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Faith-Based Organizations Combat Homelessness

By Wendy Rojo

We all find comfort and guidance in various ways. For many individuals, their faith brings them the comfort and guidance they yearn for in their lives. Their religious faith guides them during their best and worst moments.

And when people of faith gather together as one, they often see what human rights advocates call “human dignity.” Human dignity means that every human deserves a right to live their most dignified life and to be respected for their own sake. Faith-based organizations, such as churches, synagogues, and mosques, are known for seeing the dignity that every person deserves no matter their current hardships. It is no surprise then that

faith-based organizations frequently lead the pack in helping those experiencing homelessness.

In fact, in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, many such organizations are focused on ending homelessness. Wayne Walker, guided by his faith and determination to help his community, founded Our Calling in 2009. The organization uses knowledge and faith to combat homelessness in the Dallas area. The OurCalling app allows users to report the location of where people may need help in D-FW. Most recently, the *Dallas Morning News* profiled how Walker’s organization is raising \$50 million to build tiny houses to build a homeless community south of Dallas.

The Austin Street Center, another faith-based organization, provides shelter for men 45 years and older and women ages 18 and older. Austin Street Center helps older individuals because they are most at risk to be chronically homeless. Austin Street CEO Daniel Roby told STREETzine last year that the older an individual is the harder it is for them to get into housing.

The First Presbyterian Church of Dallas established The Stewpot in 1975 with the mission to help the homeless community. The Stewpot started by offering basic necessities, but the work has grown to offer a wide range of services to those experiencing homelessness and to those at risk. For example, clients can receive a Stewpot ID that the City of Dallas accepts for acquiring birth certificates, school records, and census reports.

Back in 2018, Congregation Shearith Israel created the Ladder Project, which offers a holistic approach to the problem of chronic homelessness. The Ladder Project also relies upon the congregation as a whole to help lift people out of homelessness.

The Masjid Al-Islam in Dallas provides



Artwork by Stewpot artist Kimberly Miller-Rivera.

a range of services, including a food pantry, financial assistance, educational services, and clothing. The mosque does this through its Beacon of Light Community Outreach Center.

Several faith-based organizations certainly were on the frontlines comforting people experiencing homelessness during the freezing nights of February 2021. Organizations like The Stewpot, Oak Lawn United Methodist Church, and Our Calling worked together to gather all those in the freezing temperatures and transport them to shelters. (I was able to help during one of those freezing nights and witnessed the graciousness of the people we were able to reach.) These and similar organizations provide resources that people in need can count on when the City of Dallas cannot always provide specific necessities, like transportation during a freezing night.

To be sure, work remains to be done so that everyone in this city can have a permanent



Photo courtesy of Calvin Cortez.

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STREETZine

STREETZine is a program of
The Stewpot.



The **STREETZine** is a monthly newspaper published by The Stewpot, a ministry of the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas. The Stewpot provides services and resources for people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of being homeless. The organization also offers opportunities for a new life.

As part of this ministry, the **STREETZine** seeks to raise awareness about the issues surrounding homelessness and poverty. The monthly publication also offers financial opportunity for Stewpot clients who sell the paper to Dallas residents. Vendors are able to move towards economic self-sufficiency by using the money they receive from selling copies to purchase bus passes, food, and necessary living expenses. Clients also receive stipends for contributing articles to **STREETZine**.

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The Pastor's Letter: A Response to Steadfast Love

By The Rev. Meagan Findeiss

This essay below is excerpted from a recent sermon by Rev. Findeiss.

Art evokes emotion. From still photography to oil on canvas, to tempera on masonite, there are many different kinds of mediums.

Art is a tool that allows our minds to communicate what is happening inside our bodies. It makes sense of the copious words and thoughts brimming in our minds and illumines them through an aesthetic that can be seen and experienced by all that participate with it. Art is a tool to surface raw emotions such as grief, pain, joy, and love. Art communicates.

Art is a tool that allows our minds to communicate what is happening inside our bodies. It makes sense of the copious words and thoughts brimming in our minds and illumines them through an aesthetic that can be seen and experienced by all that participate with it.

Art also speaks to people differently. Everyone has their own interpretation.

The artist Ben Shahn painted a particularly powerful piece entitled "The Red Stairway." The piece comes out of the wreckage that was World War II. Shahn depicts the aftermath of war with the crumbling building and a man who has only one leg climbing a purposeless staircase.

The other individual in this piece is looking for rocks in an area that is compiled of only rocks. Shahn wrote that he wanted this "painting to express both the hope and the fate of humanity." He said, "we seem to recover from the most frightful wars, the most frightful plagues, and go... right on again...that is the eternal hope in the human being."

When I look at this painting, I see the hopefulness of what is to come. That what is current is not final, that there is something to live for, something to

climb stairs for, something to collect rocks for.

The hell we might be experiencing is not the final word. God is present, in the construction of the staircase, in the weaving of the basket, in the daybreak. Faith remains despite the circumstances. Faith paves the way for hope.

The hell we might be experiencing is not the final word. God is present, in the construction of the staircase, in the weaving of the basket, in the daybreak. Faith remains despite the circumstances. Faith paves the way for hope.

Whether visual art or art such as poetry, music, or prayer, art provides, as we read in *Imaging the Word*, "profound understandings of what it means to live before God in a world of mystery and wonder." In the 16th chapter of the book of Psalms, the art of poetry weaves together a bridge that connects the reader from a place of fear to a place of confidence in the hope of God's saving love: verses 1-2 of *The Message Translation* say, "Keep me safe, O God, I've run for dear life to you. I say to God, 'Be my Lord!' Without you, nothing makes sense."

Then the ending of this passage, verse 11 reads, "Now you've got my feet on the life path, all radiant from the shining of your face. Ever since you took my hand, I'm on the right way." This Psalm provides solace in how it lays out the sure and steadfast promises God delivers. Promises that the Psalmist had experienced first-hand. Its focus on personal pronouns illustrates the interpersonal relationship between humanity and God Almighty.

Listen to these abundant promises of God's steadfastness in other verses from this passage:

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

The boundary lines have fallen for me

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Executive Director's Report

By **Brenda Snitzer**

My earliest memories were at preschool at a Christian church. God made himself known to me in Christ there, even though my family did not go to church.

I later accepted Christ in sixth grade at camp and I spent my middle school, high school, and college years at church and at that Christian camp. Those environments really formed who I am today, in addition to being in a loving and caring family.

The foundation created in me a sense of calling and of serving God's people as early as my years as a camp counselor, sharing my faith and praying with and for those I walked alongside. My faith has sustained me throughout my 35 years of my professional career. When I have struggled or wrestled with work, I have rested in His strength, many times in the middle of the night, finding scripture, readings or prayer to sustain or guide me.

Being at The Stewpot is the second time I have served on a church staff and third time I have served as an executive director of a nonprofit. The first time I held two different positions at Bentwood Trail Presbyterian Church, my home church. The first role was as youth director for two years. Then, I served for seven years as director of Christian education. I also am an elder and a deacon. The song that beckoned to me when I first felt called to church ministry, and that was played during my installation

in my first positions in the church 20 years ago, was *Here I am Lord* (St. Louis Jesuits). A portion of the lyrics that spoke to me then and still does today is this:

*I the Lord of snow and rain
I have borne my people's pain
I have wept for love of them
They turn away.*

*Here I am Lord
Is it I Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go Lord
If you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart.*

Those lyrics constantly echo in my mind and called me to the work of The Stewpot in new ways. My desire to serve God's people, especially those who have so little, has been a constant my whole career.

In my role at The Stewpot, I see the huge role that faith-based institutions play in combating homelessness.

In my role at The Stewpot, I see the huge role that faith-based institutions play in combating homelessness. The tenets of our faith and service are based on Matthew 25:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

The Stewpot, Austin Street Center, Genesis Women's Shelter, Our Calling, and Interfaith Housing, to name a few,

exist to help combat homelessness. These and many others feed, clothe, house, and minister to adults, children, and families that are hurting and in need. These organizations have a sense of calling and care and partner with city and county organizations. Many times they do much more than what the government can or will do. It takes all of us partnering to make an impact.

Two areas that faith-based organizations are having to become even more involved in is affordable housing and hospice/respite care. There are too many gaps in affordable housing for those in poverty or homelessness. The government and housing developers aren't building enough housing stock for people with low-incomes.

Two areas that faith-based organizations are having to become even more involved in is affordable housing and hospice/respite care.

In terms of hospice and respite care, too many of our elderly and poverty-stricken neighbors who are not well fall into homelessness and end up in shelters or on the streets. Shelters are not equipped or staffed to care for people that are needing skilled nursing care or support. This is becoming a growing problem, and a growing population of people in need of this kind of care.

The task for those of us in faith-based organizations is to see that we as a community better address them.

Brenda Snitzer is the executive director of The Stewpot.

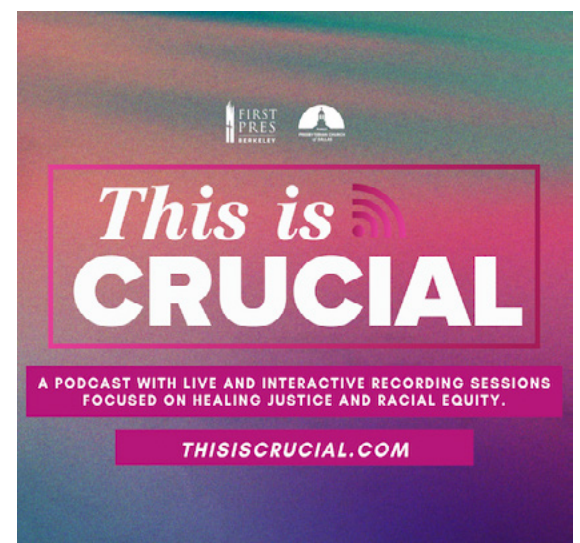
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The Story of Job, the Story of Randy

By Poppy Sundeen

When Randy Thornton was a toddler, he loved to sit on his grandmother's lap while she read aloud from the Bible. "She read the King James Version," he says, "and that was how I learned English."

It was — and is — his favorite book. "That made a problem for me when I went to school. In second grade, they started taking my Bible away. They wanted me to read fiction, and I didn't want to do it."

Randy didn't need children's stories. He already had a book filled with stories that captivated him: his Bible.

One of the stories he finds especially relevant is in the Book of Job. "I had to lose everything to gain understanding," he says, likening his journey to Job's struggle.

The parallels are many: Randy's life, like Job's, was rocked by the loss of prosperity, family, and health — everything except his faith.

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A spiral of loss

At one time, Randy appeared to be living the American dream. He had a wife, a house, and a high-paying job at Texas Instruments. But beneath the postcard exterior, there were troubles. Problems at home and work combined with nagging chest pains to make his day-to-day life unbearable. "The only peace I had was when I put my pickup in park in my own driveway — between that and before I put key in front door. Sometimes I would just sit in my driveway and pray."

After working with a Christian counselor, Randy decided to make some serious changes. He quit his job and ended his marriage.

Meanwhile his health continued to decline. The congenital heart problem, detected in his childhood, grew worse, and by 2018 he could no longer work. He returned to his family home to live with and care for his ailing mother. After her death, the house was repossessed, and Randy had nowhere to go. Then came rock bottom in the form of a debilitating stroke and heart attack.

Losing everything to gain understanding

Against all odds, Randy survived his 2019 health crisis. "My heart stopped. I was literally dead." The stroke resulted in severe damage, hindering his mobility, and leaving him with seizures that impair his speech and prevent him from driving. His disabilities were lifechanging and permanent.

Still, Randy feels fortunate. "I think the Lord passed the clot and started my heart back up, because I was gone. There's no other reason for me to be here but the Lord bringing me back."

He sees his trials as part of the process of learning to serve God and community. "Suffering led to the growth, wisdom and understanding that I prayed for."

Sharing with others

He grew up in the Baptist church, but Randy's search for wisdom extends beyond a single denomination. "My independence has been a source of strength for me."

In the 1990s, he helped organize an interfaith Bible study group that included Christians, Muslims, and Jews. "We had the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran sitting next to each other."

In the 1990s, he helped organize an interfaith Bible study group that included Christians, Muslims, and Jews. "We had the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran sitting next to each other."

While he remains connected to several North Texas Christian



Randy Thornton and son JET.

congregations, Randy also takes his faith into secular places as a lay chaplain. "On a paratransit ride, I ended up doing a counseling session with the driver. And then on the very next ride home, I counseled a man who functions as a chaplain about what he needed to continue his work."

A steward to his son

Randy's eagerness to help others throughout the community is matched by his determination to be a good steward to his son, 14-year-old JET. "I teach him that life is about relationships, and the most important relationship is with the Creator."

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Although JET lives with his mother, Randy jumps at every opportunity for father-son time. "When my dad mode kicks in, I'm truly elevated. I feel alive."

JET often listens as his father participates in spontaneous counseling sessions. "My son says, 'Everywhere you go, Dad, you do His work.'"

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Ten Things to Know about Faith-based Organizations and Homelessness

Faith-based institutions are not the only organizations providing services to Americans experiencing homelessness. But churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship are on the frontlines of many American cities when it comes to caring for people in need. The studies below outline some of their roles and contributions.

****Faith-based organizations serve as the backbone of the emergency shelter system in this country – operating at a minimum nearly 30 percent of emergency shelter beds for families and single adults at the national level.****

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

***Faith-based organizations play an active role in local planning and Continuum of Care governance activities. That includes taking a lead in implementing a systemic approach to ending homelessness.**

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

****Faith-based organizations that have been implementing Housing First programs have found it to be an effective approach for ending homelessness as well as compatible with their beliefs.****

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

**** Faith-based organizations are critical, but in some ways underutilized partners in ending homelessness.****

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

****Faith-based organizations have strong volunteer and advocacy base and flexible donor funds that may be overlooked and could be harnessed more strategically.****

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

****Faith-based organizations provide 58 percent of emergency shelter beds in the 11 cities surveyed across the nation, in addition to providing an array of vital services and personalized interventions necessary for long-term recovery and independence. These services include, but are not limited to, education, healthcare, job training and addiction recovery.****

Source: Baylor University Institute for the Study of Religion

***Faith-based organizations create an estimated \$9.42 in taxpayer savings for every \$1 in government investment.**

Source: Baylor University Institute for the Study of Religion

****Residential Recovery and Job Readiness programs are an area where faith-based programs are at the forefront for program innovation and organizational transformation for improving positive outcomes for homeless individuals and their families.****

Source: Baylor University Institute for the Study of Religion

***Collaboration among faith-based organizations, private institutions, community groups, and local, state, and federal agencies creates the strongest response to homelessness and its underlying issues.**

Source: Baylor University Institute for the Study of Religion

****Communities should do a better job of partnering with and leveraging the extensive network of services and connections offered by faith-based organizations.****

* Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness

Continued from page 2

in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

I keep the Lord always before me; because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Therefore, my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;

in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

God does NOT give up on us.

God does NOT forsake us.

God's dedication, commitment, and love for us are abundant and true.

This Psalm points to resurrection hope. It expresses, as *Imaging the Word* says, "the kind of joy that comes from having seen the worst and lived through it — joy that is tempered with the knowledge of what the world, and life, can do. It is a song of confidence and trust in the one who does not abandon God's people to death. One might even say that it is something of a love song, sung not because the Psalmist has led a perfect existence, but because God has been faithful, even through the worst of life. It is God who has been steadfast; the Lord who has given guidance and security."

One might even say that it is something of a love song, sung not because the Psalmist has led a perfect existence, but because God has been faithful, even through the worst of life.

In the midst of all the rubble that might be surrounding you, may Psalm 16 provide a staircase of hope to the knowledge of God's steadfast love.

The Rev. Meagan Findeiss is associate pastor for care and belonging at the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas.

I Came Back to Life in a Time of Trouble

By Gary Barker

It was 2019, and I was sitting in my apartment on Sandy Boulevard in Portland, Oregon, out of my mind, and frankly, near death. I was tied up in a hell of my own doing. My life was upside down and without any sense of direction.

A surprise knock at my door jolted me into the present. My ex-wife stood in the doorway, determined to help me back to life. I did not know how to act or what to say to her, but she was there. She was there for me.

She came prepared with a moving van and a rented storage unit awaited my things. I was scared about moving, but God, it saved my life. Things didn't work out with my ex-wife, and I was on the streets within days.

I was cold and someone stole my bags. I was upset about what happened and how things turned out. My life was a mess, but sleeping outside, I slowed down on the drugs.

Finally, my ex-wife started talking to me again. One day, she said to me: "Would you get out and do something already? Go sell Street Roots or something."

So, I went there, got oriented as a vendor, and started selling the newspaper. On my first day selling, I made \$160.

I thought selling the paper for Street Roots was a great thing to do. When I was selling, people would ask me questions about myself, so I started talking, and it made me feel good about what I was doing with my life.

I started getting better and better. I was still living outside when 2020 came and the pandemic hit. While the world was falling apart around me, my life, in some sense, seemed to be coming together. I got off the streets.

I was still working at Street Roots, which came up with a plan to stay

open during the pandemic by finding creative ways to offer cash assistance to vendors. An "action team" was formed, and we as vendors passed out supplies to folks living outside. The outreach performed by the "action team" led to the formation of the ambassador program.

I started getting better and better. I was still living outside when 2020 came and the pandemic hit. While the world was falling apart around me, my life, in some sense, seemed to be coming together. I got off the streets.

In August 2020, the day came when Street Roots started publishing and selling the paper again. Street Roots gave me a chance to get on my feet by being the first lead ambassador of the new program. It was a big success. Of the 10 ambassadors in the first cohort, six of them started working in jobs outside of Street Roots that paid a living wage. I wasn't one of the six, but that leads to where I am today with Street Roots.

I'm still housed but still going through trials. Being on the streets gave me a great outlook on life that I can't forget.

My drug addiction and trying to be responsible at the same time is what my life consists of being indoors. Change from being outdoors is sometimes scary and frightening. There have been changes and new rules I have to follow, but that's okay. They help all the people that I'm surrounded by. I have managed to maintain a good life and stay focused enough to do what I need to do.

Change from being outdoors is sometimes scary and frightening.

I manage to find a way to get problems off my mind by reading something positive or listening to music. I do other things that make me happy about what I'm going through. Life is full of fears and insecurities, so one of the most important things I have learned is to walk through them — it works better for me than running from them.

I am so grateful to God to resolve the tension and aggression and give me a chance to get my life going in the right direction.

I am currently working as the MoJo [mobile journalism] coordinator with Street Roots. I am part of writing the curriculum for the Street Roots School of MoJo and Communications. [A program that facilitates vendors and often people living on the street to take part in gonzo journalism using digital tech and other now-everyday tools.] I ran the pilot cohort, and it was a hit. Now the real deal is starting — a 30-week program covering everything from reporting, to fact-checking, to writing, to video production.

As of now, I work with the editor-in-chief of Street Roots, K. Rambo. They are helping guide me in the right direction so I can learn how to work my program into a greater benefit for vendors. The program is co-designed with the love and care of an instructor from Portland Community College, Mary Ann Funk. We put our heads together and we saw the same vision.

As of now, I work with the editor-in-chief of Street Roots, K. Rambo. They are helping guide me in the right direction so I can learn how to work my program into a greater benefit for vendors.

I was a vendor, and now I work hard at giving back by working with vendors who would like to experience the world of journalism and communications to determine if this field is for them. They're learning skills to make them more employable, regardless of the career path.

It's been a challenge for me, and it's been hard, but it's been fair.

I look forward to seeing the program grow but it's bigger than me and larger than life. With the help of people who are in the journalism and communications field, we will grow into a full school and so the journey begins to a new future for Street Roots.

Gary Barker sells Street Roots in Portland. He wrote this column as part of the International Network of Street Papers' Housing for the People series.

Courtesy of The International Network of Street Papers

Continued from page 1

roof over their heads. Thankfully, various organizations throughout the D-FW area are providing housing resources to those most in need.

In 1988, Jim Sowell saw the human suffering and started a food pantry. That pantry grew into the organization we now know as CitySquare. CitySquare focuses on four areas related to the persistence of poverty: hunger, health, housing, and hope. The organization has three housing programs, including one they launched through a partnership with Family Gateway and a City of Dallas grant to focus on rapid rehousing solutions.

Similarly, The Stewpot recently launched a rapid rehousing program. Its purpose is to help individuals and families quickly exit homelessness and find housing.

Not only do organizations whose leaders and members are inspired by their religious beliefs provide tangible resources, they also offer comfort and spiritual relief. A necessity we sometimes take for granted is simply having someone to talk to about our lives. Speaking to someone about a problem or having a conversation about your faith is truly a human necessity. Many writers who come to The Stewpot's Friday workshops want to be heard and have a conversation with a person.

In each of these examples, and many others across Dallas, people are translating their faith into action. They are offering a compassionate hand and providing necessities to those among us who may need them the most.

Wendy Rojo is managing editor of STREETZine.

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Now that school has started again, Randy's time with JET is limited. In addition to excelling in scholastics, JET is involved in sports, robotics, theatre, and orchestra. Randy admits to being lonely but is happy that JET is thriving.

Facing challenges, giving thanks

Randy's status as permanently disabled qualifies him for a spectrum of benefits, including homecare, paratransit, and subsidized housing.

Still, every year his status must be updated. The social worker who previously helped him navigate the complicated paperwork is no longer available. He's hoping for a replacement before the year ends and the recertification process begins. He trusts it will work out.

"I've learned not to ask for anything, because I know it's already provided. The solution is already there, so when I pray, I ask God to help me SEE it. And when I see it, help me receive it."

Instead of praying for specific outcomes, Randy focuses on prayers of gratitude. "I'm searching to find a way to be in constant prayer—being present, giving thanks."

Poppy Sundeen, a Dallas writer, is a member of the STREETZine editorial board.



Volunteers from Latinos at Amazon worked on September 8th to organize canned items for The Stewpot's food distribution program.

Photo courtesy of Wendy Rojo.

MY PASSION IS:

the STEWPOT

More than meals

COMMUNITIES FOUNDATION of TEXAS
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9.22.22 #NTXGivingDay

Writers' Workshop Essays

Editor's Note: Each Friday morning at 10 a.m., The Stewpot hosts a Writers' Workshop. During the sessions, participants address selected topics through prose or poetry. In this edition of STREETZine, we feature the essays of writers on what faith means in their lives.

How Faith Helps Me

By Darin Thomas

I believe in God, my Heavenly Father, and Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior. They are always there and never leave me.

I certainly experienced their presence after getting locked up in the Gateway treatment center near Dallas on April 28, 2021, and then getting out on March 20, 2022. I promised myself during that time that I would keep my faith. Having faith in something takes you places you never thought you could go. Being at Gateway helped me believe that what I put my mind to do, I can do: Staying sober and keeping away from negative people. I believed I was going to make it through my treatment center on top, and I did.

Now, I am getting ready to move into my own place. As long as I walk with Jesus, everything will be okay in spite of the challenges the world presents. Faith works.

You need faith in something other than yourself. Having faith simply in yourself is limited because we are not all knowing. Having faith in God, though, will make you strong and keep you from the enemy one.

Having faith certainly has kept me from doing something that I had no business doing. And having faith that my Lord and Savior would help me forgive my father for murdering my mother has resulted in my being able to forgive him. It took a long time to build up the faith to forgive, but I did it.

No matter how much the devil tries to get in the way, I use my faith to stay strong to believe and receive grace.

Darin Thomas, a STREETZine vendor, is a participant in the Writers' Workshop.

Developing a Deeper Faith

By Larry Jackson

Over the course of the years, I was brought up as a Christian. I thought I was a regular believer. But I was subject to a common street fight in my hometown of Natchez, Mississippi, where I was hit with a bottle over my right eye. The seriousness of the injury could have caused me the loss of my eye.

Afterwards, I met a lady from Israel, we talked, and she prayed for me. Right away, a warm feeling came all over my body. As time passed, I started noticing a change in going from being a basic Christian to a Christian with a stronger purpose. God started getting serious with me and using me to enlighten people about His will. My time and His word started to grow.

Now I notice the journey with God and His will. Even though I was homeless, God allowed me to move and carried me through various cities: from Natchez to Houston to Atlanta to Denton to Dallas. God gave me all the things I needed, starting with protection.

Along the way, God has allowed me to share my truth with many people. I noticed I was developing the gift of writing, so I used my Facebook page to address some readers' struggles. I used this platform to address his people, including my friends and family.

My journey has brought me back to Dallas, Texas, to continue God's work. I am looking forward to a new, refreshing plan that God has in store for me. I look forward to being blessed with the up-and-coming journey.

Larry Jackson is a STREETZine vendor and a regular Writers' Workshop participant.

Our Struggles Develop Character

By Charles Duff

As far as my faith is concerned, I would have to say life is filled with struggle in which we develop character. My struggles define me.

I've been homeless before in my younger years, but I am also or was an explorer fascinated by the beauty and wonder of the world. My true addiction, though, is words. And I love art. I love music. I love love. And this is life, is it not? The love of existing in a universe so full of possibilities.

I wanted like everyone else to succeed. I wanted a nice house with a loving wife, etc., but I failed to obtain those things because of my wild ways and leaving it to my own understanding. Yet? Yet I still plan to be happy and have the things of my longing.

Why did I fail? Because I didn't follow the rules and most of all not putting Him first.

It is written in Matthew that we should seek God first and His righteousness, then all else would be added, something I didn't do.

I didn't finish school, I got hooked on drugs, I went to prison, all of which I had the choice to avoid but did not. I played with fire and got burned.

I lost 17 years of my life to prison and an insane amount of time in a toxic relationship which brought me to my lowest point, or so I thought. This was the first person to get close enough to destroy me for so many years. "In my heart of hearts, I do love thee. Yet you are the poison that kills my soul." If only I would have put Him first.

In Job, we read that "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised."

I've been on the streets this time for three months so far. My, my, how things have changed. The world is a colder, harsher place than the first time I was homeless. Thus far I have found that it is hard and perverse out here. People are quick to use the word "no."

Charles Duff participates in The Stewpot's Writers' Workshop.



Photo courtesy of Aaron Burden through Unsplash.

A View from Nature: Livin' on the Ledge

By Vicki Gies

During my homelessness, I lived in a variety of places — some out of necessity, and some that were quite exciting. I stayed in about 13 different camps. Once I lived in a clump of bamboo. And another time, I lived on a ledge that sat under a bridge.

The ledge was about 35 feet over an active railroad track. Aside from the obvious loud sounds of the trains, the ledge was quite comfortable for me. It was about eight feet wide and 10 feet long, and I liked that it was level.

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What I kept on my "bridge loft" was a sleeping bag, a few clothes, and whatever I ate and drank. I also had a safety rope to help me get to and from the road, because when it rained, it would be very muddy and slick.

During that time, I thought a lot about Aerosmith's song entitled "Livin' on the Edge." My version during that time was "Livin' on the Ledge."

I observed several interesting occurrences while I lived on the ledge. I found that the evening activities of the wild rabbits were very entertaining. The cute bunnies had daily exercises that were truly amazing. They were able to run straight up the side of the wall, from the train tracks all the way up to the top of the ledge where I stayed. These amazing creatures did not miss a step or lose their balance! Once on top of the ledge, they would run straight down the wall, almost as if running down the street!

I observed several interesting occurrences while I lived on the ledge. I found that the evening activities of the wild rabbits were very entertaining.

The bunnies would run up and down the wall for about an hour each night, and then they would disappear until the next evening. I'm pretty sure no human could run up and down a wall and keep balance and not fall off! What a unique ability these rabbits had! They kept me truly entertained during my stay on the ledge.

As I watched the rabbits, I thought about all the cliff climbers in the world. Maybe they should take a crash course of observing these rabbits. It may help with agility.

Meanwhile, this story is dedicated to the gazillion million bunnies in the Rabbit Society.

Vicki Gies is a STREETZine vendor and frequent STREETZine contributor.

Volunteering as the Golden Thread of Democracy: A Conversation with John Bridgeland

By Bill McKenzie

Editor's note: This is a lookback at an interview conducted during the pandemic that appeared online only in August 2021.

John Bridgeland, CEO of Civic and cofounder and CEO of the COVID Collaborative, is author of Heart of the Nation: Volunteering and America's Civic Spirit. The Ohioan formerly served as director of the USA Freedom Corps under President George W. Bush and as a member of the White House Council for Community Solutions under President Barack Obama. He spoke with STREETZine's Nicole Kiser and Bill McKenzie about the importance of volunteering, its impact on individuals who serve and on those whom they serve, and the difference volunteering has made in his own life.

Your book, *The Heart of the Nation*, focuses on the value of volunteerism, which you call “the golden thread of democracy.” Why is volunteerism so important for individuals as well as for our communities and our democracy?

Volunteering is the opportunity for ordinary Americans to do extraordinary things. It gives them a chance to leave their scratch on their neighborhood, their community and on history.

Benjamin Rush, a Founding Father, said that when you serve today, you connect yourself to other Americans — those in the past, some of whom fought and died for our freedom, but also to future generations. The legacy of your service is the foundation of the world they will inherit. That is a beautiful statement of the connectedness of this tradition that Alexis de Tocqueville was so taken by when he traveled this country.

In our system of democracy,

the highest public office is “citizen,” not “president” or “senator.” We have to remind Americans of the centrality of their roles as volunteers and community leaders, and of the importance of serving on boards of nonprofits and community organizations as well as in government itself, and the power of volunteers to effect change.

[Historian] Doris Kearns Goodwin says that transformational change always occurs from the ground up. Citizens who cared about places and went to protect them led to the creation of the national park system. Americans who cared deeply about those who were excluded from the Constitution changed this country through the civil rights movement. There are countless examples of “big citizenship.”

Sometimes people think that volunteering is this nice little activity that happens on the weekend. But Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a volunteer. He had no elected office, but he changed this country through his platform. The act of volunteering is something that is noble and that we should respect. It can also be something that affects one life or one neighborhood or that changes the landscape of the country.

You have used the term “big citizenship.” I love that term, but what does it mean?

I am a Republican because I believe in big citizenship more than big government. Seeing individual citizens come together in common cause from all different backgrounds is big citizenship. Our country was founded on the notion that Americans would be active citizens — Benjamin Franklin's challenge of “a Republic if you can keep it.” You do need to engage government to bring things to scale nationwide. And programs can provide resources, support innovation and bring big ideas to scale.

Similarly, you have talked about making volunteering a “core strategic function and not just an add-on.” What do you mean by that?

I think young people in the United States lack rites of passage. As you become an adult, there ought to be an

opportunity and common expectation for every 18-year-old to have a year of national service, where they work on a public challenge with people who are different from them.

National service is a way to make volunteering systemic. We should embrace that. It is extraordinary what committed people can do. And we know that for every full-time national service corps member, they leverage an additional 32 volunteers in their projects, such as a Habitat for Humanity build.

How would you make volunteering more accessible for everyone?

After 9/11, the White House's Freedom Corps office organized over 300 businesses to change policies and practices to support volunteering, such as approving paid leave for volunteering, providing “dollars for doers” and organizing them in a collective effort called, Business Strengthening America.

Bank of America mobilized mentors and tutors in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools. They had something like six days of paid leave for volunteering. A lot of those volunteers became more deeply involved in the schools. There were countless examples of such public good.

We also expanded opportunities for Americans to serve through national service programs, such as the Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps, Conservation Corps, and Senior Corps. And we created a new Citizen Corps, Medical Reserve Corps, Volunteers in Police Service, and Fire Corps to engage more trained volunteers in disaster preparedness and response.

We need to continue to increase opportunities to serve through these efforts and are making progress with the new Civilian Climate Corps and one billion additional dollars — a doubling of the federal investment in national service — in the American Recovery Plan.

Bill McKenzie is a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas and the STREETZine Editorial Advisory Board.

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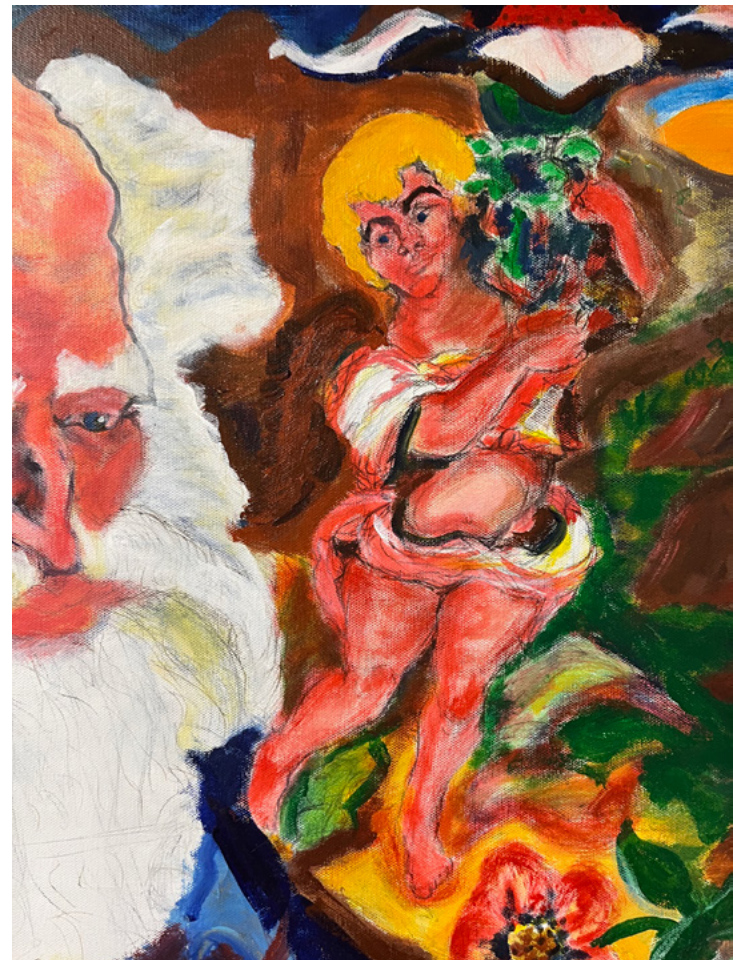
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Street Newspapers - A Voice for the Homeless & Impoverished

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STREETZine is a nonprofit newspaper published by The Stewpot of First Presbyterian Church for the benefit of people living in poverty. It includes news, particularly about issues important to those experiencing homelessness. **STREETZine** creates direct economic opportunity. Vendors receive papers to be distributed for a one-dollar or more donation.



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