

Who are the Homeless?

Television anchormen say they're people you know.
Op-ed columnists say they're war-heroes and playwrights. A few nights on Washington's streets say otherwise.

by Scott Shuger

For anyone living in a city, the dilemma unfolds dozens of times a day: There he is, between me and my immediate goal—The Man With The Styrofoam Cup, asking me a simple question: "Spare some change?" That question lights off others of my own that go unspoken: "What does this guy do with the money?" "How much does he make a day?" "Doesn't begging like this make him feel awful?" "Why doesn't it make him feel awful enough to stop and get a job?" "How did he get in this fix?" "Is he really in a fix, or is he taking me for a sucker?" "Why should I give to this guy rather than the other beggars on the block?" "Or do they think I can give to them all?"

"Spare some change?" comes up because I am in a limited way accessible to The Man With The Styrofoam Cup. My questions come up because he is in a radical way inaccessible to me. To most of us, the homeless are a visible mystery. Perhaps some of the most hardened among us would prefer them to be invisible. But the rest of us would prefer them to be less of a mystery. We want to help, yes, but we want our efforts to go where they will make a difference.

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For that to happen, we have to know what we're up against.

Hype for the holidays

Although there have been some harder-edged stories on the homeless, the main message the media delivers about them is that despite their predicament, they're just like us. In a news special, Tom Brokaw stated that the homeless are "people you know." Robert Hayes, director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, told *The New York Times* that when he is contacted by television news programs or congressional committees looking at homelessness, "they always want white, middle-class people to interview." A recent study that examined the national print and broadcast coverage given the homeless between November 1986 and February 1989 discovered that a quarter of the homeless people featured in stories were children. That was equal to the number of those identified as unemployed and three times the number identified as substance abusers. Only 4 percent of the stories attributed the plight of the homeless to their personal problems.

A recent publication of the Better Business Bu-

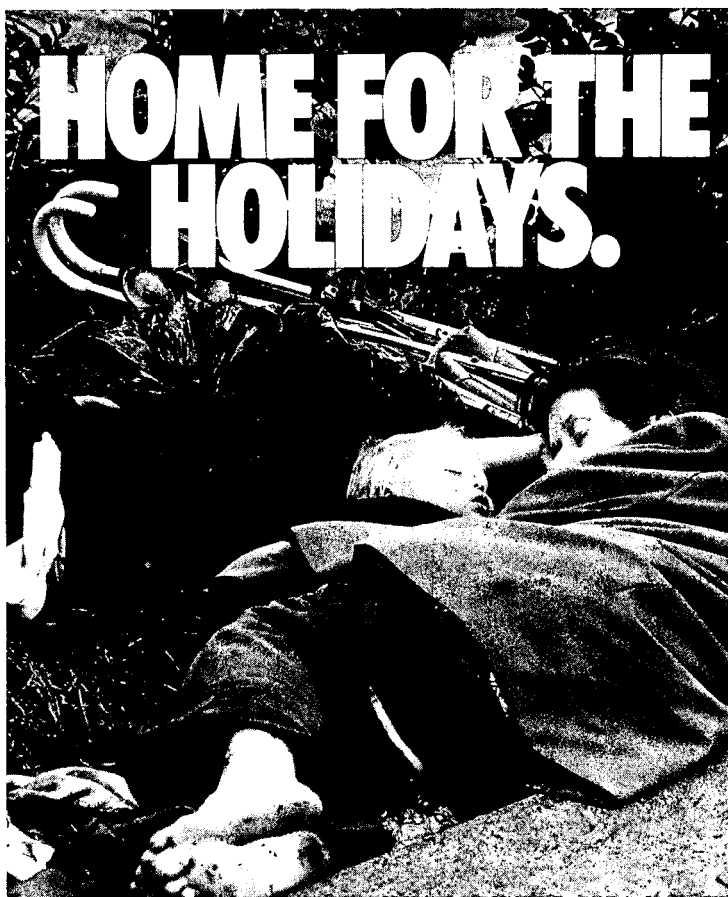
reau reported, "Many of those living in shelters or on the street are no different from those with a place to live Being on the street is often something out of their control." In a *New York Times* op-ed piece, Rep. Charles Schumer wrote that "the slightest misstep or misfortune—a temporary layoff, a large medical bill, a divorce—could send [a low-income] family onto the streets. Indeed that's exactly what's been happening." The concrete examples of the homeless Schumer cited are a working mother of eight whose eldest is an honor student, and a 63-year-old woman forced to retire from her job as a waitress because of arthritis. In another *Times* op-ed piece entitled "The Homeless: Victims of Prejudice," two Ivy League law students said that the homeless people they met during a summer of intern work included a Broadway playwright, a highly decorated World War II veteran, and an ex-professional basketball player. Not to mention "pregnant women who lost the race to stay one step ahead of the housing marshal, students trying to study in noisy shelters, and average families working diligently to save enough money for an apartment."

Jonathan Kozol, in his book on homeless families, *Rachel and Her Children*, features: a couple who, after their house burns down, lose their five children to foster homes and are reduced to panhandling; a 35-year-old woman, a college graduate who worked for many years before medical complications wiped out her savings, forced her to lose her home, ended her marriage, made her give up her kids, and left her sleeping on the beach; and a teacher, who when the heater in her building failed, was "in a matter of weeks . . . reduced from working woman and householder to a client of the welfare system." To the question "Why are they without homes?" Kozol responds, "Unreflective answers might retreat to explanations with which readers are familiar: 'family breakdown,' 'drugs,' 'culture of poverty,' 'teen pregnancies,' 'the underclass,' etc. While these are precipitating factors for some people, they are not the cause of homelessness. *The cause of homelessness is lack of housing.*" (Italics in the original.)

Last December, the Salvation Army came out with a special TV commer-

cial to boost its Christmas campaign for the homeless in New York City: *On the sidewalk in front of a wrought-iron fence, framed by a shopping bag on one side and a suitcase on the other, there's a mother and her child together in a sleeping bag, their white skins reflecting the street lights. As a man carrying a briefcase walks by, the child sits up; you can see her long blonde hair now. The mother kisses the girl and pulls her back down, hugging and patting her as they drift back to sleep.* "Home for the Holidays," the ad's caption says.

Honor students and playwrights, college graduates sleeping on the beach, mothers and daughters sleeping in the park—this is what I can read about or see on TV. But this is not what I see in Washington. Where in all this is the Man With The Styrofoam Cup?



UNLESS YOU HELP

Please give what you can. Food, clothing, money or time.
Contact your nearest Salvation Army office.



Try finding homeless like these in your city.

Although real homeless people are all around me every day, I've been vulnerable to the more idealized representations of the press because my approach to street people has been typical of the white middle class: Usually, I stare straight ahead and walk on by, my head full of those skeptical questions. Sometimes, something—an excess of change, a particularly good day, or just a weariness of skepticism—would make me stop and give some money. But no matter what, there was one thing I would never, ever, do: Talk to these people. Recently, however, I decided to break that nervous middle class habit. I resolved to talk to the homeless, to ask them some of the questions I had been keeping to myself in all the years of walking right by.

Nights of wine and poses

I first put my new approach into effect one night last winter. On the stretch of Connecticut Avenue just above Dupont Circle, it was cold and rainy, and the panhandlers were huddled in bunches near the entrances of the restaurants on the block. With most of the dinner crowd already gone, the best pickings were over for the day. That left only pedestrians like me.

Two men come up to me, styrofoam cups in hand: "Spare some change?" Both men are unsteady on their feet and hard to understand, with 100-proof breath. I make a donation and learn that the tall black man is named Mike and the short one is K.C. I ask them how long they've been on the streets, and they tell me six months. They've both had jobs in construction. Mike says he used to work as a bartender until he lost his job because of his drinking. When I ask where they stay at night, Mike says that the owner of an art gallery across the street lets them sleep in the lobby of the building. Mike says they get to bathe every two days at a shelter in Alexandria.

"What do you do with the money you get?" I ask. Mike gives me a thumb-to-the-lip bottle motion. Then he shrugs his shoulders in embarrassment. "I got to go to a program. An in-patient program so I can't get out so I can't mess up. I got to clean my act up."

Mike is very polite, calling me "sir" frequently and saying "excuse me" to every passerby. K.C. is a little closer to the edge of his personal envelope tonight. When a couple turns into the restaurant behind us, he snaps at them, "If you don't eat all your food, bring a doggy bag for us."

Some surveys say that an inordinate number of the District's homeless are veterans. So I ask, "Were either of you guys in the service?" "I was on the Ho Chi Minh Trail," replies Mike. "I was over there in

Korea," says K.C. "Quit telling the man lies," scolds Mike. I ask K.C. where and when. "I'm trying to 'member man. I'm shell-blocked," he says. "I ain't no dummy. Now hold it. All I know is I was in the 101 Screaming Eagles Fort Campbell Kentucky. Basic Training Fort Dix. But where I was, I can't remember. I got shell-blocked. I've been shot up and all that shit, but I'm still alive."

Before I can pursue this, a completely drunk or stoned black woman comes over. She's in her late twenties, I'd guess. Her head is covered by a tight bandana and her eyes are only slits. Without saying anything, she greets Mike with a French kiss that lasts about ten seconds. Then she spends at least that long sticking her tongue in his ear. Even so, she's hanging on to Mike as much for navigation as for affection. "Sandra, this is him," Mike says, pointing towards me.

"I'm Chocolate," says Sandra. "That's Memphis and that's um, Black." Mike shrugs his shoulders in embarrassment again. Just then, a younger guy, more drugged than drunk, charges towards us. This guy is really revved up on something. He starts shouting at me from 25 feet away. He's in his late teens, early twenties, with a fighter's build and a bull neck. "That's my fighter—what you all doing to her?" He pushes the other three behind him and gets in my face. "Who do you see on this corner first? What's wrong? You gonna help us out?"

As I start to leave, Mike offers his hand. His handshake is solid. I bet the rest of him was too, several thousand drinks ago. "Give me your address," demands Sandra. "Can I go home with you tonight?" It was somewhere between pitiful and sexual. "I don't want no shelter. I want to go to your house. I want to sleep in a bed, a real righteous bed."

A block away I cross paths with two guys standing out of the rain under the overhang of a closed lunch stand. Both in their twenties, one white, the other black. It quickly becomes apparent that all they have in common is this dry spot of sidewalk. The white guy, who tells me his name is Wayne, asks me for some change, telling me he got laid off from a construction job. The black guy, without introducing himself, quickly tries to take over. "Hey, I'm in a situation too. I'm a starving artist, and nobody's giving me nothing. I don't have a job. But I'm a millionaire, I know that inside. That my art is worth money, OK? But I know I'm gonna make it. All I got to do is go to New York. I've been trying for four years to get back there. I just need enough money to go to New York. The only thing I need is like 150 bucks."

I ask him if he ever tries finding work in the want ads. "Everybody keeps saying that, man! The paper is to get you to buy it or look at it. They're still mak-

ing money off you! Hey, see all these stores out here? Every one of them got a loan to get what they've got. Well, I need a loan. If I had a loan for about \$10,000, I'd be a multimillionaire, man, because my art is fuckin' baaad. That's the only way I'm gonna make it—if I get a fuckin' loan."

Wayne hasn't said a word during this rap. But when the starving artist, now pretty agitated, nervously walks to the corner to search out better possibilities than me, Wayne rolls his eyes and says to me out of the corner of his mouth, "It don't take nobody no four years to get back to New York, I'm sorry." Wayne is not wildly drunk, but now that I'm standing close to him I can tell he's pretty numbed up. Wayne is one of the truly unsheltered homeless. In good weather he sleeps in the park just opposite the Q street Metro exit. In bad weather he sleeps under the portico of an attorney's office or in a nearby building that's under construction. He has shoulder-length light-blond hair coming down from under his ball cap, a moustache, and the beginnings of a beard. About four years ago, he came to this area from Texas with his family. Then his mother died and his father started a housepainting company in Virginia. Wayne used to work there. I ask him why he quit. This was, after all, the decision that finally put him on the street. I figure there had to be a pretty dramatic reason. All Wayne comes up with is this: "I just couldn't deal with it, too many Spanish workers—they can't speak English because most of them are illegal immigrants—and being the boss's son."

The artist comes back. "Can you give me a buck or 50 cents, man, so I can get on the subway?" he asks me. As I give him two quarters, I notice that he's wearing a Burberry scarf. After he leaves, Wayne says, "I don't like him. He's a con artist. I'm watching right now to see if he gets on the subway." He doesn't.

Wayne turns his attention back to me. "I used to be in trouble all the time until I got my head cleared. Put it this way," he chuckles, "I got a few tatoos from prison." Wayne says his conviction for knifing a guy in a Texas bar fight is a problem when he's looking for work. "That's why I go for jobs that are under the table."

Hope for some homeless

In my travels around Washington, I rarely see homeless women on the street. But there are places outdoors where they congregate. One such spot is a steep stretch of Belmont Street in the northwest quadrant of the city. Walking north on 14th Street and turning onto Belmont any evening at around

5:30, you will gradually become aware of a pilgrimage—first just a few shadows moving through the uneven light, but eventually a line of them making the daily trek up to the top of the hill. Most of the shadows are families, virtually all black, living in

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temporary housing for the homeless. There are very few men, either by themselves or attached to a family group. I fall in step with the shadow families, curious to see what could have this drawing power.

At the top of the hill is the one-time Pitts Hotel, a ramshackle building now operated as a shelter for homeless families. Parked out front under the archway is a gleaming yellow Rolls Royce, District license plate 347. A man standing next to it tells me that it belongs to the building's owner, Cornelius Pitts. [For more on Pitts, see "How the Homeless Bought a Rolls for Cornelius Pitts," Marianne Szegedy-Maszak, July/August 1987.] The people file by it without taking much notice. The building has room for only 50 or so families, but every day the District's Department of Human Services deposits four additional busloads of shelter residents—mostly families—at the foot of the hill so that they can get a cooked meal.

Watching the women come and go on Belmont, you can't avoid the feeling that they are fighting some powerful obstacles in addition to the lack of a permanent place to live. Many seem tired and cranky, snapping at their children and cuffing them for transgressions that are hard to see in this light. "I'm not here because I'm all drugged up," says a plump woman with four kids in tow, hurrying down the hill to make the last bus. "I work as a nurse's assistant at

D.C. General, and the truth is”—her voice lowers—“I had to leave where I was living because my friend was beating on me.”

Despite these dark overtones, the longer I watch and listen, the more I become aware of the many hopeful signs on Belmont Street. As a group, these women seem fairly straight. Straight enough for Tom Brokaw. They stand in stark contrast to street hustlers like K.C. or the artist. Although the meals and the pick-up buses run on such a tight schedule that most of the women are in too much of a hurry to talk to me, those who do tell me that they are working, leaving their kids with babysitters during the day. A gregarious teenage mother of an 11-month-old tells me her biggest complaint: these daily crosstown voyages for food have left her baby with a persistent cold. A soft-spoken woman with three kids tells me that she has just gotten herself on a list downtown for housing placement; she hopes that in a few more weeks the city will be able to locate a place for her. Most of the women are dressed neatly, and some of the kids are in adorable get-ups: Bows in hair and party shoes for the girls, superhero jackets and team ballcaps for the boys. Obviously, many of these people are using their meager means for the right things; given more sustenance, most of them would only do more of the same. Yes, for the Belmont families, it seems that housing *would* be a big part of the answer.

Heartbreak hotel

At Mt. Carmel House, a homeless women's shelter in Washington's Chinatown, you can meet the people the Belmont Street women are trying not to become. Ann, for instance—a sad-eyed 41-year-old black woman who has come to this women's shelter straight from a stint at the detox unit at D.C. General. Ann discovered she couldn't handle alcohol after many years of what she calls “trial and error.” Before booze derailed her life, she was a data clerk at the Veterans' Administration. But now she's lost her job, and her 18-year-old daughter lives with Ann's mother.

Or there's Marsha, a black woman in her twenties whose five years on cocaine and one year of living on the streets have somehow left her eyeballs and her teeth the same yellow color. This time last year, she was pawning anything she could get her hands on and working as a prostitute to raise drug money. A high-school dropout who was sexually abused by her father, Marsha has a daughter by a man she used to live with; she no longer has any contact with him and the authorities have taken the child away. Last November, Marsha got shot in the head by “some crackhead going around in the streets shooting for the

hell of it. I should have gone to the doctor right away,” she says. “But I wouldn't go to the doctor until I'd done all my cocaine first.”

Celeste Valente, who's been a social worker at Mt. Carmel House for eight years, says that the shelter's 40-odd resident population now includes more younger women than it used to. There's been a decrease in the mentally ill clientele (now 30 percent of the population, down from 80 percent a few years ago) and an increase in drug addicts (almost all those in the shelter who are not mentally ill are substance abusers). Valente guesses that “more than 80 percent of the women who come here have been raped or were the victims of incest.”

Another woman living at Mt. Carmel is Virginia, who's spent the last year in shelters—four in all. She's white, in her forties, with “done” hair, pink lipstick, and rouged cheeks. Her handbag says “Maui” on it. She could easily pass for a suburbanite down here doing volunteer work. In fact, she now volunteers a couple of nights a week at a nearby dinner program. “When I was working,” Virginia remembers, “I gave about \$1,500 of my United Way funds to the House of Ruth [another women's shelter in Washington]. And when I became homeless, that's the first place I went.” Virginia's father was career Army. She was born in Austria. She has a literature degree from Georgetown. “I had the life,” she says.

Here it seems I've come across a person worthy of Jonathan Kozol, the Salvation Army, and all the other “it could happen to anyone” theorists. But there's a difference they might not like. Virginia's an alcoholic. And she spent a long time in what she describes as a “sick” relationship with a sexually abusive man. After she was laid off from her job managing an engineering office, she stayed in her apartment, watched TV, and drank for eight months. “I drank copious amounts of beer,” she tells me, “three six-packs to a case a day.”

Karmic crossed wires

During the eighties, Lafayette Park, just across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, became a campground for homeless squatters. Indeed, some people have lived there for most of the decade, conducting what they call a “peace vigil.” The vigil is often on the itinerary of school classes visiting from out of town. The peace squatters have positioned themselves along the south edge of the park, where their placards about Hiroshima and nuclear freeze face the president's front door. Sixties-like, they give themselves new names like “Sunrise.” One vigiler I talk to, who's lived here for three years, used to work as an art restorer before joining the scene he de-

scribes as a "karmic crossfire." He doesn't want to live anywhere else. He supports himself by performing three nights a week in a "folk rock" band. The rest of the time he's out in the park, sometimes sleeping in his jury-rigged plastic shelter, sometimes cooking up a stew, or greeting pedestrians with lines like, "Peace, brother. Thanks for smiling"—whether the guy is smiling or not.

But some of the homeless in Lafayette Park are conducting more private vigils. Take the man on the park bench, hands on knees, open bottle of beer at his feet, just staring intensely at the White House. With the green of his poncho and the way his eyes are bulging, he looks like a frog on a lily pad. "I'm here to talk to George," he tells me. When he sees my fatigue pants, he goes to Red Alert, "Are you Marine Corps, FBI, Secret Service? Are you wearing a tape recorder?" I reassure him. He's so close to jumping out of his skin that I worry about what would happen if he were to notice the two men in uniform on the White House roof. "Yeah, George is a good man," the guy on the bench says, continuing to stare straight ahead. "I don't have nothing against him. He's a naval aviator and all that. When he went out to San Francisco after that earthquake, I talked to him." I asked the man if he flew out there to do that. "Nope," he says, never taking his eyes off his quarry, "talked to him by Telstar."

The Telstar man has plenty of company in Washington. Near my office for instance, there is the tall, helmeted man who keeps a guardpost at the corner of Q and Connecticut. When you get close to him, you can see that he's wearing a flannel West German army uniform. He's sort of handsome and he has that straight-from-the-diaphragm voice and ramrod posture so valued in drill instructors. His long reddish brown hair runs in a thin, tight braid down his back. Tucked in his helmet and pointing straight up are three toothbrushes, looking like periscopes.

When I ask him his name, he replies, "General. U.S. General. None of that Noriega thing for me." I notice that he's wearing a Top Gun squadron patch; he tells me where he got it: "The Surgeon General distributed it to the field artillery and ballistics command and the dominions of trade. Top Gun. Miramar California. I took the training out there about eight weeks ago. It was about the failure to inform people at the White House. And to maintain gun standards, computer standards, or surgical standards."

When I ask General what he's doing at this corner, he tells me, "This is the field marshal air combat warning post here for the businesses and the banks. This post is the way that the military has become involved about the levering of the topmost business developments." What's he watching out for? The an-

swer comes back instantly: "The Turks." As to how long he'll be in this assignment, General guesses about 40 years. "It should improve sometime in the nineties as far as the Motorola business is concerned. Eventually I will tend towards Walkman business. How the General maintains his districting or vector businesses is highly dependent upon Walkman skills."

General does not know he's homeless. When I ask him where he goes at night and in bad weather, he tells me that he confers with the president. He readily distinguishes himself from panhandlers, whom he dismisses as "people who have no ownership interests or no mortgage or paper interests." However, in a way, he does have his own version of "Spare some change?" As I'm leaving, he says to me, "You should bring me a banknote so that the interests you represent can be represented here."

The grate society

Under an overpass in Foggy Bottom just east of the Potomac and just north of the exclusive Watergate apartment complex are some steam grates that have long served as a thermal oasis for the homeless. The night I walk by is chilly, so the grates are pretty full. When I approach, several of the men there ask me for change. The hot air rushing out of this hole in the ground produces a loud hum you have to shout over. The steam itself provides a two-part sensation: first your face gets hit by a pleasant rush of warmth, then your nose gets hit by the stench of stale booze. Booze that's soaked through clothes, that's soaked through skin, that's soaked through lives.

There are nine or ten men at the grate this night. It's an interracial group. Some are huddled at the edges, some just racked out across it. The two men who asked me for money talk to me a lot, but some of the others never even look in my direction.

One man tells me he's been out here for two years, another says eight. The liveliest talker is a young black guy named Tony. In his mid-twenties, he's handsome and, in an alcoholic sort of way, articulate. Tony points to a woman coming our way. "Here comes my girlfriend. That's why I'm out here, because of her." A black woman weaves towards us. She's really drunk. She plops down sullenly at the edge of the grate, no use for anybody. "I met her in July when I came out the Navy," Tony says, unaccountably thrilled to see her.

Tony says he's not really homeless because he can stay with his aunt at 14th and Euclid. But it's real late and he's still out here drinking.

Tony says he was in the Navy for eight years. "Aviation. Backseater in F-14s. I was a second lieu-

tenant. I worked in the Indian Ocean on the *Nimitz*. Just got out in July. I'm going back. I'm in the reserves." There's a pause. "I was supposed to been back—I'm not going to lie to you. I'm AWOL. When I came out of high school and went to the Navy, I started out as an NCO—a noncommissioned officer. I was an NCO all the way. I went to school in Annapolis. When I go back, they may drop me down to like E-4. After I get out of the brig. I see Navy cars go by here every day. They're MPs, man, I know they lookin' for me.

"I want to re-up for maybe four more years. And then come back and get me a job at one of these airports as an aviator or air traffic controller. But it's gonna be a while for me now because last Saturday night, some girl stabbed me in my chest. And all I got is one lung now." As he's telling me this, Tony's unbuttoning his shirt. He shows me a Band-Aid just under his clavicle. It's not a very elaborate dressing, and I don't see any signs of actual injury. "I just got out of the hospital. And today two guys tried to jump on me." Tony shows me his punching hand. The knuckles on it are very swollen. "So it's gonna be a while—maybe another two months—until I go back."

Tony says the Navy sent him here on shore leave to bury his grandmother. "That's when I met Karen," he tells me, nodding toward the poor woman who just joined us. "Took a liking to her. And she turned my head around." He says Karen used to drive trucks in the Army, that she was in Vietnam. He says she's 38. She looks 58. Tony reaches between his knees into the red plastic milk crate he's sitting on and pulls out a white plastic flask. Gin, he tells me. A pint a day. Pointing at the others, he explains, "They drink that hard stuff."

Tony's story was fascinating, but it wasn't true. You can't start out in the service as an NCO, and "second lieutenant" is not a rank in the Navy.

The old man at my feet, whom Tony introduces as Jimmy, "the granddaddy of the grates," mumbles at me. In the slurred words of a lifelong drunk he tells me that he's worked as a tow-truck driver at an Amoco station for 18 years. But, he says, "See those," pointing at some of Georgetown's poshest apartments, "I don't make enough money to rent no apartment for \$250 a month. So I stay here." Jimmy's incredibly dirty. He never looks up at me. His attention is riveted on a little pack of picture cards he keeps riffling through. They're not baseball cards, although they're that size. Because they're predominantly pink, I assume they're pornographic. When Jimmy hands me one, I see they're not. They're pictures of food. The card in my hand is "Shrimp with Greens."

The closest thing to an American monument to

homelessness is the shelter run by the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV) in the former Federal City College building at the intersection of 2nd and D in downtown Washington. This is the building that the federal government agreed to lease to homeless advocate Mitch Snyder in 1984 after Snyder led a 51-day fast. Housing 1,400 homeless—1,265 men and 135 women—it's the largest shelter in the country, perhaps in the world. CCNV's literature calls it "a national model."

Since its inception, the CCNV shelter has received over \$13 million in combined federal and D.C. appropriations, and another \$500,000 in corporate donations. I wanted to get an idea of what that money is buying. To do that, I decided to take my idea of talking to the homeless one step further by going to the shelter and asking for help.

Shelter skelter

I showed up at CCNV late on a Saturday afternoon in January, dressed in my worst clothes and having not washed or shaved for days. In front of the building, Saturday night is already well underway. Thirty or so men are standing on the porch and along the sidewalk, talking loudly and taking regular pulls from the brown paper bags they all seem to have. One of the louder guys is a gapped-toothed man in a purple parka. He's shouting out at anybody walking by and going through a loud review of the lunch he had at some soup kitchen: "Uhhhh-uhhhh, barbecue chicken! I'm telling you, they got *down*. . . ."

When they're not drinking and cursing, the men spend a lot of time spitting. The sidewalk is phlegm-spotted. It's hard to find a dry spot on the steps to sit on. Almost as soon as I do, I attract the attention of a disastrously drunk man who until then had been working full-time trying to keep from impacting the sidewalk. He's lurching about furiously, like a man on the deck of a storm-blown ship. He finally makes it over next to me. Even sitting down, he's weaving. He mumbles something to me I can't make out. The second time, I catch it: "Do you have five cents?" When I say I don't, he repeats the question. Then he mumbles something else, "What's in the bag?" For authenticity, I have a paper bag with me. The drunk grabs my arm and tries to pull me towards him. "What's in the bag?" "Nothing for you," I tell him, moving away. This catches Purple Parka's attention. From his perch, he looks down at me and barks, "Talk to the man like that and I'll bust yo' ass on the sidewalk."

When a woman comes to the front of the building with some stuff to donate, Purple Parka comes down and swarms all over her, putting his arm around her

and trying to take her through a door where she doesn't want to go. "Be sociable," another man tells him. "You not on the staff." Parka snaps back, "I ain't yo' nigger." When a girl with a pretty hairstyle walks by, he shouts at her, "I want your hair!" She replies, "You gonna buy me some more?"

I move down to the wooden benches near one corner of the building. From here, I can see something that I couldn't before. Behind a van across the street, two guys are fighting. They must be pretty drunk; the pace doesn't let up a bit even when one guy slams the other's head into the van.

There's a constant stream of men coming in and out of the building. A beer can in a paper sack is practically part of the uniform. A few weeks before tonight, *Newsweek* ran a picture of the area where I'm sitting now. In the shot, the CCNV building and grounds looked spic-and-span. The three guys now on the bench to my right, sharing a joint, weren't there. And neither were the two women and one guy on the sidewalk right in front of me, passing a reefer between them. A young black guy dressed in the immaculate fashion of followers of Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan—black suit, bow tie, highly polished shoes—comes over to the trio. I expect him to tell them to put the joint out. But instead he takes off his Walkman and lends it to one of the women. She closes her eyes and sways to the music, continuing to take her tokes. A guy yells down to the group from the balcony, "You know she be horny when she smokes that shit!"

So far, out of the hundred or so people I've seen at CCNV, I'm the only white. That's why I notice when three white guys come out of the building. They're walking down the ramp when a tall man with one of those Eraserhead hairdos that's high and flat on top and shaved bald all around the sides suddenly comes up in their faces and edges them towards the wall. He says something to them and then they sheepishly continue on their way. Eraserhead has now joined Purple Parka out front as one of CCNV's unofficial greeters. He's got a pocket square tucked into his sports jacket, and is wearing a fancy-looking watch and four rings.

I go inside to find out what prospects there are for getting put up for the night. I'm told that the shelter is full until Tuesday, but that a van will eventually come to take me to one of the city's emergency shelters. I decide to wait in the lobby. Over the next couple of hours there I see a lot.

Residents continue to stream in and out of the building. (There is no sign-in or sign-out. The building is open most of the time. Between midnight and 4 a.m. the front door is opened for five minutes every half hour.) About a third of the people I see are carry-

ing Walkman sets. At least half are carrying beer or liquor. The stuff's usually in a paper bag, but several people, Eraserhead among them, are carrying beer in plastic cups. Later, a CCNV spokesman named Lawrence Lyles tells me that CCNV policy is that "we allow people to have beer and hard stuff, but not illegal drugs. As long as they maintain themselves. This is the residents' house. If you were home, you'd

What I see at Mitch Snyder's shelter supports what an experienced city social worker tells me later: "There are drugs in [there]. The place is out of control."

drink a little beer, wouldn't you?" But more than a few of the residents are not maintaining themselves. Drunks—weaving, falling-down drunks—are a common sight in the lobby. Some of them get up the steps only because they are carried up. Only once does a staff member ask anybody what he's carrying in. And when the resident laughs off the question, the staff member doesn't pursue it. What I see supports what an experienced city social worker tells me later: "There are drugs in CCNV. The place is out of control."

Conversation here tends to be animated, often hostile. "If all you needed to live was a teaspoon of water," one man snaps at another, "I wouldn't give it to you." Another man explains in a loud voice why he wants a stiletto. "Because if I miss you one way, I'll cut you coming back." "Look," says one laughing guy to his friend, pointing to a bearded, wasted white man whose eyes are set on infinite, "Charlie Manson is on parole."

A handsome man with longish gray-black hair comes down to get his mail. He's carrying two books, the first I've seen here. He's neatly dressed in a completely coordinated Army camouflage uniform. In this scene, he looks as solid as a rock. He's walk-

ing towards me as he finishes his letter. "They say they will give me money if I go to a psychiatrist," he tells me, his face lit up now by a scary smile. "But I will stay here instead!"

Even in this chaos, there are some touches fit for a public service announcement. An older black man asks a feeble-looking white man about how he's mending since he got hit by a car. He listens patiently as the man shows him his injuries and explains what medical appointments he has set up in the days ahead. A lady gives a man in a wheelchair a spin he clearly enjoys.

At about 8 p.m., one of the staff members very politely informs the few of us who've been waiting for transportation that there will be no van run tonight. He quickly goes on to tell us that there's room at one of the city's newest emergency shelters. And it's within walking distance, over at the Department of Employment Services just around the corner.

On my way there, I fall in with two other guys, Tom and James, headed for the same place. They are both refreshingly clean-cut and substance-free. We all shake hands and quickly hit it off. The DES shelter is actually in the employees' parking garage underneath the building. It's well heated, and the nice lady volunteer who checks us in issues us like-new Army cots and a tuna sandwich apiece. There are about 50 people already on cots when we arrive—the place is full. The three of us help each other set up our cots. Tom takes a shower and brings some cups and water back from the bathroom to make up some Kool-Aid he's brought with him. He shares it with James and me and gives us each a cookie, too. The shelter atmosphere is pretty much like that of a barracks; there's plenty of "smokin' and jokin'" but the drunks are mostly down for the count. The roving armed guard probably helps.

The three of us talk among ourselves. Tom's a white guy with a bushy moustache. He just got out of jail—during a routine traffic stop the day before, he got arrested on an old warrant for driving without a license. He made bail, but he's from Virginia, and without a license or car (it got impounded), and low on money, he has no way to get back. And he has no place to stay here. His court date is next month, and he figures he will get some jail because, as he puts it, "this isn't the first time."

James is black and works in the kitchen at the Marriott in Crystal City. He's wearing an Army jacket, from his days as a parachute rigger in the Airborne. This is his first day on the streets. He had been living with his girlfriend, but they had a fight. James works on the side as a party DJ. At one of these parties, a girl gave him her phone number to give to a friend of his, but James's girlfriend discovered it in

his jacket and went nuts, throwing James out of the house and all of his stuff down the stairs. I ask James if there isn't a family member he can stay with until this boils over. "I tried staying with my mother," he answers, "but she had too many restrictions—she won't give me a key, she won't let me in past 11 at night, and there's no TV downstairs. I'm a party animal."

Lying back on my cot, I spend a long time staring at the garage ceiling, trying to figure out James's logic. Why would somebody clean and employed choose this—and tomorrow night maybe something much worse—over coming in at 11 to a house with only one TV? Would "people you know" do that?

Conspicuous dysfunction

The Depression taught most Americans that there are plenty of ways to become poor that aren't one's fault. By now this is a lesson well learned. Perhaps too well-learned. Americans tend to believe that homelessness is exclusively a social problem, a system failure. This idea goes hand-in-hand with the traditional liberal notion that the solution to the problem is simply the provision of housing and jobs. While there is something to this, it's not *the* solution—as I found out for myself there's too much else going on with the homeless.

Allowing for the possibility of some overlap, here's how I would roughly classify the homeless people I met: At least three-quarters were (current or recovering) substance abusers, three-quarters were unattached men, and about a third seemed to some degree mentally ill. But there is another important factor I observed in about half of the homeless people I talked to—one that takes a little explaining. I call it the "X-factor" because I'm not having much luck figuring it out.*

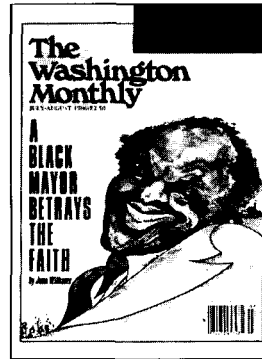
Ronald Reagan once came in for a lot of well-deserved criticism for saying that anybody who is homeless is so only because he chooses to be. That's a ridiculous notion. Sleeping in the park in the winter, being chronically sick and disoriented—nobody chooses *that*. But just the same, people like the New York artist, Wayne from Texas, and James are carrying something around in their heads that's separating them from opportunities and propelling them towards ruin. The artist has his incoherent put-down of the

*It's interesting to compare my description of the homeless population based on my own experience with what you can find in print elsewhere. Most respected policy studies and surveys are now saying that about a third of the homeless are mentally ill, a third are substance abusers, and a third are "other." That is, they find less substance abuse than I did, about the same amount of mental illness, and tend to leave the rest of the population an undifferentiated mystery while I think some of that remainder is in the grip of X-factor thinking.

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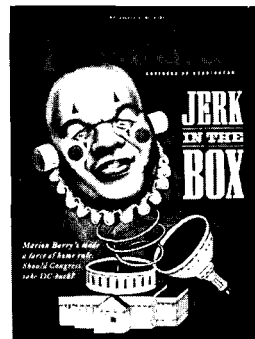
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classifieds, Wayne has his equally confused contempt for the work at his father's business, and James has his odd standards about acceptable living conditions. Here are some other examples of the X-factor I came across in talking to the homeless:

➤One of the beggars I frequently see is a 24-year-old black guy who goes by the street name "Quickness." He can usually be found around Dupont Circle either zoned out or trying to be. He tells me that he originally came to Washington to sell PCP, but he got caught and spent three years in jail. He's been on the streets for the seven months since he got out. When I ask him what he wants out of life, he tells me "money." His parents are back in Florida, and they know he's up here, but he won't go back to them and he won't even tell them he's homeless. Quickness prefers staying in the streets to that.

➤A fiftyish man whom I often see late at night begging near my office, an articulate man who appears sane and drug- and alcohol-free, tells me that he served in submarines in the Navy and then worked at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. He says that he lost his job at the NRC because of differences with his bosses. Later, he landed a job stuffing envelopes for a political organization, but he quit because he didn't agree with the material he was mailing and went back to the streets, where he makes about \$2 an hour (it turns out that's the typical figure for a Washington beggar).

➤A young woman I met who splits her begging between Dupont Circle and Georgetown tells me that she recently failed the Civil Service exam. I ask her if she has tried to get into a job training program. "I feel that I don't have the time for that. I just want something right now. Something I can just walk into and get right then and there."

All of these people fail the Bill Shade test. Bill is the only single male homeless person I met who I am convinced is actively trying every day to become homeless. Bill was working in construction when he got burned out of his apartment. Most of what Bill collects from begging he turns over to the woman who takes care of his daughter. Once I was talking to Bill when I noticed the Help Wanted sign behind his head. He read my mind: "I already went in there, but they want a girl to work behind the counter." So instead he sweeps the sidewalk in front of the shop. He works odd jobs whenever he can. He cleans up around the bank where he sleeps. He puts quarters in expired parking meters to save people he doesn't know from paying the \$15 ticket. He's hoping to get the funds together to move back to Baltimore with his daughter. If reading this story makes you feel like helping a single homeless person directly, call me or write me about Bill Shade.

I'm finding it hard to articulate the troublesome mental baggage that hampers the New York artist or Quickness say, but not Bill Shade. It's not, contra the Reagan camp, mere laziness—these people work much harder every day than most just to keep from freezing to death. It's something more like a twisted sense of pride—a sense of personal specialness tweaked so ridiculously high that anything—even sleeping outside and begging for food—is viewed as better than forms of compromise that you and I would readily accept, like fitting in at work, getting a

The Depression taught most Americans that there are plenty of ways to become poor that aren't a person's fault. By now this is a lesson well-learned. Perhaps too well-learned.

job out of the newspaper, or coming home at 11. For all I can tell, some of this odd thinking is the extreme rationalization so common in alcoholics and substance abusers, and some is a sign of a treatable organic thought disorder, like mild schizophrenia. But I'm also convinced that some of the homeless I met who evinced the X-factor were neither mentally ill nor addicts. What do we make of them?

If you've raised children in the seventies and eighties, then you know how the emphasis on rampant instant gratification and conspicuous consumption of such television fare as "Dallas," "Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous," and "L.A. Law" can distort your children's desires and expectations. Sometimes being "tough"—emphasizing setting goals and working hard to achieve them, etc.—brings kids around on this. But many parents have experienced the bewilderment that comes when that doesn't work. How do we reach Johnny? How do we bring him down to earth so that he can make a good life for himself? Parents can use up a decade or more wrestling with

such questions, often without arriving at an answer. Well, maybe the bewilderment I feel in the face of the foregoing examples is similar, with a similar cause. But about two or three times more extreme. It seems that some of the homeless have just soaked up way too much of our culture's obsession with "too much, too soon."

There can be all the low-cost housing in the world, and an untreated paranoid won't set foot in it, and an untreated schizophrenic might burn it down. (Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, a psychiatrist who is an expert on the homeless mentally ill, told me that he has encountered both outcomes.) And a drug addict will spend the rent money on crack. So homelessness is in large measure a mental health problem and a drug problem that defies the conventional liberal answers of housing and jobs. But notice this about the X-factor homeless: They aren't likely to be people for whom jobs and housing alone would be the answer, either. Once a man decides to eat only caviar, he will turn down bread as fervently as an ordinary man turns down poison. If low cost housing were made available to the New York artist (and for all I know, it already has been), but there was no \$10,000 loan, how would he pay the rent? If he were offered a nonglamorous job to make the rent, would he take it?

There certainly seem to be homeless people who are nearly like you and me, save for some intervening bad breaks. Many of the women on Belmont Street appear to fit that bill, as does Bill Shade. So for people like these, fixing the bad break—making jobs and housing available—is what's called for. But media depictions to the contrary, there are more homeless people—the untreated mentally ill, the addicted, and those with the X-factor—who are not like us. As a result, if they are ever to realize secure and steady lives, they will require different kinds of help.

Traditional liberals don't want to admit such differences—and that's wrong—because they want us to help all the homeless—that's right. Neoconservatives admit the differences (right) because they don't want to help them all (wrong). The correct position is to admit the differences among the homeless while strenuously working to help them all. If conservatives need to care more, liberals need to *see* more. It's a cruel joke to pretend that an untreated mentally ill person is better off in the streets than he would be if he were compelled somehow to take medication, or to pretend that Quickness would hold down a job with the same tenacity as Bill Shade. To make real progress in the fight against homelessness, we must first be honest about who the homeless are. □

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The Worst City Government

If great leaders—Gandhi, Martin Luther King—are judged by the impact of their example, then Marion Barry is headed for the history books. The D.C. government is being investigated for drug use at all levels. According to *The Washington Times*, law enforcement officials have “confirmed that dozens of city workers in virtually every one of the city’s 14 major agencies are buying and selling drugs.”

On January 25th an ambulance crew was called to aid an overdose victim at the (aptly named) Central Intake Facility of the District’s Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services Administration. The victim, who lay prone on the lobby floor, was not one of the addicts who come to the facility for treatment and counseling. He was a supervisor and counselor. The paramedics administered Narcon, which is used to reverse drug-induced shock. After he regained consciousness, the man refused a trip to the hospital.

An ADASA spokeswoman confirmed that a city employee had overdosed on Thursday the 25th. By Friday, however, the overdose had become a “medical crisis,” with no mention of drug use. Sources within the department told the *Times* that they have seen “a few of the people in charge here snorting cocaine at their desks.” The overdose occurred just two days after the announcement of a major in-house investigation of drug use at the Department of Human Services, ADASA’s parent agency.

It may be that, since his arrest, Mayor Barry is trying to present a new and improved example for his workers. When he decided to seek help, he steered clear of the Central Intake Facility—in fact, of any city service. He went to Florida.

—Bill Yelverton

Less than two years after lackluster fans convinced a surly owner to pack up the Cardinals and head for Phoenix, St. Louis is ardently courting the National Football League for a new team. This time, it’s sweetened its proposal with the promise of a domed stadium. The city is planning to pay 25 percent of the \$225 million tab for the building project, with the state and county picking up the rest.

Unfortunately, St. Louis doesn’t stand much of a chance of attracting a new team. During the Superbowl, a group of would-be owners lobbied NFL officials in New Orleans. The best guarantee they could get? A vague commitment that the league would expand by a couple of teams sometime in the mid-nineties. Good news—except that Baltimore, Memphis, Sacramento, Oakland, Charlotte, Birmingham, Jacksonville, San Antonio, and other cities are lined up and waiting for a franchise.

It’s a little unclear what will happen if the dome isn’t enough to overcome St. Louis’s poor track record and win it the deal. The baseball Cardinals are planning to stay in Busch Stadium. And there

are only so many political conventions and Pan Am games to go around. Even if the city gets a team, it would need the stadium only eight or nine days a year.

If St. Louis were desperate to find ways to spend money, pumping millions into building a shiny vacant warehouse in the shadow of the Arch would make a lot of sense. But the city has more pressing problems. St. Louis boasts dismal public schools and a 10,000-member waiting list for public housing. The price of the dome is just less than the city’s entire education budget—and it’s more than ten times the combined federal and city investment in St. Louis housing.

St. Louis could learn something from St. Petersburg. This month, the Florida city opens its newly built baseball dome to . . . no one. The city has spent \$110 million to construct a vacant building. City officials admit they can schedule only a few trade shows and tractor pulls. That means higher taxes, a larger debt, and a drain on city services.

—Daniel Mirvish

The *Monthly* depends on its readers to keep track of the breakdown of big city government. Please send your nominations to:

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