

COVER STORY

BRUTAL REALITY

Our city's homeless speak out

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A year ago, Cheri Brooks started talking to and photographing homeless people here in Indianapolis. We spent two days and nights recently tracking some of them down to see how they were doing.

The five people in these photographs are just a few examples of what can happen to anyone — and what happens, on a daily basis, on the streets of Indianapolis.

DALE

A pleasant exterior belies the angry soul of Dale, a homeless man who has lived in the woods for nearly five years.

When no one is around, he shatters the peacefulness of those woods with screams of frustration and isolation. Dale describes himself as a walking time bomb, just waiting for the opportunity to explode.

At 41, he's been to college, has worked since he was 9, and is a veteran of the United States Air Force. Now he inhabits a makeshift shelter in woods within the city. One evening, I spoke with him in the peaceful and dark quiet. It was reminiscent of a camping trip. Two minutes after leaving him, I was in the heart of the city's nightlife. It was like being in parallel worlds.

Dale's life took a downward turn after his divorce more than 10 years ago. His car broke down beyond repair, he lost his job and his apartment; then his tools, used for his livelihood, were stolen. Unable to pay his bills and child support, he hopped a Greyhound for a one-way ride to the Pacific Northwest with hopes of a fresh start. Within a year, Dale's new life went sour and he returned to Indiana. He has been living on the streets since.

Dale pretty much keeps to himself. He is clean-shaven, doesn't drink and dresses like a neighbor who maintains his yard and golfs.

But Dale is angry and frustrated and not yet ready to try mainstream society again. He believes that trying to get a job and start again would be in vain. It's less frustrating and less painful to live in the woods with his cat than re-joining the rat race.

He told me that once someone slips down into the homelessness pit, it's incredibly difficult to get out because the odds are against success. But he hasn't given up hope. One day, maybe...

MARGARET

The smell of Jack Daniels emanating from her is enough to blow your hair back. However, beneath the tired, lined face is a pretty woman with gentle blue eyes who loves to play the piano. At 53, Margaret has four kids, an ex-husband, and also has been on and off the streets for 10 years. Why, then, is she still sleeping in the park? Because Margaret would rather drink. She has been barred from several shelters because of the erratic behavior caused by her alcoholism.

Margaret's facial expressions change instantly from laughter to anger to tears to none at all. One moment she's sweet and cheery, the next she rages in your face. The alcohol raises all of her emotions to the surface, something that has alienated her from society.

Why does she drink? The question elicits a gaze back to a distant time. "It stops the hurts." And the "hurts" go back

to a severe childhood malady and continue to a broken family and a broken heart. For her facing the pain is worse than facing the effects of the Irish Rose wine.

How she has survived nearly 10 years on the street is beyond comprehension. Does she want off? Yes and no. Being off would require her to become sober and cope with whatever memories torment her. Is it better to be sober and in acute pain, or drunk and numb? I don't know.

What does Margaret's future look like to her? She wouldn't answer. I don't believe she wants to look.

SILENT JOE

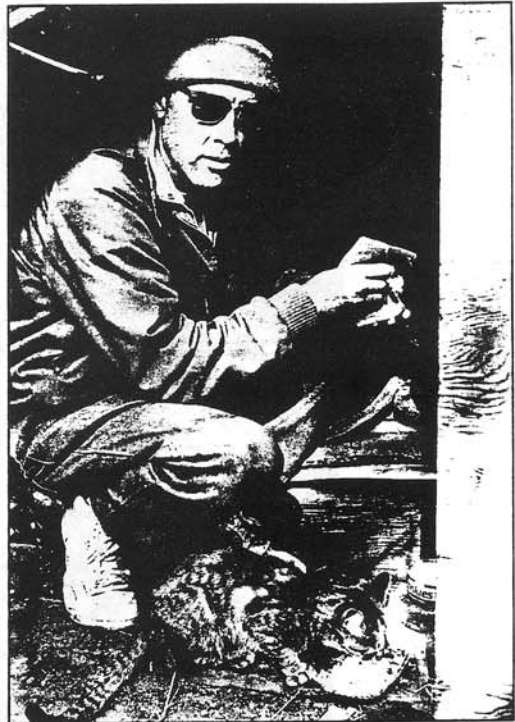
His cup reads: "I can only work for the world. My life and my cup are too empty. Please fill one or both with love. Love only. Please."

Silent Joe has a new pair of old boots that someone gave to him. He'll need them when winter comes. His eyes and hands communicate his thoughts since he doesn't speak. He's not mute; he just chooses not to talk. Maybe his silence is due to humility or shame or nothing at all. Maybe his large, dark eyes express an unspeakable past. While we hang out with him one night, Joe writes a pageful of words that speak in an esoteric manner of life. The paragraphs are poetic and surprisingly make sense. On one page he writes: "I don't think Heaven is as beautiful as Indianapolis." Joe also writes that he feels more secure within and about himself in his present condition. "I like survival."

RON SCHULTZ

You might remember Ron Schultz. He had his 15 minutes of fame about two months ago. Ron was the homeless man whose burning body was mistaken for a trash fire back in April. Remember?

But that's all you know about Ron. You don't know that Ron kept two articles in his wallet — one being an ad for the Wheeler Mission showing his picture and the other a story about an horrific bus wreck that he was survived sev-



Dale has lived in the woods within Indianapolis for nearly five years. With his cat as his companion, he says he doesn't want to enter mainstream society.

eral years ago. The image of bodies under white sheets was engraved into his memory forever.

Cheri was of the last people to see Ron alive. His final words to her were "No one has taken an interest in me like you have in a long time." In the end, people showed interest in him; but only as a soundbite on the news.

GINNY

A razor and mace kept Ginny safe during three months of homelessness. A man gave her 1,000 hits of speed to help her stay awake so she wouldn't be robbed. She lived on the streets of Broad Ripple from June through August; doing odd jobs for a little cash and stealing an occasional steak off some unsuspecting barbequer's grill. Since then, she's been homeless three more times. One time Ginny spent a month at the Salvation Army; another, she lived in her car while working as a bookbinder. One of seven children, her alcoholic father was abusive toward her and her siblings. While Ginny has escaped alcoholism, her sister did not and has been living on the street for seven years. She blames part of her homelessness on her own stubbornness and self-described "stupidity." But whatever the circumstances,

Ginny would be out every day putting in applications all over the city until she found work. What got her off the street? It was looking forward and not dwelling on the past, letting the anger go before it destroyed her. It's her opinion that sometimes people remain homeless because they can't let go of the past and see a future.

Even now, Ginny faces the possibility of landing up back on the street. But she's optimistic about finding full-time work which, at 53, is going to be a formidable challenge. Ginny just keeps moving forward and not looking back.

We as a society lose when a soul "disappears" onto the streets for any reason. Aside from these four individuals, I also spoke with several other previously homeless people and they all said the same thing. When people lose hope and give up, or cannot bear to face their pain, they stay on the street. But if they can let it go and focus on what might be, they, too, can get off the park benches and out of the shelters, and have a future.



The shoes of Silent Joe — so named because he chooses not to speak — speak volumes about his condition. Since this picture was taken, he's received a new pair of boots.