

Rescue from the edge

8 Detroit women, once homeless, tell others how they got back on track

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August 7, 2006

Marti Waters had a successful career as a welfare caseworker for 18 years with the State of Michigan.

But she became so depressed after her mother's death in 1988 that she turned to drugs.

"Drugs came into my life at 38 years old, not 18," she says. "I'm an old fool."

She lost her home and her car and got so thin and sickly looking that her family took over raising her young son. She retreated from her seven siblings after years of helping run the family. She lived in the backseat of her car, in cheap weekly rental rooms and eventually with an aunt.

Then, in 1993, when she became pregnant with her second child, she entered a drug rehabilitation program. She's been clean and in school since, reunited with her son and faithfully attending all her children's school sporting events.

In May, Waters earned her master's degree in social work from Wayne State University. She now works with her mentor, Olivia Washington, PhD, on outreach programs in metro Detroit.

One of them is a new project that features the life stories of formerly homeless women. Washington and her academic partner, David Moxley, PhD, a WSU social worker, have put together a traveling exhibit to educate people about the little-discussed issues that accompany women and homelessness.

With the help of Flint graphic artist Mara Jervera Fulmer, they also published a booklet in late July about the project and produced a companion Web site, www.tellingmystorydetroit.org. The exhibit -- "Telling My Story at the Edge of Recovery, 8 African-American Women's Journey from Homelessness in Detroit" -- features the life stories, poems, quilt contributions, songs and pictures of the women.



Dona Tatum, left, whose life is chronicled in the exhibit on homelessness, talks with Marti Waters. Waters, who once lived in her car while battling drug addiction, now helps others in distress. (Photos by WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press)

What you can do

"Telling My Story at the Edge of Recovery" is on display through Aug. 17 at the C.S. Mott Community College Visual Arts & Design Center Auxiliary Gallery in Flint. For gallery hours and information, call 810-762-0443.

For more information on the Detroit project for homeless women, contacts for donations, or to obtain a booklet (\$12.50) describing the project, call 313-577-2297 or go to:

It's on display now at C.S. Mott Community College in Flint.

www.tellingmystorydetroit.org.

Waters travels with Washington to shelters and other places to motivate and help homeless women. At 56, Waters hopes to start her own company to provide counseling and community liaison help about homelessness issues.

Washington said she has no trouble finding homeless women.

She sees them at Detroit domestic violence shelters, hospitals, soup kitchens, warming sites and neighborhood centers. They are almost never there by choice, she says. Many are single women at mid-life. They're often invisible, living on the fringe, with relatives, in cars and other less visible sites. The older and more financially insecure they are, the more they are vulnerable to being homeless. Often they are black.

African Americans are 12.7% of the U.S. population but make up 40% to 50% of homeless people, says Washington, a Wayne State University School of Nursing researcher and director of the Institute of Gerontology's Healthy Black Elders Center at the school.

She and Moxley are looking for partners to help build a network of services, called the Detroit Sophia Community, to guide homeless women to self-sufficiency and provide a model for other cities.

They need to find money to move the exhibit and to pay for a modest reception they like to accompany it, as they did for the project's June debut at Detroit's Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation in downtown Detroit. The work up to now has been funded with \$175,000 in grants from WSU, the federal Institute on Aging and the United Black Fund.

"Homeless women are invisible and the problem is pretty unexpected," Washington says. "Many live on the edge. Any change in their social environment causes them to tip."

Washington and Moxley have documented eight paths to homelessness among black Detroit women: accidents and fires; health problems; marital disruption; job loss, debt and credit problems; substance abuse; criminal activities; domestic violence, and mental illness.

Homelessness for Dona Tatum, whose life is chronicled in the exhibit, began with "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

Once a traveling member of the stage show "Bubbling Brown Sugar," Tatum took Winfrey to heart when the talk show host encouraged women to leave abusive relationships.

Tatum packed a small bag and left a man abusing her.

She lived in her car, even dared to park it in a police parking lot, where no one bothered her, she says. Each day, she washed up at a different gas station or fast food restaurant.

Last year, after help from the WSU program, she was inducted into the International Society of Poets, which awarded her two honors for her work.

She has her own apartment in Detroit, is finishing a screenplay and hopes to produce an audio book of her poems.

"I haven't made it, but I'm on my way," she says.

Homeless women often do not have families to rely on. Either they are too embarrassed to share their plight or lifestyle choices with them or the families "are as marginal or more dysfunctional than they are," Washington says.

"When tragedy hits, there isn't much of a cushion."

Carolyn Felder, 57, hid her lifestyle from her family. "I thought my only skills were drugs."

She became homeless after amassing five felony convictions for the sale of drugs and running a house of prostitution.

Threatened by a judge with life in prison, she changed her ways and now is program director for Catera Home, an outpatient Detroit program that provides services for substance abusers and others needing transitional help.

"I was homeless but never helpless," she says.

A visitor at the Detroit exhibit told Felder, "I'm proud of you."

Felder, without hesitation, replied: "I'm proud of me, too."

One of the biggest stereotypes about homelessness is that people want to live that way, Washington says. Most "do not wish to be homeless," she insists. "Homelessness is very hard on people."

Many of the women have four or five chronic diseases, often beginning before their homelessness, then worsened by it, she says.

Some of the most common health issues are high blood pressure, arthritis and respiratory and heart problems. But the stress of homelessness can cause or add to emotional and mental issues, she says. "Stress is of such a magnitude that it overwhelms the person's ability to cope and function."

Through their new network, Washington and Moxley hope to help women learn financial management skills to erase debt, return to school or find jobs, and find permanent homes, as the women in the exhibit have done or are arranging.

Moxley estimates they need another \$175,000 to begin the work of the Sophia Community. "It's not costly," he says. "It's about forming relationships."

"We call it the big tent phenomena. We want to involve as many collaborators as possible."

He's determined to make the community idea work.

"The tragedy is, this is my 26th year working on homelessness," Moxley says. "We haven't made substantial progress. I'm ashamed of that."

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