Westchester’s Homeless: A Story Worth Hearing
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By: Nick Brandi

Compared to their counterparts in the urban hubs of America, Westchester’s homeless are largely unseen. They don’t dot the sidewalks of Scarsdale nor line the streets of Larchmont, and you won’t find them waiting at your tree-lined suburban intersection armed with a squeegee or bag of oranges.

Yet, they are among us: According to the recently released Westchester County Affordable Housing Needs Assessment, homelessness in Westchester rose nearly 10% overall between the years 2007 and 2018, with student homelessness up in excess of 100%. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development asserts that on a single night during the last 10 days of January 2018, more than 1,800 persons were homeless in Westchester.

What follows is a cross-section of homeless people within our county, each with a story worth hearing, all with a life worth living. None want our pity, though some might be grateful for a helping hand offered in the spirit of neighborly compassion and friendship.

Photos by Stefan Radtke

– Gordon Simmons –
Age: 63

Gordon Simmons only became homeless in June of 2019, after receiving notification that his residence, unbeknownst to him, was illegal as an apartment and that he had 72 hours to vacate the premises. Previously, Simmons worked for a long time at Croton Egg Farm and retired from
a management position at Interstate Battery after 18 years of service. Simmons has a sister, whom he speaks with every day, and he says that overall, people have been supportive of him.

Simmons says that keeping busy, having a sense of purpose, and patience are keys to making the best of situations such as his. In addition to helping out around his shelter in Peekskill, sweeping, mopping, and tending to the garden, he likes to build miniature houses out of balsa wood, each of which takes three or four weeks to complete.

For people who may be new to homelessness, Simmons says, “Don’t be afraid of coming to the shelter if you need to. It’s here to take care of you, look after you, and help you.”

Denise Bigelow is a mother of six and grandmother of five who was born in North Carolina and moved to Westchester at age 4. A bad ankle injury in 2018 deprived her of the mobility she needed to hold a job and support herself. Meaning well, people often tell her: “Don’t be depressed,’ but how can you not be depressed and stressed in this situation?” she says. A spiritual woman, Bigelow prays and reads Scripture daily, though her favorite temple these days, she says with a laugh, is Dunkin’ Donuts. Her de-stressing strategies include listening to music and using a painting app on her mobile device. Bigelow also enjoys singing and can’t wait to be reunited with her kids and grandkids. Though she aspires to return one day to Peekskill’s Jan Peek Shelter as a volunteer rather than resident, for now, she says, “I know I need to have patience... my time will come.”
Barry McAllister and Charlene Scott were born in Valhalla and raised in Peekskill. She spent 15 years as a medical tech; McAllister worked a decade in construction. They lost their home due to an unfortunate sequence of events that included extended periods of unemployment and the passing of beloved family members. McAllister got laid off from his construction job, while Scott suffered a downward spiral after she quit her job at Mohegan Park to care for her infirmed sister and lapsed into depression following her sister’s death. They do, however, have regular contact with both family and friends, which they cherish. They enjoy sitting by the Hudson River, watching movies, and Positive Peek Tuesdays at the Jan Peek Shelter. On McAllister’s wish list is regaining his driver’s license and taking a vacation; Scott concurs but adds she’d like to fly or ride Amtrak, two things she’s never done.

“Sometimes getting up in the morning is difficult,” shares McAllister, “because I have good, vivid dreams about not being in a shelter. Then I wake up and remember that Charlene and I are still here.”

Editor’s note: At press time, Scott and McAllister had just been approved for their own apartment after being homeless for almost three years.
John Hodgins is a Certified Public Accountant and Peekskill native. He became homeless in 2018, when his mother’s skyrocketing medical expenses exhausted whatever money they had. Social Services assistance was denied after his landlord refused to provide proof of Hodgins’ residence. Overall, Hodgins says, people have been supportive, but he really misses having a car and would like to work as a CPA again. He’s proud to have done tax work for some very prominent people and once uncovered bank fraud that changed the management structure of a major Northeastern bank.

Hodgins emphasizes that local shelters have severe space challenges: “It’s really rough for 20 guys, sometimes with clashing personalities, to use one bathroom,” he says. “Many people think the homeless have a substance-abuse problem, but we have more folks here due to economic, legal, and credit issues. That’s where the county and state need to focus their attention.”
The dye was cast for Jason Dowicyan’s future at just 6 weeks old. That’s when he says he contracted viral meningitis, which was followed nine years later by pediatric progressive multiple sclerosis that was initially misdiagnosed as ADD.

Yet, these obstacles didn’t prevent Dowicyan, who was raised in Yonkers, from going on to own a business in the pet-sales-and-supplies industry, along with a lucrative bakery route, for many years (“It was commonplace for me to have $3,000 cash in my pocket at all times,” he says). But despite his business acumen and what is a conspicuously above-average IQ, his success in life would be profoundly compromised by his bipolar disorder and the heavy regimen of self-medication that accompanied it. This conspiracy of misfortune and disadvantage ultimately landed a 31-year-old Dowicyan behind bars for 17 years, following a bar fight that ended with a fatality (“County jail will make you nuts: If you didn’t think you were a homicidal manic [going in], you will be very soon,” he says).

All of these bad hands and hardships, however, weren’t enough to extinguish his intellectual output, which Dowicyan says includes no fewer than 22 manuscripts and more than 500 pages of a literary trilogy he is working on. He is also a singer and musician who played in an LA rock band and even does a little acting when the opportunity arises (he has a certificate from Purchase College in filmmaking, screenwriting, and scriptwriting).

Predictably, Dowicyan loves reading and listens to NPR as often as possible. He likes his morning joe from White Plains’ La Marqueta and sandwiches from nearby Royal Scarlet (“the best in the county!”) and sometimes plucks the axes over at Sam Ash. His principal message to the community is that “people should look beyond the immediate circumstances and see the person behind them. You might realize they are not as different from you as you think.”

Tops on Dowicyan’s wish list is to have a literary professional take a fair look at his work.

– Vincent Asaro –
Age: 63
Vincent Asaro had a career in the textile industry after graduating Mercy College with a BS in psychology with honors. Born in Brooklyn and raised on Staten Island, Asaro found himself homeless after his mother was sent to a nursing home and he could no longer afford their apartment. This was compounded by a disability that made getting a new job problematic. Besides his academic background in science, Asaro is an artist who can draw well and play the guitar (his favorite activity), though he also reads books on psychiatry, theology, and general science. Though he has invested quite some time and derived great satisfaction helping others, both as a nurse’s aide and at the VA, what he says he longs for most is to have a life partner.

From Asaro’s perspective, the best strategy to endure homelessness in Westchester is to be perseverant and retain self-control. “There are people in Westchester who want to help you,” he advises, “so try to present yourself well.”

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