

# HIDDEN HOMELESS

trying to survive in the choice city



▶ photos by garrett mynatt  
 evan vent, a sophomore natural resources major, with his 1974 volkswagon beetle.

If Evan Vent took a seat next to you in class, you would never guess that he had been homeless before. The sophomore natural resources major has an Apple laptop, presentable clothes, a head of brown curls tucked behind a bandanna and a relaxed demeanor.

Vent, who is 21, has lived homeless during brief periods since 2008, but he does not classify himself as homeless because he is able to find work and can afford rent during the school year. He is currently living in a house on Stuart Street.

“I would never even consider myself homeless. I’m not even in the same demographic. [I’ve been homeless] just a couple of times, and not for extended stays. Well, I guess my friends’ couch for four or five months,” Vent says, changing his mind.

Though Vent’s current living situation does not reflect the turmoil of a homeless life, his past encounters shed light on a different definition of the homeless in the Fort Collins community. According to Zachary Penland, program supervisor of the Murphy Center for Hope in Fort Collins, an estimated 3,000 people in Larimer County are considered homeless, but that does not necessarily mean that many people are sleeping in the streets every night.

The definition of homelessness is simply more far-reaching than most people suspect, and encompasses a wide variety of situations.

“They’re a part of what we call the ‘hidden homeless,’” said Sister Mary Alice Murphy, a consultant on homeless services

for United Way for Larimer County. “There are a lot of people doubled up with a friend and not paying their share of the rent because they don’t have enough money.”

Murphy, for whom the Murphy Center for Hope is named, has formed numerous initiatives to combat homelessness since her arrival in Fort Collins in 1983, including the area’s first soup kitchen and homeless shelter. She works part-time at the Murphy Center, a new institution where clients in need can find and receive help from the 13 non-profit organizations that offer services on its premises. With the help of community members, her latest project is converting the Winter Day Shelter, which is housed at Community of Christ Church in Fort Collins, into a year-round day shelter.

“No matter where you go, this problem is there, and maybe [it’s] hidden in some communities,” Murphy said. “It’s hidden in this one.”

Homeward 2020, a local organization with the goal of ending homelessness in the Fort Collins area, defines homelessness as “the condition and social category of people who lack housing, because they cannot afford, pay for, or are otherwise unable to maintain regular, safe and adequate housing.”

The executive director of the organization, Bryce Hach, 35, further divides the homeless into two categories, the episodic and chronic homeless. He describes the episodic homeless, who account for 80 percent of national homeless cases, as the people living on the brink of homelessness who have to resort to it sporadically. The chronic homeless, on the other hand, account for only 20 percent of homeless cases but are the most visible demographic.

“The [hidden] homeless don’t put a sign on themselves saying ‘I’m homeless,’” Murphy said. “The stigma of being homeless is something they don’t want anyone to know and they’ll do anything to cover up.”

A study conducted in 2008 by Jamie Van Leeuwen, who has a doctorate in Public Policy and is the Project Director of Denver’s Road Home, illustrates the ambiguity surrounding the homeless. The data indicated that 556 men, women and children in Larimer County were homeless. However, Penland said in an e-mail that the number is not an accurate reflection.

According to Penland, last year Poudre School District identified over 750 homeless children in attendance. Considering statistics that almost half of those who are homeless are children, Penland places the homeless population estimate in Larimer County closer to 3,000 people, with the vast majority in Fort Collins.

“Fort Collins looks so great when people just go through it, and this is the soft underbelly,” Murphy said.

The reason that few people recognize this “soft underbelly,” however, is that a vast majority of the homeless are episodic and nearly impossible to identify. The Colorado Statewide Homeless Count, a point-in-time survey taken in January 2007, said that of the 15,394 homeless respondents, only 6.9 percent spent the night in the street. The survey lists eight stipulations that characterize a person as homeless, which range from sleeping in cars and public places to staying temporarily with family or friends while

looking for a place to call home.

Vent is certainly familiar with the episodic scenarios, as he grew up in poverty outside of Grand Junction, Colo., and has lived at the cusp of homelessness for part of his life. Throughout high school Vent was the main caretaker of his two younger brothers, and he worked after school and at night in order to support them. In college, Vent has lived in the residence halls, and most recently in a house with financial help from his father, but during the summers Vent receives no financial assistance and has resorted to a number of unusual accommodations for short periods of time: living in an RV on a friend’s driveway, a friend’s couch and even his 1974 Volkswagen Beetle.

For most of the summer months, however, he lives without shelter by choice. A self-described “free spirit,” Vent abandons his belongings with friends and has hitchhiked throughout Colorado, to Wyoming and New Mexico with other homeless people, partly to save money, and partly for the sense of adventure and community he finds. He has slept in national forests and even the streets of various towns.

“You meet some really cool people,” Vent said. “You really get to know people at the most basic levels, because they have nothing left to lose. [The homeless] have nothing to begin with.”

This is clearly a controversial element in Vent’s life, as he has lived homeless out of necessity before, yet chooses this lifestyle in the summer. Vent realizes that people may not understand him deliberately living this way.

“I’m not out there saying [to the homeless] ‘I came out here to live like you guys for a little bit,’” Vent said. “That would be condescending to them.”

He instead attributes his decision to live with nothing not only as an unusual way to see different sites but as a desire to understand the realities of the world.

“I think we all ask ourselves [the] question [of], ‘what’s that guy doing out on the curb? What’s he thinking? Does he have family?’” Vent said. “I mean, you put yourself out there and the cold times roll around and [you] can’t imagine doing this for four or five more months.”

It was during these situations that Vent received a dose of the reality that many homeless face every day, including the negative stereotypes placed upon them.

“You have to deal with that kind of mentality – just the typical stereotypes that people put on the homeless,” Vent said. “If you’re dirty and grungy looking, you’re [nothing].”

Murphy acknowledges that the homeless are often afraid to speak of their hardships due to the criticism they receive.

“[Homelessness] has a very negative stigma,” Murphy said. “It means you haven’t done your fair share, you haven’t worked hard enough. It’s judgmental.”

And though Vent has received kindness from strangers when he was in need, he has also witnessed the feelings of indifference that some people have toward the homeless. He recalls a bitter cold night when the temperature dipped below freezing. His friend’s van that they were staying in was stolen and they had to sleep outside in Fort Collins.

“The next morning, I went to shake him and he was frozen

# faces

solid,” Vent said. “[He] had frostbite over 80 percent of his body. I was terrified. You’re looking at people walking in the street and you’re like, ‘Hey my buddy is hurting’ and people just shrug you off. Finally, someone stopped [and] took him to the hospital.”

Vent’s friend was released from the hospital a few days later, and left Colorado to live in New Mexico. Vent has not heard from him since.

“He just kind of skipped out, which is what [homeless] people do,” Vent said.

Aside from the many hardships he has faced, Vent sees his encounters without shelter as a benefit to himself and others. He hopes to someday open a small

outdoor supplies shop that would not only cater to his adventurous nature, but would offer environmental classes and opportunities to underprivileged children, something he wishes had been available during his own difficult childhood.

Ultimately, he finds satisfaction in the fact that his time spent with homeless people has brought joy to all parties involved.

“I think offering [to be] a friend for a day can change someone’s life forever,” Vent said. “You listen to someone’s story and try to understand. It changed my perspective on a few things.”

Raquel Miller, a 23-year-old Kindercare teacher and nanny, is also not homeless, but lived for two months in her 2000 Chevy Impala when her car began experiencing problems. Though she had family in Livermore, Colo., which is an hour north of Fort Collins, Miller’s car could not make the drive, and she needed to stay in Fort Collins to work and save money to make repairs to her car. Inspired by the plea for social justice in the book “The Irresistible Revolution” by Shane Claiborne, Miller decided to live in her car, a choice that rendered her homeless during February and March of 2009.

“I wouldn’t even classify myself necessarily as homeless because I had a home, it just wasn’t very convenient to get to,” Miller said. “I did have some financial situations, but it wasn’t like I was at the end of my rope and didn’t have a home to go to because my parents had their home.”

Like Vent, Miller lived without a home for financial reasons and by choice, in order to gain an understanding of the daily obstacles faced by the homeless population. She moved to Columbus, Ohio in March, where she will utilize her awareness of the homeless to serve meals and provide aid to them at the Better Way ministry, a homeless shelter and soup kitchen.

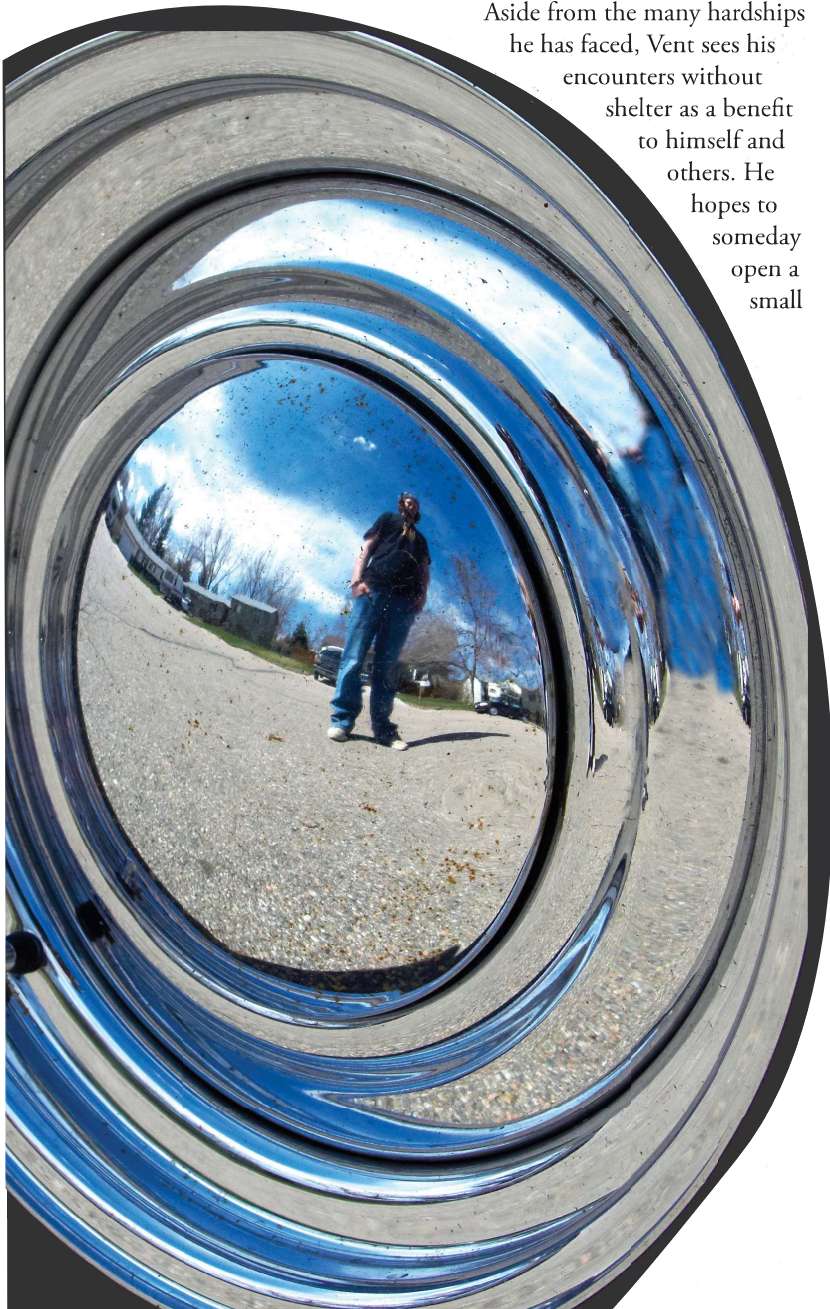
“I knew that [living in my car] was an introduction of what it’s like to be homeless,” Miller said. “And while I knew I was blessed with a safety net I also knew that this is just the beginning of helping to get people out of poverty and helping the homeless. This wasn’t just me trying to pretend [to be homeless] or have this self-righteous manner.”

Throughout her edifying encounter, Miller slept in the driver’s side of her car and worked during the day. She would clean herself and put on makeup in the morning at convenience stores and rotate parking at apartment complexes at night.

Aside from her mother picking her up to shower on weekends, because “it was a pretty dirty situation,” Miller never utilized any type of assistance.

“It’s really difficult to know what to do with yourself when you don’t have a home to go to,” Miller said. “I couldn’t find anything on public showers, the public bathrooms are closed, parks are closed. It really blew me away because I’ve seen plenty of homeless people in Old Town and I don’t know what they do [to stay clean].”

Beside basic hygiene and shelter, Miller missed a number



# "IT'S REALLY DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH YOURSELF WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE A HOME TO GO TO."

—RAQUEL MILLER

of conveniences that are often unappreciated in the setting of a permanent residence.

"When you [have] to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, what do you do? It's hard to find a place that's open 24 hours," Miller said. "Sometimes I would park by the Alley Cat just so I could go to the bathroom at night. Or have light to read by. I never really thought about having no light to read – I'm such a huge reader and that had a really big impact on me."

Safety was another concern, as Miller's car windows were not tinted so anyone could see inside.

"It was hard at night [because] I was always worried a police officer would come up and be like, 'you gotta leave,'" Miller said. "One time someone tapped on my door and asked if I was ok."

And of course, the ever-changing Colorado weather was a constant issue as well. "When it snowed it was cold," Miller said. "But when you had to [get out of the car to] go to the bathroom, you froze, just froze entirely."

At the end of her two-month stint without a home, she had saved enough money to mend her car and afford rent. She credits the experience with opening her eyes to the challenges facing the homeless in Fort Collins.

"It's something I would recommend to other people – it gives you a fresh perspective and appreciation for life and what really matters," Miller said. "It was very much something I wanted to experience and I wanted to have a new realization for it [because] it's such an issue. We have privileges but let us remember the people who don't."

Unfortunately, a rising number of local individuals and families are finding themselves without permanent shelter.

"The problem is getting worse," said Daniel Covey, the case manager at the Murphy Center for Hope. "I've seen many families that are really on the trajectory of being homeless very soon."

Covey assists homeless clients at the Murphy Center, and estimates that the average age of his clients is 30. He says about half of the clients he sees are families.

"There's a time when people can come in and we can give them a lot of resources to help them avoid homelessness," Covey said. "But there's sort of a point of no return where people come in and it can be very difficult to actually prevent them from being homeless, and I'm seeing more of those families than I would like."

The Web site for the National Coalition for the Homeless cites a lack of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous rise in poverty as key factors behind the increase, but Covey adds that unaffordable health care, the economy and a more competitive job market have all taken their toll.

"For people with mediocre or poor work histories, they really don't get much of a chance," Covey said. "I was really surprised when I started working here how many of the homeless people have great and truly employable skills, but they may not have tools for their trade or they have employment gaps or a felony, so there are all these obstacles to them gaining employment."

Another obstacle often overlooked is human nature itself. Both Miller and Vent attribute much of their homeless experiences to their own faults, especially pride.

"I'm the type of person that I hate handouts," Miller said. "I want to earn what I have, so I didn't want to [sleep] at someone's house all the time, I didn't want to ask for a shower or whatever. Part of it is pride and part of it is just that I really believe firmly that you earn what you work for and I didn't have money to give them, so you find ways to make it work."

For Vent, pride has been a long-standing issue. Even when he was supporting his younger brothers and in financial need, he was always reluctant to accept the charity of others.

"I had to realize that people helping other people is more of a gift to give than it is to receive," Vent said. "A lot of homeless people do have pride, which is ironic, because when you're begging people for money there is no pride there at all. Pride was my vice. Not asking people for help, shutting others out when they did want to help. And humbling myself in that way and just accepting from people when I am in need has been kind of a major obstacle in my life that I've overcome."

Whatever the reason, the upsurge in difficult conditions has uprooted many people from the warmth of their homes and forced them to resort to unpleasant alternatives.

"The homeless and the problems that surround them are very multifaceted, with a broad spectrum, from the kid who's couch surfing at his friends' houses to the homeless man standing on the street corner saying, 'will work for food,'" Murphy said. "[And] if every single person took one aspect of helping the homeless, we could solve it." ■ **ca**