

BLANK TALES

Edition 2 Issue 3 // June 2017 // Dedicated to Des Moines's homeless community



What does it mean to be

HOMELESS?

Exploring stereotypes about homeless individuals (pages 4-5)

About us

Who We Are

The Blank Tales team is a collaboration of three Valley High School students—Guowei, Jared, and Elizabeth. To make this issue, we interviewed homeless and formerly homeless individuals and listened to their powerful stories. The names of our interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy. Their anonymity also inspired the title of our magazine. Each person has their own unique story that does not fit any stereotype. Our magazine provides a “blank” medium for every person to share both their hardships and successes.

Our Mission

Through our publication, we hope to raise awareness of the homeless community in Des Moines. Homelessness is a complex problem. Our mission is to increase action towards ending homelessness and lifting homeless individuals, families, and children from poverty. We hope the stories we share inspire you, our readers, to help people find homes and build stable and secure lives.

These stories show how much organizations like the Continuum of Care Board, Hawthorn Hill, and CareMore can help to change the lives of homeless people (see page 8 for organizations you can support). These organizations have wonderful programs that provide shelter, food, clothing, therapy, and help people to secure employment. Many strive to provide long-term solutions to homelessness by helping people become financially stable and independent.

You can help these organizations and their continued efforts to change lives. We strongly encourage you to give in any way that you can—by volunteering or donating to the remarkable organizations listed on the back cover. You have the power to make a difference and change lives.

Contact Us

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Editors' note

Speaking out to inspire change

Dear readers,

On April 12, 2017, the three of us were invited to speak at the Student Voice Rally, an event hosted by the Iowa Student Learning Institute (IowaSLI).

IowaSLI was founded in the spring of 2013 by Ian Coon and Jack Hostager, two high school students inspired by their experiences at local leadership seminars. Four years later, Jack and Ian have expanded IowaSLI into a network of students and teachers that spans the Midwest. Their mission is to revolutionize the role of student voices in Iowa's K-12 education system.

IowaSLI's Student Voice Rally is an annual event that brings together hundreds of students, educators, and public officials from across the state to form a "unified voice from the students of Iowa." The event is highlighted by its keynote speakers, individuals actively involved in the mission of IowaSLI. Our presentation was one of several speeches

given at the Student Voice Rally.

The three of us focused our speech on the way we use Blank Tales to involve ourselves in the issue of homelessness—an issue with which suburban high school students aren't typically familiar. We introduced our listeners to the current state of homelessness in Des Moines, then discussed Blank Tales's mission. The overarching theme of the "student voice" was present throughout our speech. As a non-profit publication, Blank Tales acts as a medium for the three of us to use our voices to make a positive impact in our community, even as high schoolers.

We left the Student Voice Rally hoping to have inspired our listeners to make a positive difference. We hope Blank Tales has inspired all of our readers to do the same. This issue shares the stories of Rosa and Luci and discusses stereotypes about homeless individuals.

Thanks for reading. Sincerely, Guowei, Jared, and Elizabeth

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WHAT
DOES IT
MEAN
TO BE

HOMELESS?

Too often, we project assumptions onto others. The result? Stereotypes about the most vulnerable in our society. Here, we explore how reality differs from common expectation.

MYTH: *Homeless people are lazy.*

REALITY: Finding affordable housing is difficult, particularly in Central Iowa. Additionally, other complications, like physical and mental illness, can prevent people from finding homes.

According to a study by the Urban Institute, there are only 30 affordable housing units for every 100 low-income families in Polk County*. In comparison, Brooklyn, NY has 48 units for every 100 families.

Organizations like the Polk County Housing Trust Fund have advocated for more affordable housing. However, the Department of Housing and Urban Development plays a larger role, according to *The Guardian*.

Other factors complicate the house hunt. Most landlords don't accept those addicted to drugs or alcohol, for example. However, many outreach organizations believe in the "housing first" model: that is, individuals cannot defeat their addictions and illnesses without stable housing. Therefore, it's a catch 22—with substance abuse problems, it's hard to find housing, but without housing, it's hard to defeat addiction.

*A low-income family is defined as a family making at or below 30 percent of US median income in a given year. See The Urban Institute's website for a full report.

MYTH: *Homeless people are dumb.*

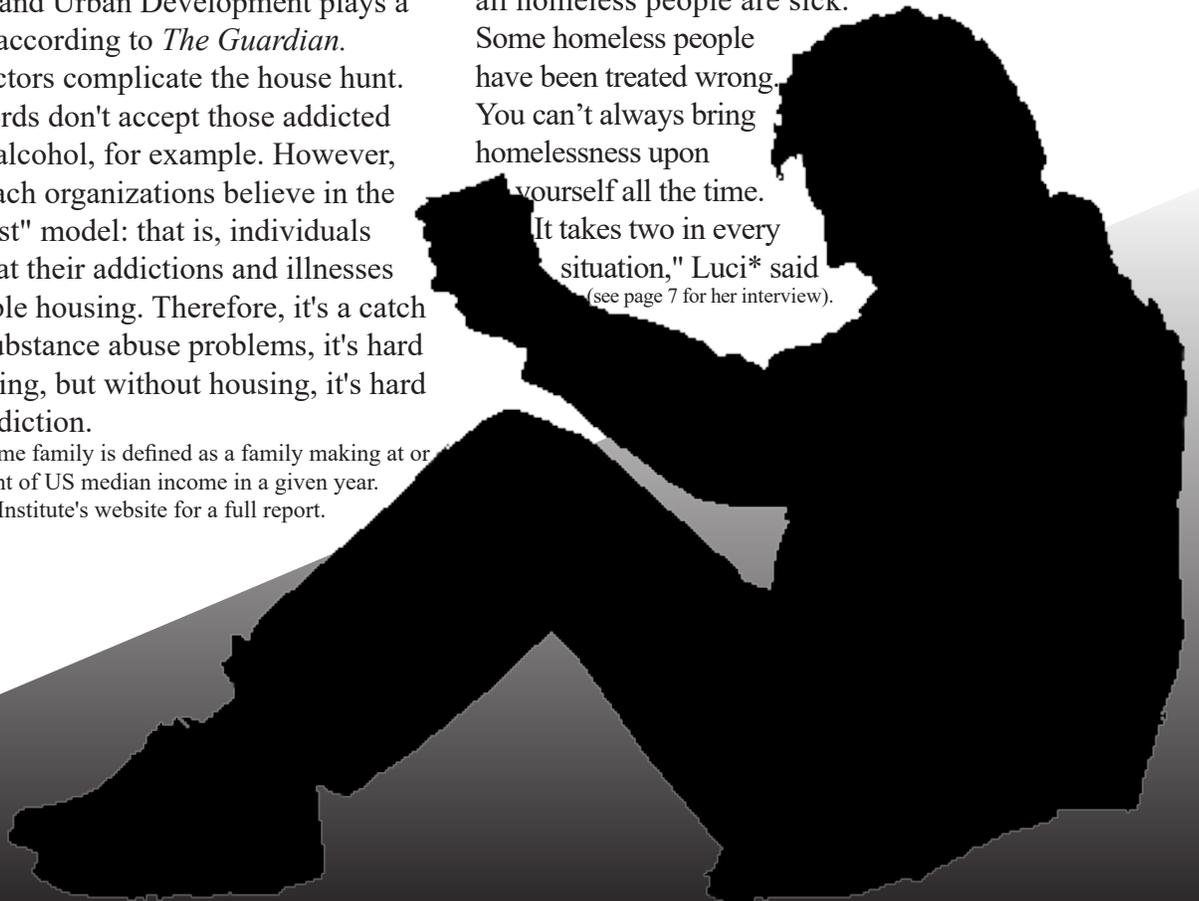
REALITY: People don't become homeless because they know nothing. Forces like familial disagreements and mental illness play a much larger role than intelligence.

"The single largest cause of homelessness is when [someone] experiences a catastrophic loss of family. In some cases, that downward spiral leads them to the streets," Thomas Aitchison, employee of Community First! Village (a tiny homes village and homeless outreach organization in Austin, TX), said.

"Not all homeless people are dumb. Not all homeless people are sick.

Some homeless people have been treated wrong. You can't always bring homelessness upon yourself all the time.

"It takes two in every situation," Luci* said (see page 7 for her interview).



MYTH: *Homeless people are criminals.*

REALITY: Equating homeless individuals to criminals is not only wrong, but it also simplifies a complex problem. Homeless individuals often commit crimes out of desperation.

54 percent of homeless individuals have spent time in a correctional facility over the course of their lives, according to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council (NHCHC). However, "this increased contact with the criminal justice system is due to numerous causes, including use of local ordinances that prohibit sleeping, standing, or panhandling in public spaces," NHCHC reported.

Others wind up in jail as a side-effect of poverty and homelessness. Quinn*, a homeless person on Joppa's Heat Team route, went to jail because he couldn't pay child support. Quinn had been unable to find work—and obtaining a job will be even more difficult after time in jail.

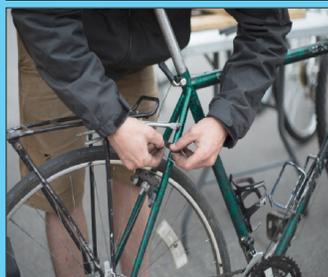
Criminalization only makes it more difficult to end chronic homelessness. The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Report noted that when a previously incarcerated person re-enters society, they face greater barriers when obtaining housing and employment. This only increases the chance they will commit more crimes.

Finally, many homeless individuals are victims of violent crime themselves or fear assault when unsheltered. "It's hard out here—you're just sleeping out in the streets by yourself, and people take advantage of that. There are so many creeps out here. How do you guarantee you're going to be safe?" Olivia*, a homeless woman in Des Moines, said.

**Names have been changed to protect privacy*

Homeless Connect

Run by the Polk County Continuum of Care Board (CoCB), the annual Homeless Connect event aims to bring together a variety of services for homeless individuals. Each client was paired with a "navigator" (a volunteer familiar with available resources). According to CoCB director Mark Phillips, the navigator-client partnerships build relationships and add a humanizing element to the process.



Top: The Continuum of Care hosted Homeless Connect 2017 on April 20. Middle left: A client chats with a volunteer. Community members paired up with homeless individuals to help them find needed resources. Middle right: A client looks for clothes. Bottom left: A volunteer repairs bikes. Bottom right: A stylist from the Aveda Institute cuts and styles a client's hair.
Special thanks to Ryan Morrison for taking photos

New beginnings: Rosa's story

Tell us your story.

"My name is Rosa*. I am from Mexico. I came to the United States almost 12 years ago. I got married in Mexico to a Mexican-American, [which is] why I'm here. He filled out my papers for immigration and everything, so I came here. I have four kids. I got divorced around six years ago. I've had my own home [since June 28th] and I have my citizenship [as of] September 28th. I had a lot of events this year; I'm very busy. I'm happy, happier than before when I was married. My next goal is obviously the language. I want to focus on the language and speaking better. Another goal I have for my kids is to go to Disneyland, probably next year. I want to make it next year, so I'm starting to save money."

When did you move from Mexico?

"I was 22—now I'm 33."

What brought you to the US?

"I got married and we decided to live in the United States. I had my job in Mexico, but my ex-husband said he wanted to try living here. I like it now. I love the country. I don't feel like I'm from another country. I have a lot of friends here. The company I work treats me really well; they are very flexible sometimes when the kids get sick or something. They say 'go ahead and come back when you can.' They are very nice and I am very lucky because of my job, the friends I have, and the programs I found."

Did you have a job when you first moved here?

"No. When I moved here, I was at home with my son. Two years later, I started working because I wanted to learn a little English. I went to school a little bit to learn the language and started working. When I was in Mexico I was working for HR and administration—all about the office. I moved here two years later and started working for 3E, the electrical company. Before, I had no idea how to use tools or any-

thing. But now I'm okay. I love my job. I'm enjoying the job.

I started working at 3E eight years ago. When I divorced my ex-husband, I went back to Mexico for a year because I didn't have any family here. I needed moral support; I needed my family and all of my friends, so I went back to Mexico. When I went back to the United States, I asked for a job at the same company I was working at and they opened the doors for me. I am so lucky and thankful. At that time, I didn't even

"At that time, I didn't even have a savings account or a checking account. I had zero. I was living in the park with my kids. I was homeless in California. So when I have some friends, or when I see some people that need help, I try to help." -Rosa



have a savings account or a checking account. I had zero. I was living in the park with my kids. I was homeless in California. So when I have some friends, or when I see some people that need help, I try to help, because I was in that situation before and sometimes when we need help we don't know where we have to go, we don't have an idea of all the programs we have around."

What was your experience like being homeless?

"I was really sad. More for my kids. I'm an adult and stronger than my kids,

but my kids didn't understand. All the kids wanted a home; they wanted bedrooms. When we were in the shelter everyone was nice to us, but my kids always asked me 'why are we living here? Why are a lot of people here?' They always remember the shelter, and why we were there, and all the kids who were living there..."

What programs have helped you?

"The first program was Home Connection/Hawthorn Hill. That program is for transitional housing, so that program works like... You have to make a goal. It's not only renting a home. You have to make a goal and do the goals. If you don't work on your goals, you have to move out. That program is only supposed to be for two years. I was part of that program for almost five years, because I was waiting for my own home, so they gave me extensions every six months, because I made my goals really fast and the social worker said 'okay, I know you are here because you are waiting for your own home, so we'll give you extensions every six months until you get your own home because you are working on your goals all the time.' They don't want lazy people; they want working people with goals that make them stronger. That was my first program. [Another program that helped us was] Principal. They helped us for Christmas; they give us presents all the time. Or when the kids start school, they buy their supplies and clothes for the schools. Another program was Big Brothers Big Sisters.

I'm still working at 3E now. Probably for ever and ever for the rest of my life. I like it, I enjoy it. I wake up and I say... It's not like 'oh, I have to work.' I'm excited all the time, I enjoy it, I learn new stuff all the time. I really like my job."

Is there anything else you want to say?

"I'm thankful for all the help. Without that help, I don't know where I would be."

*Names have been changed to protect interviewees' privacy

CareMore: Luci's story

Tell us your story.

Luci*: "I arrived [in Des Moines] from Minneapolis from a well-known shelter called the Exodus. The Exodus is a co-ed shelter, but it's mostly for men. I got into trouble at [Exodus], and they asked me to leave. I was ready to go anyways. There were a lot of people...it was too much. After I got in trouble, I didn't know what I was gonna do. Someone said Des Moines. I looked up Des Moines, Iowa, and CISS (Central Iowa Shelter and Services) popped up, so I called them. They said we have a bed; come on down. So I came here to CISS and it was okay. But I didn't have insurance. No doctors or nothing. In Minneapolis, I had doctors appointments five times a week.

Then I got a flier that said CareMore is open on April 1. I was like, 'oh man, I gotta try this out.' At that time I had a cane. But I needed to come here. I came and the first person I got in touch with was Susan. Then it was Dr. Benjamin.

And that's when I met Doug, [CareMore's social worker]. I said, 'I don't know what to do, Doug.' He was like, 'we're going to help you; we have programs; I have all kinds of information and connections.' Once CareMore came into my life it was like a match made in heaven. I owe CareMore everything. Everything they said they were going to do for me, they did it and beyond. It's extraordinary; they're phenomenal; CareMore's like my angel. One big old place full of angels."

Did CareMore help you with counseling and job hunting?

"Before I came here, I was going for disability. When I came here, I met

Susan, and once I told Susan about disability, she basically made them pay attention to my case. I got my disability, because Susan wouldn't let up." Teresa Walker (Community Outreach Manager at CareMore): "In Luci's situation, she needed help with forms, and she needed help with housing. [Our social worker, Doug] walks alongside our patients and gives them that assistance that they need."

How do you get transportation to CareMore?

TW: "The closest bus stop is by McDonald's on 14th Street. There are no sidewalks from there to the clinic. Our patients are having to walk, and it can be a long and unsafe walk if they are unstable. We were able to help Luci with transportation and that has made a big difference."

L: "In the wintertime, I was scared to death. So when I told CareMore that I had a fear of falling, they made sure I had my walker. To be honest, I was not a proud fan of the walker. CareMore also made sure that I could get a bus card because I wasn't sure of how I was going to get here. They showed me how to get around Iowa."

What's the hardest part about being homeless?

L: "The hardest part about being homeless is you don't know what's going to happen that day or the next day or at night. You don't know if someone's going to let you sleep on their couch and then they'll say 'Okay, my boyfriend don't want no company. You gotta get out.' Then you walk the streets with your stuff. The hardest part about being homeless is darkness. It's empty; it's dark; it's lonely."



Luci, pictured above, is one of CareMore's clients. "CareMore came here in April 2016. We are a primary care provider, so we're a doctor's office that has medical and behavioral health—a one stop shop. We only see patients who are on Medicaid with Amerigroup insurance. We are brand new to the community," Teresa Walker, CareMore's community outreach manager, said.

What are your dreams or goals for the future?

L: "Thanks to CareMore I've reached all my goals. I'm serious—I'm almost 60 years old and my goal was to get stable. I did that."

continued on page 8

Places to donate

Broadlawns:

www.broadlawns.org/
Medical center that offers accessible, cost-effective patient care

Career Closets:

<https://www.plymouthchurch.com/news/plymouth-women-career-closet-moves-to-new-ymca/>
Provides clothing for women in need for interviews and work

Central Iowa Shelter & Services:

www.centraliowashelter.org/
Free emergency shelter and food for adults; health and education programs

Dress for Success:

<https://www.dressforsuccess.org>
Professional attire for women interviewing for jobs and working

Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families:

<http://www.evelynkdaviscenter.org/>
Workforce training, employment opportunities, and educational opportunities

Hawthorn Hill:

<http://www.hawthorn-hill.org/>
Emergency shelter for mothers and children as well as a permanent, supportive housing program

House of Mercy:

www.houseofmercydesmoines.org/
Housing, substance-related counseling, trauma counseling, and more

Iowa Homeless Youth Centers:

iowahomelessyouth.org/
Services to teach youth from 16-25 to become self-sufficient

Joppa Outreach:

www.joppaoutreach.org/
Faith-based services to help people with employment, housing, and health

MECCA:

www.meccaservices.com/aboutus.html
Drug addiction outpatient rehabilitation

Primary Healthcare:

www.phcinc.net
Nonprofit community healthcare center for insured or uninsured patients

Reggie's Place Coffee Shop/ Connection Café:

theconnectioncafe.org
Free lunch for homeless and underprivileged people

Sands:

www.broadlawns.org/inpatient-services.cfm
Broadlawns Medical Center Inpatient Behavioral Health Unit

St. Joseph's:

www.dmdiocese.org/st-joseph-emergency-family-shelter.cfm
Homeless shelter for families

YMCA:

www.dymymca.org/en/locations/ymca_supportive_housing_campus
Stable, secure, permanent housing for homeless or at-risk homeless

Luci's story (continued from page 7)

Do you have any advice for others who are struggling?

Luci: "Walk into CareMore. It's like going to visit my friends, and what I have to say is not falling on deaf ears."

How has your health changed since you've obtained housing?

L: "I'm not so negative. I get to talk to Susan. She listens, and she makes me feel better, and I trust her."

Teresa Walker (CareMore employee): "CareMore works closely with patients who have fallen through the cracks in their medical care. Our

goal is to see Medicaid patients that do not have a primary doctor. It is important to remember to not put our own judgment upon what we think is right for others. A gentleman that was homeless wouldn't take his meds. When we finally got to bottom of why, he said that he thought he could die because someone could kill him if he fell asleep or take all of his belongings because the medication made him sleep... That's not my reality when I go to bed, but that's his."

"The hardest part about being homeless is darkness. It's empty; it's dark; it's lonely."

-Luci

(read the rest on page 7)