very little money. At the "suggestion" of my dad, God rest his soul, I took The Test and to my amazement passed it. I did about half my sophomore year there and hated every second of it; it was too hard, the students treated the few townies that were there like Lepers and I missed my friends at Exeter High. After a couple months of pleading my case to my parents I won and got to go back to E.H.S.

Exeter (the town) is more like a small compact city. It's very affluent and is populated by people from all around the globe as well as your garden variety townies. My father's side of the family has lived in Exeter since the Revolution. My great-whatever grandfather fought in the Revolution. His son was a legislator of some kind in the early 1800s and my great grandfather was a lawyer in Portsmouth, N.H., near Exeter, in the late 1800s. He changed our name from Brialos to Brierley probably due to prejudice and needing clients. He got the name from owning property in Brierley Hill in the north of England. My grandfather founded and owned Brierley Beverages which produced and sold Brier-Cola and Brier-Ale in N.H., VT., northern Massachusetts and southern Maine from the late 20's until 1963 when he sold it to NEHI cola. My father was V.P. of Anderson Consulting in Boston. He traveled all over the world and we got to go with him many times. I've lived for short times in Brazil, England, Portugal, and Spain.

My mother's father came here from Portugal around 1905. He was a dairy farmer, a small town Chief of Police, and a bootlegger. He ate pig brains, cow guts, and all manner of disgusting things. He was awesome—one of a kind. My mother was the Vice-Sheriff of Rockingham County—my home county. She is 91 and still alive. My father died in 1996. He would be 99. I had two sisters and one brother, Barbara, Hannah, and Jim. Barbara died in 1987 at 47 and Jim died in 1995—he was 48. My parents were sticklers for education. My sisters, my brother, and I all graduated college. My sisters were housewives, my brother a bank vice-president and a pro golfer of little renown. He was very good though. I was an electrician for 25 years. I never went to grad school—that was my plan.

—*Reb Brierley*

When were you homeless for the first time?

When I first time came to the Preble Street Day Shelter, I didn't know one person. Why I came here I will never know. Only God knows why. When I left Williamsport, PA, I was scared, not knowing where I was staying. What I had to leave behind, that I wish I could have brought with me, was my son Steve.

—*Linda Burnham*

In nineteen ninety-seven, everything was going great. I was director of maintenance for a midsize electronics company. I owned my own home where I lived with my youngest son and my girlfriend. I also had seven years of sobriety. In ninety-eight, two companies merged and the company I worked for folded, almost overnight. Within six months, I lost my home, I had to sell my truck and my motorcycle, and we all ended up at the shelter in Portsmouth N.H. It was pretty humbling. Eventually, I arranged for my son to stay with my sister and her family – that took a huge weight off my shoulders, but then my girlfriend suddenly died. I was devastated and began drinking again, more than ever. The next six years, I bounced around working here and there, but still drinking. In two thousand three, I landed in a hospital in Florida with liver failure and then a psych ward for severe depression. When I finally got back north, I got into the Salvation Army A.R.C. right here on Preble Street. I stayed for a few months, got approved for S.S.D.I., and left the Salvation Army to work on housing and wound up back on the streets drinking again. I got so sick I had to sober up or die.

—*Reb Brierley*

The first time I came to the Preble Street Day Shelter, I was leery of everyone. I just kind of sat at a table and observed and tried to learn who I could talk to that I could trust and that would give me some hope instead of false encouragement. I have never felt safe at Preble Street Resource Center and things are really spiraling out of control. I get really nervous when people are loud because I don't know whether it will turn out good or bad.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

I got to Portland, Maine on May 17th, 2009. My husband and I stopped at a church in South Portland. They were very nice and helpful. We had no money left for gas for our van. They helped us with gas money and food. We left after evening service, and went into Portland, where we found out where the shelter was, and also found out, from the homeless on the street, they told us what to do. We went to General Assistance and they approved us for a housing voucher and told us that one of us had to stay in the Women's Shelter, which is where I went for a week and a half. We looked at two or three apartments, but they wouldn't let us keep our little dog. We found an apartment right next to the shelter, a real nice one bedroom, and we could keep our little dog.

The main thing I had problems with is the case workers that try to help you after you leave the shelter. I think they should tell people what to do when they get an apartment—where to get food, cleaning supplies, and furniture—whatever they need to know and where to refer people to get help. They also need to check on people if they get a place to see how they are doing and if they need anything. There should be more information for people to find resources for help. People should not be homeless in Portland. There is a lot of help if they know where to go.

—*Jeanna Roath*

What sort of personal relationships are you able to maintain while being homeless?

As far as relationships are concerned, when our adventure in homelessness began my girlfriend and myself were very determined not to let it ruin our relationship and it didn't but like I wrote earlier she passed away. I lost a few friends but only because we now traveled in much different circles, long time friends I didn't lose and surprisingly I've met a lot of friends that I hope will be friends for a long time to come.

Throughout my homeless experience my mother has been a huge help. She hasn't been able to give me a place to live but has helped me financially and spiritually and she is now thrilled that I've pulled myself back up. Some of my family have been good but some have turned their backs on me. I know some people who have completely lost contact with their families, and that's very sad but it happens a lot.

—*Reb Brierley*

How would you describe what being homeless is like to someone who has never experienced it?

When it sinks in, I mean really sinks in, you realize just how bad it is. Homelessness is depressing, frustrating, and extremely inconvenient. It often seems that once you become homeless it can become a trap, you get tired of being defined as a Shelter person; it's hard to find work, especially nowadays. It also oddly can become comfortable which surprised me because it happened to me but I finally pulled out of it. The reality of homelessness is that it's hard, it breaks hearts and spirits. You can't let it get the best of you.

—*Reb Brierley*

I'll only briefly touch on the elderly men and women who are homeless simply because I don't know what it's like for them—the same for handicapped people. All I can say is it very sad to see the elderly and those who have serious mental or physical handicaps living in the shelter and on the streets. It must be a very difficult thing to deal with. The best I can do is to treat them with as much respect as possible.

—*Reb Brierley*

Tooth for tooth
Eye for eye
The shit we go through
Just to survive
Bumming money
Rummaging trash
6 out of 10
With no place to crash
On park benches you see them sleep
These are the people of the street
They walk in the rain
And they walk in the snow
Cause they've no other place to go
Emergency shelters not enough
Social workers make it tough
On park benches
You see them sleep
These are the people
Of the street.

—*Patrick Smith*

I get up early at the shelter. It's easier to shower, then I hang around and let my hair dry. At 7:30, I leave and head to the Soup Kitchen. It's crowded and noisy. Never a dull moment. After eating, I head upstairs to the Resource Center to get on the mail list. If the weather's bad I hang out there and read or write. If it's good, I head out and either hang in the park or just walk the streets. Oftentimes, I go to the library or browse book stores. I usually hook up with my brother, Al, and we figure out something to do or some place to go. There's really not much to do, especially if your pockets are empty, which sometimes leads to some drinking just to pass time. I always try to avoid that and try to find something that's creative, or I'll work on getting things I need like food stamps, housing, or clean clothes. Being homeless, as I always say, is hard, inconvenient, depressing, and extremely trying.

—*Reb Brierley*

What was it like coming to Preble Street or another shelter for the first time?

I remember my first time in the Day Room and being sad at the number of people whose lives had led them here. I was shocked at the number. I've been very sad feeling their frustration with trying to stay sober, safe, find jobs and a place to go away from here for good. Away from the noise, harassment, the people who come here every day—it's not by choice.

A lot of people have fallen through the cracks—how lucky I've been but one never knows. How to dig one's way out—faith, persistence, using the right sources. Frustration is an “F” word here.

—*Bev Baker (Day Shelter Staff)*

Seven years ago, my husband died suddenly in his sleep of a brain tumor. In one instant, he was gone. This occurred on our 18th wedding anniversary. In the years since, loss has played a large role in my life. For various circumstances after his death I lost all our belongings, my job, our cars, and our cat of 15 years. After years of working through my depression, I finally obtained a great job in 2008 only to once again lose that.

Because of the last loss, I ended up at the homeless shelter. I was afraid, alone, angry and once again feeling depressed. I have been here three months. The end result has been after all my losses, I have realized the blessings I have gained. I am looking for work and housing, but am no longer depressed. I have come to holy surrender, leaning on my God and have met wonderful, caring people. This experience is making me stronger and loving life in ways I never have. It is strange but I've learned the down and out, lonely and hurting do reach out to each other in ways that have truly blessed me.

—*Bernice Kidd*

I thank you first for reading this. My name is Francisco J. Wilson. I was born from a mixed family. I am Nicaraguan. Now starting with my experiences in the USA—it is not a bad experience, is that I get to know myself. When I first came to Miami, it wasn't so bad until 9/11 when things started to get bad. I ran up to Portland, Maine where my battle started. I see myself as a Black person but they see me as a Spanish man. I told the people I am a Black man—American people call me a Black Spanish man. My eyes are small like Chinese. They also say I am a Black man, but I am a Black man born in a Spanish country.

—*Francisco Wilson*

The first time I walked into the Preble Street Resource Center I was overwhelmed, I couldn't believe the people. So many people. I was really depressed. I had to find housing, and after figuring out what I had to do, I did it and eventually got an apartment, but only after a long stay at the shelter, and I don't like crowds.

Eating at the Soup Kitchen, hanging around the Resource Center, and sleeping at the Shelter caused me a lot of depression, but I endured it. I'm doing all right now but after ten years of off and on homelessness, I'm sure I'll never forget everything I've been through. In all honesty, I used to think of homeless people as being lazy or having just given up, and although there are those who are chronically homeless, the vast majority are everyday people who fell on bad times. Maybe drugs or alcohol played a part in it or maybe not, maybe just the luck of the draw. The bottom line is that we are all just people. If more people realized that they could lose it all and end up homeless very quickly, perhaps attitudes would change and that might be the beginning of some kind of solution.

—*Reb Brierley*

As a woman, how is your life different from the lives of the men you see in the day shelter, the soup kitchen, or on the street?

I feel that there is a lot of prejudice against women because they don't have strength. I learned that if I open my mouth, I make headway; for men and women.

—*Linda Burnham*

Men, I Love You

Men, I love you
but we need to talk
Why do you keep breaking
so many women's hearts
Tiger Woods is the latest
to go down this path
When the wife found out
she went on the attack
She beat him, beat the car
Beat everything in sight
Boy oh boy, I feel for his wife
I've never found a man
to equal up to my father
After seeing a man
hurt my mother
Her heart was broke
She cried all night
My heart broke for her
I wanted to fight
After feeling my mother's pain
I've never trusted
A man with my heart
to break and bust it
Men, I love you
but we need to talk
Take care of the women
and protect their hearts

—*Michelle Thomas*

How have you experienced the stigma of homelessness?

Why do you look down on me just because I'm homeless? No matter what I did or will do in the future, as long as I am homeless I will not be good enough. If I should win the lottery, I would have friends out the ears. I don't drink alcohol or do the illicit drug scene, but some people are still against me. You tell me I am not good enough to be a friend or someone just to speak to on the street.

—*Linda Burnham*

Many people have preconceived notions about what it means to be homeless. Often these ideas are founded on assumptions and beliefs that are invalid. For instance, many people think that being homeless is a choice to be made. All too often I hear people associate the word “lazy” with homelessness. However I have learned that homelessness is often the result of things beyond the control of the individual. Family situations, medical circumstances, and even simple “bad luck” can bring about homelessness. Frequently, people believe that homelessness is caused by bad decision-making on behalf of the individual when in fact it is often beyond their control. The stigma of “laziness” pervades society and contributes to the discrimination and disenfranchisement experienced throughout the homeless community.

—*Andrew Bove (Day Shelter Staff)*

Why do you assume—because I am hurting and living in the shelter—that I am useless, worthless, a failure? Why do you believe all people who are homeless are drug addicts and/or alcoholics? Why do you believe we want to be here? Why do you believe we do not deserve to have a home or a job? Why do you close your eyes to us as if we do not exist? Do you know that a good percentage of the homeless are mentally ill, or that hospitals and institutions were shut down which forced the mentally ill into homeless shelters? Do you know that veterans are at homeless shelters? Do you know people who are well-educated and who once held good jobs but who lost their jobs, then their homes, and are now here? What gives you the right to decide our future when you have never spent a moment to get to know us or why we are here?

Do you know that some of us ended up here because of the economy and the job situation? Do you know we are someone's daughter, son, or spouse? What happened to the world that would allow an 80 year old woman to end up at a shelter? Do you know people will not hire me or rent to me just because my current address is a shelter? Before you ignore us or form opinions, get to know us. You may be surprised.

—*Bernice Kidd*

Have there been times in my life when I have felt disapproved of solely because I was homeless? Yes, by people who know me and don't know me—they treat shelter people like no good people. I feel like those things have got to change; that people from the shelters get a much better way of life. We know that it is very difficult but it can happen if we get together and fight for it.

—*Francisco Wilson*

I was taking a walk through Portsmouth N.H. (where I became homeless) one night to get out of the shelter for a while. A man was trying to push his car, which had broken down, off the road. I ran over to help him. After we had gotten it into a parking lot, he offered to buy me a beer. We had a couple of beers and a talk. Somehow in the conversation I mentioned that I was homeless. He got up to go to the bathroom and said something to the barkeep. Well, he never came back. Then the bartender came over to me and asked me to leave. When I realized what was going on, I felt pretty hurt. I figured that the moral to the story is—don't tell anyone you're homeless. Some people are too small-minded to handle it.

—*Reb Brierley*

Up until I became homeless I never experienced any bigotry that I know of. After moving into the shelter I started to look for work and rebuild my life. I was being interviewed for a job with an electrical contractor; everything was going fine until he learned my address which was the Shelter's address. Suddenly the position was filled. Another time I was walking through a parking lot when the police rolled up. They told me that because I had a backpack on I was suspicious. This kind of small minded nonsense doesn't really bother me. When I hear about acts of violence against or exploitation of the homeless my blood begins to boil. There is no excuse for any of that. Many times the police don't do anything about this, which makes the problem grow worse. Being homeless has taught me a lot about human nature—it's been an eye-opening yet disturbing experience.

—*Reb Brierley*

Have there been times in my life when I have felt disapproved of solely because I was homeless? Yes, all the time. People are always asking me how I am, but deep down inside they just want to know my plans so they can then make their plans. I didn't get any rest again last night. I have my own apartment, but I spend my days and nights all by my lonesome. I feel like I am in jail at all times. I feel like the staff at my facility are the keepers of the key. I have no supplies left and no one to help me until 2:00 this afternoon. Life and its hard knocks time after time have made me this way.

My injuries are all permanent and my eyes can't be fixed. I still haven't seen any of my family and can't even communicate by phone because vehicles going by shut down my phone. I sit by myself under a bridge and get chewed alive by whatever, but it is so serene and beautiful. I get a view of the water, mountains, wild flowers, and all my street friends meet me there and we laugh and exchange information about people who haven't been seen for a while. It is awesome.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

The rain in Maine falls mainly on James.

—*James Hierl*

I think that the human tendency to regard the world in drastic dualities is at the root of people's misguided conceptions of the homeless. It is easy to say that I (a success) have a house and a steady job because I have worked hard and earned them, while you (a failure) are homeless and unemployed because you are unintelligent and lazy. It is far more difficult to confront the complexities which underlie our apparent differences. A variety of factors, many of which are out of our control, contribute to our mental, physical, and financial situations. To believe that our circumstances can be explained by a mere decision that we each freely make (to work or to abuse the available resources, to find housing or to complacently live on the streets or in a shelter, to engage constructively with our societies or to remain alone and isolated), is to miss the many subtleties which color our unique situations.

When the businessman meets the homeless man on the street, he is faced with a decision: he may either immediately, without reflection, place the man in a category, which fits his preconceived notions of all homeless individuals, and thus write him off as unworthy of his concern, or he may work to see through all manner of appearances and stereotypes, and to enter into authentic relation with him—one human being valuing and respecting the uniqueness and inherent dignity of another. It is easier for him to disregard the homeless man, as he can then continue with his day untarnished, content with his success and the natural discrepancies of his society. It is a challenge, on the other hand, for him to acknowledge the humanity of the homeless man, as he will then be faced with the responsibility implicit in the encounter. In realizing the commonality between them, he will come to see the plight of the homeless man as inextricably entwined with his own. And his compassion will compel him to act. Homeless people are looked down upon only by those unwilling to accept the responsibility entailed in the acknowledgment of our shared humanity. It is in realizing our ultimate unity, however, that we become more fully ourselves.

—*Ryan Brennan (Day Shelter Staff)*

Why do you look down on me just because I'm homeless? Why do you assume I'm no good, or a bum? Why do you look at me like I'm dirt and talk down to me? You could be me. You could be going through this nightmare. I hope you don't have to live this (life) in order to see that, for the most part, we're all the same as you. Times are hard all over and a lot of people are going to lose an awful lot. It's hard to recover from that kind of loss—it takes time and determination to pull yourself back up, and if you have to live in a shelter and eat at the soup kitchen, then you just have to. It doesn't diminish a person, it doesn't mean they're a criminal or a bum or anything more than that they're down on their luck.

Those with emotional problems also face prejudice. They're ridiculed, laughed at, and dismissed even by other homeless folks. It's very sad. Who could ever justify teasing another human being just because they're emotionally challenged? The bottom line is that we—all of us—should try very hard to be kinder to each other and not ridicule or look down on someone whose life is in turmoil.

The attitudes of so many people are so negative and wrong that I can only feel sorry for them.

—*Reb Brierley*

Have you known homeless people who have just given up?

People who become comfortable and end up living the shelter life sometimes for years, I think that's a waste of a life. It's no way to live. It happened to me during quite a few years off and on the street. I finally got off my ass and pulled it back together and now I'm living my own life again. Anyone can do it, it's hard but it can be done. There is a lot of help out there—there are subsidies for housing through G.A., Shalom House, and Portland Housing and people at Oxford Street and the Resource Center who can help. I ended up having to go on Social Security which actually became the beginning of the end of homelessness for me. It qualified me for BRAP, and then Section 8, which finally got me off the streets. I hope every homeless person finds their way home.

—*Reb Brierley*

How do you feel about the police and the judicial system?

Growing up, I had a lot of respect for policemen. My father was Chief of Police in my hometown until I was around 15 or 16 and my mother was a member of the County Sheriff's Department. She was head C.O. in the county jail. But ever since becoming homeless, I have lost a huge amount of respect for those who dole out "justice." I've seen cops pushing people around, overreacting to every kind of situation—no matter how minor. They make it very clear that they have no use for homeless people. I myself have experienced their contempt on more than one occasion. I simply don't like the police any more. I know a number of people who have been beaten up just for being homeless, and I can't think of one occasion where the police did anything about it. That, in my opinion, makes them a very big part of the problems faced by anyone who has become homeless.

—*Reb Brierley*

Have you or people you've known been affected by substance or alcohol abuse?

Alcohol, strangely enough, didn't cause me to be on the streets although it did ruin my health. I am now on a liver transplant list and have been for over four years. Alcohol and drugs have caused many to lose all they have and sadly keeps many on the streets. A close friend of mine has been on the streets for years and drinking has been the reason. He's doing good, he's sober and working, and getting an apartment. Booze and drugs cause homelessness and sadly when a person is on the streets it is usually the only thing that they think they have to do!

—*Reb Brierley*

I have been smoking and drinking since I was 18 years old. I am not proud of this fact, but it was a learned behavior. My father smoked Chesterfield non-filter cigarettes and drank like a fish. We had a lot of good times, but a lot of embarrassing moments also. I fooled everyone Tuesday morning at the AA meetings that I attend Monday through Saturday if I am well enough to attend. I messed up a couple of times, but everyone got a kick out of it and congratulated me on a job well done!

I know that I shouldn't be drinking, but it relaxes me enough to sleep which I need desperately. My mom was gravely ill with everything that you can imagine. My Dad worked 7 days a week and my mom wasn't able to work. I took over the household chores at the early age of 11 or 12. My Dad was an embarrassing drunk. We had a birthday party for him one year and I didn't talk to him for days.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

I'll start by changing your ways,
I'll make you need me every day.
I'll spend your money selfishly,
I'll turn your friends to enemies.
I'll destroy your body and make you sick,
I'll make you choose...
and it is I who you'll pick.
I'll make your life a living hell,
I'll make sure you never get well.
I'll bring you your last gasp for breath,
And then finally, I'll bring you DEATH!
Into my trap, BEWARE do not fall,
Who am I?
I am your worst enemy, I am ALCOHOL!

—*Janet Turner*

What is it like trying to get a job when you have no home? What is it like trying to hold a job when you are homeless?

Attempting to make a living while living in a shelter is very difficult. You can't work nights or you won't sleep right and you'll become exhausted. Then there's the hygiene problem. If you get filthy while working, it's very hard to get your clothes laundered and keep yourself clean. Eating properly becomes a problem as well. But trying to find a job can be an exercise in futility. Once people find out you're at the shelter, attitudes go south real fast. I think they think all homeless people are the same. They see those with alcohol problems and assume that all the people on the street are drunks. They, of course, are very wrong. I've had more than one occasion of being passed over for work just because I was homeless, and ended up at Labor Ready working for virtually nothing or doing grunt work for some private person which usually pays pretty good but again you end up covered with dirt and no way to clean up. It's a vicious circle. The whole homeless experience is a vicious circle but there is hope if you stick to your guns and pull yourself out of this extremely hard lifestyle.

—*Reb Brierley*

At 3:00, Monday through Friday, I start the laundry for the Women's Shelter. I wash, dry, and fold blankets until 7:00. I miss supper many times just to get what I can do. When you try to do blankets for 50 to 70 women, it isn't easy always.

—*Linda Burnham*

What does it take to survive on the streets when you're homeless?

Upon becoming homeless one soon realizes that they need a lot of things and they have to figure out how to play the game. They need to know where to go and who to talk to for any needed services, shelters, soup kitchens, clothes closets and food pantries. Also as bad it seems, which area is best for flying a sign, stemming (panhandling), or canning. Then when the time comes they've got to find out how to get housing vouchers, food stamps, MaineCare, and furniture. Being homeless is a full time job, a very hard job. But if you're motivated and patient you will succeed and have a decent life again.

—*Reb Brierley*

The streets can be hard, even dangerous at times. It's never been a problem for me but I know more than a few people who have been beaten up just for looking homeless. Usually the small minded cowards go after the drunken ones. I guess that's an easier target. You have to be careful, pick your friends carefully, watch where you go (stay off private property) unless you like jail, don't drink stupidly in public, treat everyone respectfully, what goes around comes around. You need to know the best place to panhandle or fly a sign and you need to figure a good canning route but you should always have a plan to get off the street because the longer you're homeless, the worse it gets. There are a lot of people who have just given up—that's a huge mistake.

—*Reb Brierley*

Living on the streets is trying. There are things you need to know, things that can make it easier to deal with and that might make the whole experience shorter. Of course you need to know where the shelter and soup kitchen are located and where to receive services intended to help you, like clinics, food pantries, psychological services, veterans services, and for some of the best places to panhandle, you need to connect with the right people. Pick your friends carefully. You should never trespass where it says not to or drink in public places. It's almost impossible to not get caught, rule of thumb—avoid confrontations with the police, stay out of jail, and be respectful to everyone, don't make enemies and watch your back.

—*Reb Brierley*

It takes a lot of courage and determination to survive on the streets when you're homeless. You can't sweat the small stuff. You need to find all the productive resources. You need to keep a positive attitude which I know is hard in these trying times. In order to survive, you have to figure out what works for you. Try to be friendly and polite at all times. We all have our bad days, disappointments, but try not to ruin the atmosphere with negativity. There is always help available—just reach out. I myself hate to ask for help, but sometimes you have to give in and accept help graciously. Try to eat healthy and dress properly. Drink plenty of fluids and try to enjoy whatever groups or help that is offered. We need to unite to try to make this world a better place.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

I am woman hear me roar
I have been homeless once before
Most important thing to know
You can't be out there alone
You need someone to watch your back
When you're sleeping to avoid attack
Get a partner you can trust
Stay out of groups - that's a plus
To survive on the streets you must stay clean
Most important is to have a dream
Positive dreams are life changing
Negative dreams will keep you hanging
Find a goal / whatever it may be
Dress for success and you will see
Surviving on the streets can be easy

—*Michelle Thomas*

As someone who is homeless or formerly homeless, what are holidays like for you?

Every day is a holiday. Speaking about the few days before and after December 25, 2009, I am just doing what I usually do. On Monday, I went to the soup kitchen, signed up for 12:30 mail, fed the ducks and squirrels in Deering Park, rode to St. Vincent de Paul for a sack lunch and bread. Then back to the Resource Center for mail check and lunch. Tuesday, I went to Amistad to visit with Pastor Mair. That was after going to St. Luke's church for non-food items. After Amistad, I rode to Sacred Heart Catholic Church for food and bread. Then home on High Street. It was evident the bedbug inspector was over since my bed was disturbed. Lunch and mail check at the Resource Center and the soup kitchen today.

—*Chris Whelan*

I am not homeless right now, but I have been in that situation three times and the last time was the hardest and longest experience of my life. Christmas time is a very hard time of year for a lot of people. They have a lot of events, but a lot of them cost money and a lot of people don't have the money.

I was looking forward to going to the Christmas tree lighting but didn't go because of the weather. I didn't make it to the candlelight vigil because I had to tend to some other business.

They have a lot of nice gifts and food which is greatly appreciated, but people abuse the generosity. It only takes two seconds to say I appreciate your kindness or thank you so much. A lot of people don't have family or if they do have family they don't come to visit because they have to work for a living. Christmas is a very special time of year and there are beautiful decorations and you can go ice skating at Deering Oaks Park. It should be a time of peace, people wishing each other well and saying it is so good to see you, how have you been. It doesn't hurt to smile and not to ruin the mood for other people. That is what it is all about—everyone looking out for each other and making people feel welcome and comfortable. Sharing and caring is always needed, especially in these trying times.

I just hope and pray that everyone stays safe and warm and that they continue to help those in need as even though it isn't said, I know that everyone appreciates it in their own way.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

Christmas is special. It can bring out the best and the worst in people. People will be extra nice or at their worst: tight and cheap.

—*Linda Burnham*

The day before Christmas people were giving me five dollar bills and stuff. I got a few laughs out of a few people Christmas Day. The day after Christmas I got my ass kicked all over town. Not literally—figuratively. Sunday was okay.

—*James Hierl*

What would your Native American name be if you were observed in your day-to-day life?

My name would be the “Happy Hyena.” Each day I strive to feel joy / happiness within my soul. Once achieved I am full of energy and always smiling. A hyena is strong, quick, and looks like he smiles. Bringing out my strengths, enduring smile, and energy touches all around me. To survive the day to day jungle here one must keep the imagination going. I truly see myself as the hyena of Preble Street.

—*Bernice Kidd*

Strong Like Tree

Being part Native American
 Is nothing new to me
 My father always told me
 I was strong like a tree.
 Deeply rooted with family values
 Father, Mother, Grandma—I miss them
 Planted the seed to make me strong
 Always respect others you can't go wrong
 Love the sun, drink water / I will always be
 Strong, healthy and “Strong Like Tree”.

—Michelle Thomas

What are your experiences dealing with loss and death?

Seven years ago, my husband died suddenly in his sleep of a brain tumor. In one instant, he was gone. This occurred on our 18th wedding anniversary. In the years since, loss has played a large role in my life. For various circumstances after his death I lost all our belongings, my job, our cars, and our cat of 15 years. After years of working through my depression, I finally obtained a great job in 2008 only to once again lose that.

Because of the last loss, I ended up at the homeless shelter. I was afraid, alone, angry and once again feeling depressed. I have been here three months. The end result has been after all my losses, I have realized the blessings I have gained. I am looking for work and housing, but am no longer depressed. I have come to holy surrender, leaning on my God and have met wonderful, caring people. This experience is making me stronger and loving life in ways I never have. It is strange but I've learned the down and out, lonely and hurting do reach out to each other in ways that have truly blessed me.

—Bernice Kidd

When my father died 2 1/2 years ago, it was not the way I wanted him to go. He committed suicide. He used the rifle that I gave him about two years before.

—*Linda Burnham*

What is it like depending on a soup kitchen for your meals?

I deeply appreciate the soup kitchen and have much respect for everybody involved. I hear people complaining about the food, see them giving the volunteers a hard time and all I've got to say to them is smarten up, never look a gift horse in the mouth. Try a few days without anything to eat and no place to go and maybe that reality pill will slap you to your senses. People should also take their petty arguing and full-blown confrontations which are 98% over nothing out to the streets and let others enjoy their meal. The soup kitchen is a blessing and we should treat it with respect or go somewhere else and try eating for nothing. Good luck!

—*Reb Brierley*

Have there been periods in your life when you couldn't afford to buy enough food for yourself or your family?

You do what you have to do. Going to a food pantry, to a church dinner, or taking food from a friend. Eating at the soup kitchen sometimes is good and not so good. But it is something.

—*Linda Burnham*

Since being homeless I have had to eat at food pantries. Not being able to take care of myself for basic needs is difficult. At age 57, I wonder how, after working all my life and being self-sufficient, my life has ended up at food pantries. I sometimes feel all my hard efforts have been for nothing. What has happened to the meaning of life, reaping the rewards of hard work, when you end up not even being able to feed yourself? Hopefully, soon again, I will be able to.

—*Bernice Kidd*

I and my children and my grandchildren have been struggling with being able to afford enough food all our lives. I always make sure that my family has been provided for and I go without myself over and over again. It is so sad to see all the people that have to eat out of trash facilities, because they can't handle going to soup kitchens or church functions or club activities. I hate to admit it, but I grab food that people throw away all the time. I know that it isn't safe, but I had no other options at the time. I was a fancy trash picker at times. At other times, a stupid one.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

Versatile Resilient

Determined Non-failing

Non-wavering Persistent

Considerate of others

Non-coveting

Lucky (Very fortunate)

—*James Hierl*

What do you do to help yourself stay positive? What brings you happiness?

When I'm really depressed and feeling like the other shoe is about to drop, there are a few things that can make me happy: writing, reading, watching an old movie with a happy ending, watching the three stooges. I can cook or just take a long walk on the beach, call an old friend, or write a long letter to anyone, talk to my mother, go to a bookstore or maybe a junk shop, there are so many things that can make me happy. A baby's laugh, a smile from a stranger, church bells, music, art, creating my own art, remembering good things in my past like fishing with my father and brother and even though they're both gone, it still cheers me up. Sometimes happiness is fleeting but I always manage to bring it back, being sad a lot can take its toll on a person. I know it's taken a toll on me, but I refuse to let it take over.

—*Reb Brierley*

Be a bud sitting quietly in the hedge
Be a smile, one part of wondrous existence
Stand here, there is no need to depart.
This earth is as beautiful as the earth of our childhood
Do not harm it, please, and continue to sing
“Butterfly over the Field of Golden Mustard Flowers.”

—*Jeanna Roath*

I would be happier if I could see my mother. As much as I can find, she is in assisted living after sustaining a broken hip. The last time I saw her was September 20, 2005. After she put a restraining order on me for two years, I could go near her (the restraining order ran out September 2008). I heard she wanted another but didn't get it. The judge told her she can't get it unless I'm bothering her, which I'm not doing. She told her lawyer who has had limited contact with her tell me she loved me and I had her lawyer give her the same message from me. She is 83 (84 in December) and I'd like to see her before she dies.

—*Frank Higgins*

My Love for God

The Ability of focus on positive memories

Faces of people here at the shelter

Unexpected letters

When the oppression starts to seep in I close my eyes and silently sing

Walking

Reading

Helping others

In my current homelessness, focusing on others and not my self helps me to smile and carry on.

What has truly kept me going for the past year is holy surrender—

Learning to be content with what I have. I used to focus on all I have lost but now I am so grateful for what I have. All else is truly a blessing.

Listening and watching.

—*Bernice Kidd*

A place to live of my own.
I could cook what foods I like.
I would be alone (I don't like crowds.)
I could see the people on my own terms at my own place.
Watching TV is okay if I'm set up to do it.

—*Frank Higgins*

How important is it to you to have your own home?

Dear Government:

We the people are economically struggling, especially those of us with handicaps. Jobs are hard to find and benefits from disability do not cover all living expenses. Benefits are below the economic status of poverty, making many of us homeless. We need Section 8 housing vouchers to help find homes - a place to call home.

The shelters provide some shelter, but not all the time and in bad weather I have found myself cold and wet with nowhere to go. I've thought about sitting in a box with a sign: "Free to a good home." It would be nicer to feel more independent. It would feel nicer to go to my own home.

Please consider the homeless, especially now around the holidays. Give the gift that keeps on giving, Section 8 vouchers that lead to home. A home to call my own.

God bless.

—*Francine Spangler*

*Some Poetry & Prose**Gatekeeper (What St. Peter's seen)*

I've heard cries from the dark underbelly of a
society gone mad
Massing between the border of sanity and
that which is deemed sane
Praying that if they can hold out through one
more revolution
Peace might come and stay
I've seen huddled groups of clerics on their
knees praying
to the heavens thundering holy above
their bibles held over their heads as if to
shelter them from his omnipotent wrath
their rosaries held close to their hearts
the sweat drenched beads glistening in the
light of raging fires
I've witnessed endless generations of little
beings drowning in their own waste
clawing and fighting to the bitter end
Praying for absolution, thinking that the
ultimate magnificent will come down
and save them
All the while sinking deeper and deeper,
unseen but for me

—*Reb Brierley*

Because she may have been discovered face down in the ocean; because he might have been mislabeled as a “transient” in the press; because she might not have had a shower this morning; because he might have asked for a quarter as you walked past on your way to lunch; because she might self-medicate more than you do or in different ways; because he huddles around the entrance to a soup kitchen patiently waiting for dinner; because no one pays for an obituary in the paper when she dies - it may be presumed that no one cares.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

—*Bill Goodykoontz (Day Shelter Volunteer)*

Untitled No. 23

Now that I've tasted life
Cruel
To it's core
Now that I've lived in pain
I go on
I go on
And live

—*Reb Brierley*

Apathy
Be careful
Unwanted stuff happens when you're careless, usually!
Relevant, pertinent, significant, important
consequence.
Escence.
Essence.

—*James Hierl*

The Power of Love

When there's a connection
There's nothing you can do
 The power of love
Will come shining through
 Try to avoid it
 Only makes it rough
 The power of love
Can be really really tough
 Tough on the heart
 Tough on the soul
 The power of love
Is something to behold
 You try so hard
 to let her know
But the obstacles involved
melt your heart like snow
 When one is rejected
 Its just like the sun
Going down on your soul
 Leaving this void
Which causes bitterness, strife, and much
 discord
It's okay, raise your head
 Keep your pride
At least she knows that
 You really tried
 It she's the right one
The power of love can never be denied

—*Michelle Thomas*

My Ray of Sunshine

She's absolutely beautiful
With a smile to match
My ray of sunshine
As a matter of fact
She lights up a room
Whenever she enters
Consecutive sunshine
Never a splinter
Like a slab of marble
Sculpted to perfection
To anyone who dates her
What a beautiful selection
The world can be dark
But there's always a light
My ray of sunshine
What a beautiful sight

—*Michelle Thomas*

What's it like being part of a writers' group?

I like the writer's group because it provides a time and place separate from the often hectic pace of the Day Room. For most of the day, I have to be alert and aware of all that is going on and, though constantly interacting with many people, it is difficult to simply sit with someone to simply be with them, without worrying about all of the practical things that need to be attended to. I like the writers' group because it provides a respite from the stresses of my day and allows me to connect with people in a more calm and, I think, meaningful way. It also gives me time to reflect on the nature of Preble Street, and all that goes on here, and my place in it. I am able to think about things that I simply don't have the time to think about during the rest of the day.

—*Ryan Brennan (Day Shelter Staff)*

I love being part of a writer's group. It is very interesting to hear other people's stories and we have a lot of fun with it. To be honest, I just like to write—period. It is a calming mechanism for me. I hold a lot of stuff inside and it isn't good for me or people around me.

Writing class is fun, informative, and very friendly which there isn't much of that going around lately. I would like to write about fairness. There seems to be a lot of unfair things going on.

—*Pamela Joyce Jones*

I enjoy being part of a writer's group for many reasons. I have always enjoyed putting my thoughts on paper. It is a way to express and expand my thoughts. I enjoy the company of others and also their thoughts, experiences, knowledge. I feel a sense of community and appreciate the fact that others care about who I am.

—*Bernice Kidd*



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other people are too.