



portraits of

Photography, autobiography tell the stories of homeless older women

by Cheryl Deep photography by Mara Jevera Fulmer

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The conceptual portraits of eight African-American women enrolled in a Wayne State pilot program are helping older women reverse the tragedy of homelessness.

"Telling My Story at the Edge of Recovery" combines photography and autobiography to profile homeless older women, an often-forgotten population both in the city and nationwide. The exhibit is part of a collaborative program by the Institute of Gerontology, the School of Social Work and the College of Nursing.

Eight formerly homeless African-American

women comprise the research steering committee. During the exhibit's premier this summer, eight photographic panels represented the lives of these women, who hosted their portrait and answered questions about their homeless experience.

The exhibit is housed this fall on campus in the College of Nursing's Cohn Lounge.

"This exhibit is an educational forum," says Mara Fulmer, exhibit curator and artist. "It brings people together to explore the realities of homelessness, to become more mindful of its



homelessness

true causes and consequences."

The exhibit included artifacts from one of the participant's life: Rachel saved her license plate, a mailbox door, a burner pan from the stove – reminders of the stable life and transportation that she lost. A large quilt hung at the back of the room, and each woman had sewn a panel to comfort and inspire.

"They should include a packet of tissues with each invite," said Joni Golden of *Women's Forum Magazine*. "We couldn't hold back the tears."

About half of all homeless people in the United States are African American and about half the country's poor are African American women aged 65 to 74, says Olivia Washington, an associate professor of the Institute of Gerontology and College of Nursing.

In Detroit alone, 10,000 people each night have no home, and about half of the city's homeless are African American and many of those are women over 50.

"This is a vulnerable population poised close to the tipping point," says Washington, who codirects the homeless project with David Moxley, a professor in the School of Social Work. "They are more likely to have chronic health problems that can lead to job loss and then home loss. Once they are homeless, illness accelerates. Women age quickly after facing a Detroit winter without adequate food or shelter."

The program provides innovative therapy intervention to participants. Group support meetings try to lessen the psychological trauma of homelessness while building self-esteem, trust

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"Telling My Story at the Edge of Recovery" is now on display in the College of Nursing's Cohn Lounge on Wayne State's main campus.

and confidence. Women are encouraged to own their experience, primarily by sharing their story, and take responsibility for the changes needed to move out of homelessness.

The panels, presentations and pieces of "Telling My Story" are portable and available for set-up at distant venues.

"We'd like to sensitize urban centers around the country to this pending epidemic," says

Washington, who adds that the situation will worsen over the next decade and that preventing homelessness is far superior to treating it.

"Once an older woman is homeless, it can take years of support and intervention to make her feel safe again. Recovery is a process. Even moving into a home will not provide an instant cure. Losing your place, your identity, your status and your friends causes deep trauma that leaves lasting scars."

Washington and Moxley want their project to build toward creating an intentional community in Detroit to give homeless women support and opportunity.

"Our initiative would embrace women newly emerging from homelessness," Moxley says. "They are wobbly and can easily slip back, [but this initiative] would pull them toward long-term stability." ♦



Visitors to the Blue Cross Blue Shield building in Detroit study portraits at the exhibit's premiere on June 13, 2006, during a multi-media interactive reception.

Cheryl Deep directs media relations for Wayne State's Institute of Gerontology.