

# Homeless seek shelter from cold, share stories

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A man, barely recognizable under layers of clothing and blankets, sat huddled up on a curb outside the Lord's Diner on Monday night. It was 5:30 p.m., 17 degrees outside, and Inter-Faith Ministries homeless services director Sandy Swank was just beginning her rounds for the night.

Next to the man was a dog, also covered by blankets. "I like your dog," Swank called from her van window. "It's not mine, I'm just babysitting for somebody," the man said. "I wouldn't do that to an animal."

This man is homeless, but would not submit a dog to the cold that he himself endures.

He was one of many to take a seat inside Swank's warm van—happy to receive a few minutes of heat—to receive a warm meal and place to sleep at Grace United Methodist Church.

Grace United Methodist serves as an overflow facility for Inter-Faith's residents. Inter-Faith Inn houses 50 individuals and Grace provides space for 30 more.

"8, 9, 10, 11..." Swank called. "We're going to take them in order or they get into arguments."

Swank called out individuals' ticket numbers, indicating which trip one will receive to the final destination and how much longer, after a long day already out on the streets, he will stand outside.

As she shuffled residents from one location to the next, Swank cranked up the heat and joked of donning shorts herself. She has been working for Inter-Faith for more than 20 years and said she doesn't even consider what she does a "job."

"It's been a real privilege for me. Most people never get the opportunity to meet as many people. I see people in various stages of being

extraordinarily happy and extraordinarily sad that full emotional gamut," Swank said. "I'm not charged with liking everything that everybody does, but I am charged with loving and caring about them and I do. I would not be able to do what I do if it were a job. I would not be able to do this."

Over the years, Swank has gotten to know many homeless individuals.

"I'm a woman of many names here. Y'all (motioning to those in the van) call me names I can't even repeat," she said laughing.

"Even in the worst of times, I cannot say that anyone has been totally disrespectful to me, which is just amazing. I had one guy one time that socked me. It was kind of a girly sock though, so it didn't really count, but out of all of those years you've got to think ... that's pretty extraordinary."

Someone piped up from the back seat.

"Especially from the people who roll through here," he said.

Swank said she's never felt threatened and always feels that those to whom she drives have her back if something threatening were to occur.

Someone else piped up.

"The majority of us guys are just looking for a warm place to sleep at night, so they're not going to try to do anything stupid," one passenger said.

Just a warm place to sleep.

**Enduring more than just the cold**

The chills of frostbite can sneak up on one quickly, and sometimes it can do more than bite.

"A lot of times the frostbite doesn't appear to be too bad at first. It usually starts with the toes, but then part of the tissue will die off and they get gangrene. The gangrene will continue to kill the tissue and move up," Swank said.

Often, the only way to prevent the gangrene spreading is amputation.



Photo by Megan Pauly

Homeless individuals sleep inside Grace United Methodist Church, the overflow shelter for the Inter-Faith Inn.

Swank has witnessed this several times.

"One time a guy had frostbite really bad. They told him to stay off of his feet. He kept walking and walking and refused to stop. He took his shoes off in the shelter one night and you could follow where he'd been because there was a trail of blood up and down the hallway," Swank said.

Thing got worse; he left behind more than just a trail of blood.

"One night the police called me at home and wanted to know if something had happened to this guy. I said I didn't know, I hadn't seen him in a long time. They had some papers to identify him by," Swank said.

His foot was found, still in its shoe, down by the river.

**David Riley carries his life on his back**

"Nice to meet you," I said as men piled into Sandy's van for the fifth time.

"Nice to meet you," Riley said. "Well, I guess so."

Riley has epilepsy, a common chronic neurologi-

cal disorder characterized by seizures.

Riley is also only four credit hours away from receiving his bachelor's degree. He spent his first two years at Cloud County Community College in Concordia and last two years at Fort Hays State.

He studied art. He was airlifted from Hays to Wichita after his last seizure in September.

"They gave me a pair of pants and a pair of socks and just kind of dropped me off in the middle of Wichita. I was still coming out a seizure," Riley said. "I have no family down here, no nothing. My family is from Arizona, Nebraska, Washington, Kansas and Cocker City, where my son is. Other than that...that's me."

Riley's son was born Nov. 8. However, he hasn't seen him in over a year.

Riley has a girlfriend, Bobbie, from the women's shelter.

"When I first came here (to Wichita) I'd never seen so many churches," he said. "We had six meals the day before Thanksgiving."

While Riley is grateful for the food and housing that has kept him alive, he admitted to having attempted suicide.

"No wonder I'm an artist. I play on fear, emotions and anger," he said. "It's where society puts us. It's sad, but it's reality. Society doesn't see us at 5:30 a.m. carrying our lives on our backs."

**'One step at a time' for Jessie Wallace**

Jessie was deployed for eight years, and is now a military veteran. He's broke, and won't make it home for Christmas because of that. He's trying to get a job as a bell ringer at the Salvation Army, with an end goal of going back to school at Wichita Technical College or Wichita State. "If you don't work, you don't deserve this," Wallace said of his current situation. "I'm just trying to take this one step at a time."

If given \$50 for Christmas, he would give half to a charitable organization and take himself to the movies with the rest.

"It's not hard loving yourself," he said.

**Reggie 'among brothers and sisters'**

Reverend Reggie wanted to tell his story, too.

"Once there was a boy named Reggie. Reggie couldn't read or write," Reggie said. "The Holy Spirit came into my living room and said, 'go to the

base and take the test.' I went and flunked. And I took it again, and I flunked. I took it a third time and the Holy Spirit guided my right hand. The recruiter said, 'How can this be? You were illiterate before. You can go anywhere in the Army you want.' The Holy Spirit said, 'say engineering.' Now I have two engineering degrees, one civil and one land field."

Reggie then glanced gently around the room.

"I enjoy people. There's good in everyone, we just have to reach down and find it in them," he said. "I am among my brothers and sisters here. I am here to encourage them."

**Eric: a rider of buses and lover of books**

Eric sits in the basement dining room, flipping through the Wichita Eagle after finishing his dinner.

At the beginning of the month, after receiving his check from the state, he saves his money for bus passes. Each morning he rides the bus for a couple of hours, but admits that his days are boring.

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"All 365 days are the same. I haven't gotten holidays or birthdays in years. A lot of us are looking for jobs but it's really slow," he said.

He won't be going home for Christmas because he doesn't have any family.

He does, however, have his books. A book about Ted Bundy's life lay next to the newspaper, which he discussed at great length.

"It's interesting learning about his mind," he said.

"When I read something I want to learn something."

### **Carlos finds community on the street**

Carlos Terronze used to move things across the country, and has visited all 50 states.

Even though his family is what brought him back to Kansas, he won't be seeing them over the holiday season.

"My family and I don't really get along," he said.

He has found somewhat of a community on the streets.

"When you live on the

streets you get to know a lot of people, and about 99 percent of them are halfway decent," he said. "There's always that 1 percent that makes things hard on you, but that's something you've got to deal with."

### **From the street to stability**

A dose of holiday cheer can usually be heard from the stereo of Sandy's van.

However, the festivities don't stop there when it comes to Christmas at Inter-Faith.

Swank, co-worker Diane Roth and the others will all be spending Christmas dinner together this year.

It's a time when volunteers aren't needed as much.

Roth, who used to be homeless herself, began working for Swank after Swank's significant other had a stroke and required assistance.

Eventually Swank was able to hire Roth as an employee of Inter-Faith.

Roth and Swank's work relationship has carried over

into their personal lives; the two frequently travel and vacation together.

"I'm glad for the opportunity to do this. I've been homeless many times, but thankfully for not more than one to two nights at a time," Roth said. "In 2002 I came to the overflow shelter."

During her bouts of homelessness, Roth was ashamed to tell her mother that she was on the streets.

After moving into a place of her own to call

home, she invited friends and family over for a housewarming party.

Roth, who showcased her holiday spirit through a display of flashy, festive fingernails painted both red and green, knows what the holidays means to her.

"There are always people out there who are always a lot worse off than me," Roth said. "What more is Christmas about than celebrating Christ's birth and spending time with friends and family?"