

**THE MULTI DIMENSIONAL VULNERABILITIES AND RISK FACTORS FOR  
WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS**

By

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## DEDICATION PAGE

This project is dedicated to the women of Community First Village and all of the women still living homeless in Austin.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Description</u>
ADA	American Disabilities Act
ARCH	Austin Resource Center for the Homeless
CFV	Community First Village
CPS	Child Protective Services
ECHO	Ending Community Homelessness Coalition
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
GED	General Education Development
HUD	(U.S. Department of) Housing and Urban Development
MLF	Mobile Loaves and Fishes
NIMBY	Not in My Back Yard
PIT	Point in Time (Count)
RHDA	Rental Housing Development Assistance
RV	Recreational Vehicle
TOOF	The Other Ones Foundation
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
VA	Veterans Administration

## LIST OF DEFINITIONS

**Chronic Homelessness:** Having been without a home or shelter for at least a year while struggling with a disabling condition such as mental illness, physical disability or substance use disorder.

**Education/ Work Training:** High school, GED, College degrees or training that equips one with the skill, ability and knowledge to perform and maintain a job in a specific field.

**Family Dysfunction:** Dynamics or activity within a family that is disruptive, cause instability, insecurity, or have a long-term negative impact.

**Flop House:** A cheap or seedy lodging house or hotel where many people sleep in large rooms.

**Health Issues:** Chronic medical conditions that negatively affect health, quality of life and require medication

**Homelessness:** Having no home or place of residence. Living unsheltered.

**Heroin Bulb Milk:** Raw Opium. The plants contain egg-shaped seed pods which are sliced open to reveal a milky sap, which is raw opium. As the opium oozes from the pod, it forms a dark, thick gum which is clumped into balls or cakes, and wrapped in leaves or plastic for opium trade market. Most heroin for market has been processed or cut with other agents.

**Incarceration:** Confined in a prison facility after trial and sentencing.

**Jail:** Arrested and confined locally before a trial and sentencing.

**Mental Illness:** Any disease of the mind; the psychological state of someone who has emotional or behavioral problems serious enough to require psychiatric intervention and affects social interactions and the ability to have steady employment and relationships.

**Physical Abuse:** Aggressive or violent behavior towards a person that results in harm, injury or permanent damage.

**Substance Abuse:** Dependency upon alcohol or drugs that affect the brain, leads to addiction and behavior change.

**Trauma:** Events or experiences that have a negative or scarring long-term impact.

The terms are defined for the specific purposes of this research and applied in this analysis.

## 1. Introduction to the Vulnerabilities and Risk Connections between Women and Homelessness

The discussion in Austin and nationally surrounding the causes and effects of homelessness is pertinent in our modern cities. Citizens, leaders, and politicians want to solve homelessness with solutions that tend to focus on affordable housing and removing unsheltered people from city streets. Unfortunately, it is not a problem to be solved with a set formula for all locations and populations. There will always be vulnerable persons at risk of becoming homeless. Therefore, understanding the complex lives of people at risk of homelessness and those already living unsheltered, is critical to providing services for prevention, housing, assistance, and recovery (Caton 2005). Common reasons attributed to homelessness in public dialogue include reductionist ideas that this population is simply lazy, drug addicted or have mental issues (Truong 2012). Activists point to the rising cost of living and housing along with limited public resources, affordable housing, and rehabilitation facilities (data.austintexas.gov 2023). More comprehensive studies suggest a tangled intersection of factors that are situational, cumulative, difficult to quantify and identify for preventative measures contribute to homelessness (Nyamathi et al. 2001). Furthermore, these factors are disproportionately borne throughout society, putting women, the low income, disabled, and mentally ill at higher risk of slipping into homelessness (Apicello 2010).

To understand the cumulative risk factors impacting women's homelessness, this directed research project examines the *Gospel Con Carne* podcast interviews with eleven women who lived unsheltered in the Austin, Texas metropolitan area. These women are diverse in their education, work, foundational family backgrounds, and ages at which they became homeless. Though their life experiences are different, they reflect overlapping commonalities. This research

asks: how do women fall into homelessness? In lieu of a singular or independent cause, I argue that it is a complex intertwining of multiple variables, events, influences, and experiences that guide women into a vulnerable lifestyle and homelessness. The risk factors are not isolated variables, but connected and cumulative, requiring prevention instead of reaction to the resulting issue of homelessness. Analysis reveals nine themes of abuse, addiction, education and employment, mental health, family dynamics, health issues, trauma, incarceration, and homelessness. The podcast participants have each experienced between three to all nine of the identified common risk factors, with a mean of six.

This directed research project contributes to two bodies of literature which include the definitions, causes, and research surrounding chronic homelessness, and examination of the homeless experience for women, identifying the vulnerable, and availability of social services. My research demonstrates that women have specific vulnerabilities and experiences of homelessness that reflect larger social patterns of patriarchy and gender inequality. My analysis illustrates that these variables cannot be understood in isolation, but must be understood relationally, in terms of how they compound and impact one another. This project also provides insights for policy makers and advocates of homeless women by demonstrating how vulnerabilities combine and accumulate to put women at risk of homelessness. Furthermore, additional preventative strategies, assistance, and recovery programs are needed to mitigate the issue proactively and strategically.

## **2. Issues and Factors Surrounding Homeless in the United States and Austin, Texas.**

The Austin metro area increased in population by over 1.2 million people between 2000 and 2020 and now has a current population of over 2.22 million residents (US Census Bureau 2023). This represents a growth rate ranging between 2.3 and 4.7 percent annually since 2000 (data.austintexas.gov 2023). Correspondingly, the median home price in the Austin Metro Area has increased by over 40 percent since 2019 and the average rental rate has increased by over 18 percent during the past 10 years (TAMU Real Estate Center 2023). During the years of 2007 and 2015, the number of housing units in Austin grew by 64,000 units, while the number of affordable market-rate housing units increased by 20,000 from 2019 to 2021 (ECHO 2021). A stable vacancy rate shows that additional housing units were occupied as quickly as produced (data.austintexas.gov 2023). This is indicative of Austin's rapid population growth which is also seeing an increase in the percent of the population with higher incomes, a factor that contributes to increasing home prices and rents (data.austintexas.gov 2023). These factors make Austin the most expensive metro area in the state putting many lower income residents into housing vulnerability with heavy rent burdens (ECHO 2023).

Across the nation, it is estimated that one percent of the population of the United States (US) is homeless at some point within a year (Maness et al. 2014). American cities differ in attitudes toward the homeless, policies, and available resources. Some cities allow panhandling, put out portable hygiene facilities in public spaces, and do not to enforce camping bans (Speer 2016). Many cities that have high numbers of homeless living downtown or in concentrated areas are seeing disruptions in normal city activities, unsanitary conditions, and safety concerns. Cities are beginning to enact public camping bans, restrictions on panhandling, and laws that address drug paraphernalia disposal associated with homeless camps, and states such as

Tennessee and Missouri have made camping on public lands illegal (Langeggeraand and Loester 2016). The National Coalition for the Homeless director, Don Whitehead said, “At least 65 U.S. cities are criminalizing or sweeping encampments. Everywhere that there is a high population of homeless people, we started to see this as their response” (Cline 2022).

The homeless population in Austin, Texas has become very visible in recent years and the topic of passionate discussion (Weber 2019). In May of 2021, Austin voters passed Proposition B which reinstated a camping ban on public property (Tompkins 2022). This ban was originally passed by the City of Austin in 1996 and then repealed in 2019 (Bova 2020). The ballot measure known as Proposition B reinstated a criminal penalty for people sleeping in the city in areas not designated for camping and for obstructing public sidewalks by sitting, lying down or loitering. Camping is defined by the City of Austin as, “storing personal belongings, using a tent/car as a living accommodation, and cooking” (Wilson et al. 2021). The ban does not apply to permitted camping sites in a park. At the state level, Texas HB 1925 was also passed in 2019 and is largely in alignment with the Austin code (Thompkins 2022). The Austin camping ban ordinance is a Class C Misdemeanor with fines up to \$500. However, the ban is frequently unenforced, tickets are not issued, and charges are not prosecuted (Autullo 2021). When ticketed, most of the unsheltered that receive tickets do not show up to court, which can lead to issued warrants, arrests, and a criminal record that can make getting into housing even more challenging for the unsheltered (Bova 2020). This is a difficult issue to navigate and balance for cities since the result of lack of enforcement applied in the city is tent lined streets, sanitary waste accumulation, crime and loitering interrupting the flow of city life and space (Jankowski 2019). Impediments to pedestrian movement, along with safety and sanitation concerns affect normal business activity, tourism, shopping, and dining patterns (Chamard 2010). This translates to a

reduced budget with less spending for social and public services for all, including the homeless (Autullo 2021). Finding a balance that allows for economic prosperity and equity for all in city spaces is difficult to achieve.

One of the most widely available and useful reports for city planners in understanding the scale of homelessness in their city is the annual point-in-time count report. Communities that are part of the Continuum of Care Federal Program are required to conduct an annual point-in-time count (PIT). This involves using trained staff and volunteers to systematically canvas city sectors to count homeless persons, both sheltered and unsheltered. These counts occur in major cities on a singular day selected by each city within a 10-day period at the end January (this compact time frame seeks to reduce double counting). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and major cities compile and analyze the collected PIT information before making it publicly available (AHAR 2022). This national program began its collection of homelessness estimates, both nationally and by state, in 2007. The document further breaks down the data into categories of individuals, families, youth, veterans, chronic patterns, and a national inventory of beds. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services also publishes an annual report of the state of children and families in the country. This includes data reports on the number of homeless children and families and outlines contributing factors to homelessness. The report finds that homeless women tend to congregate in urban areas for social services and suffer from poor nutrition, violence, female genitourinary problems, and sexually transmitted diseases (USHHS 2016).

Locally, Austin Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO) publishes a quick snapshot reference pages of the PIT count along with a full report for public use (ECHO 2021). The snapshot report includes the current annual PIT count and statistics, a short evaluation,

highlights significant changes, the homeless response strategy overview, coordinated services, and other pertinent information in a succinct format. The full report addresses the data, trends, policy, responses, programs, services, comparisons, and emerging trends, along with detailed demographic data and statistics of the homeless population living in the City of Austin (ECHO HMIS 2021).

The annual point-in-time reports are a dissected and graphed differently every year depending upon the detail of information collected from PIT counts and their volunteers (HUD 2023). Some years, the report results only reflect the total homeless population without the male-female ratios. Other reports count either individuals or households with children. For the years that gender information is available, females generally comprise an increasing percentage of the homeless population in Austin (ECHO 2021). In 2016 and 2019, females were thirty-six percent of the homeless population, thirty-eight percent in 2020 and forty-three percent in 2021 (data.austintexas.gov 2021). Texas has a homeless rate for females of 3.30 per 10,000 residents in the general population (USC 2023).

In 2011, Austin-Travis County had a total homeless population of 2362 and 2957 in the year of 2021 (ECHO 2021). That translates to an increase of twenty-five percent or 595 persons over a ten-year period (data.austintexas.gov 2023). The number of homeless has fluctuated with a steady upward trend since 2017 (see table 2.1). Most of the homeless in the Austin-Travis County area are individuals over the age of twenty-five years (ECHO 2021). A significant change is an increase in the number of unsheltered homeless in the city in the past few years while the number of sheltered has remained the same or decreased (data.austintexas.gov 2023). This increase corresponds to how the homeless are counted, who is included in the homeless and sheltered count, along with increased population growth in the city, rising home prices, rental

rates, and limited affordable housing options (TAMU Real Estate Center and Census 2023). Only full partners the Austin’s Homeless Management System are included in the sheltered homeless PIT counts. Therefore, the hundreds of previously homeless that were included in PIT counts and now sheltered by private organizations are not accounted for in the official totals (ECHO 2023).

Table 2.1 Annual PIT Counts of Homeless Individuals in Austin, Texas

Year	Homeless Individuals	Unsheltered	Shelters & Transitional Housing
2009	2641	870	1771
2010	2087	731	1356
2011	2362	1004	1358
2012	2244	869	1375
2013	2090	765	1325
2014	1987	448	1539
2015	1832	668	1210
2016	2138	816	1322
2017	2036	834	1202
2018	2147	1014	1133
2019	2255	1086	1169
2020	2506	1574	932
2021	2954	2032	922

Data compiled from Austin data.gov information

The Austin PIT count for 2022 was cancelled and 2023 results have not been released yet. However, in July 2022, ECHO estimated the number of unhoused residents in Austin or Travis County to be 4,022 (Zelenka 2022, p. 62). This included individuals considered to be unsheltered (those in tents, cars, or places deemed uninhabitable) and sheltered (emergency shelters and other temporary housing situations) (Zelenka 2022). The largest published increase in the number of homeless, of almost five hundred persons, came between the years of 2020 and 2021 (data.austintexas.gov 2023). This unusually large increase is thought to be due to changes

in the PIT count methodology and shelter access (HMIS Snapshot 2021). With Covid-19 cases rising, the 2021 PIT count was suspended and data mining techniques from city databases were employed to determine the city homeless count. Also, the downtown Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH) became a men's shelter for only those participating in case management services and programs including job placement, legal assistance, community healthcare, veteran and mental health services. Other city programs remain intact and include a center for women and children, free health services, street outreach teams in the downtown and campus area, along with collaborative supportive services with other agencies and organizations that aim to assist and house the homeless. There are several non-profit housing organizations in the Austin area that are actively housing the homeless. The Other Ones Foundation (TOOF) serves the homeless population living on state land at Camp Esperanza in Southeast Austin (ECHO 2023). TOOF has constructed 200 individual shelter units for resident campers along with food preparation and bathroom facilities. Foundation Communities of Austin has purchased, renovated, and built 16 apartment and efficiency home communities in the metro area for low-income people in danger of becoming homeless. They offer services for health, financial stability and education and have a maximum income level for eligibility. The City of Austin has approximately 1800 subsidized affordable housing units, and as of 2021, approximately 149,000 unsubsidized affordable market rate rental housing units in Austin, available to qualifying households at or below 80% median family income, based on household size (data.austintexas.gov 2023). Community First Village, located in Eastern Travis County, is a master planned community of micro-homes, canvas cottages, and RV's that house the formerly chronically homeless. The organization seeks to provide affordable, permanent housing for men and women exiting chronic homelessness. (mlf.org, 2023). The cost of housing increases, Covid-19 with the resulting financial stress on

citizens, the temporary eviction moratorium, and changes in the city housing and shelter programs, all play a part in Austin's homeless puzzle (ECHO 2023).

This diverse data tells us that the general homeless population, along with the number of women experiencing homelessness, is steadily increasing in the Austin metro area. Though the City of Austin has added to the number of affordable housing units available through the collaborative efforts of both public and private organizations to provide shelter and social services. The reinstatement of the public camping ban in Austin has created the challenge of balancing the tension between the rights and needs of the homeless with the functionality, sanitation and safety in the city.

### **3. Literature Review: Women and Causes of Homelessness**

There is a developing body of literature addressing the subject of homelessness. Most analysis originates with government agencies, academic researchers, and observations from those working in the field. A large portion of the literature focuses on homelessness in general terms, as a problem to be solved, and the associated issues it presents for society such as providing shelter, mental health resources and medical care for the homeless. Historically, the literature has focused on homeless populations of men and veterans and on issues associated with addiction, unproductivity, and mental health issues. For the purposes of this research, I engage with and contribute to two bodies of literature: definitions and causes of chronic homeless and women's vulnerability to homelessness and their needed services.

#### **3.1 Definitions and Causes of Chronic Homelessness**

The first body of literature approaches homelessness from a position of policy, statistics, and funding along with the reasons and causes of homelessness. Many organizations such as HUD, cities and agencies, along with researchers collect, organize, and release data for public use. This information is widely available and invaluable for policy makers, non-profits, urban planners, and service providers. Research follows up this information with studies on the causes and roots of homelessness.

The stereotypes held by society affect attitudes, agendas and the policy proposals of city planners and elected officials that shape services and approve spending. Gorfido says, "Cultural beliefs within the United States regarding who is homeless and what homelessness means also play a significant role in the development of positively impactful social welfare programs" (2020, p. 106). Though there is a level of compassion towards the homeless, many communities

are content with criminalizing homelessness and excluding them from city spaces for reasons of safety, sanitation, and convenience. Meanwell (2012) says that research indicates that common public perceptions of homeless include irresponsible behavior, laziness, that they are dangerous and undesirable, and support restrictions on homeless activities such as camping and panhandling. The local and zoning policies used to prohibit group homes and care facilities are problematic in addressing housing needs and recovery programs for the disabled, recidivism, and the homeless (Salkin 1993). The ‘not-in-my-backyard’ (NIMBY) movement pressures local officials to reject housing permits needed for vulnerable populations (Lyon-Callo 2001). The most organized and vocal community groups that mobilize tend to hold unfavorable views of homeless persons and favor the prevention of homeless services in their neighborhoods says Lyon-Callo (2001).

Cities with a concentrated population of homeless can experience a decline in downtown occupancy and in tourism, Tretter argues (2013). “Having people sleeping on streets, panhandling and loitering, created an atmosphere of decline and a vicious circle, where investment driven away by fear led to the further decay of city centers and encouraged the arrival of more homeless people” says Tretter (2013, p. 2226). One downtown Portland employer related that employees are often confronted by mentally ill people and must avoid discarded needles on the sidewalks. “The situation has affected businesses and events, with employers routinely asking officials to do more. Some are looking to move, while others already have – notably Oregon’s largest annual golf tournament, the LPGA Tour’s Portland Classic relocated last year due to safety concerns related to a nearby homeless encampment” (Cline 2022). In Austin, Bill Brice of the Downtown Austin Alliance says the camping ban lift in 2019 “has definitely been detrimental to downtown economy, to the city of as a whole” (Rahman 2021).

Austin Mayor Steve Adler was quoted in the local newspaper saying, “We know from visitors who are coming to town that the predators that are surrounding our homeless community are beginning to impact the experience that tourists and visitors have when they come to Austin. And, quite frankly, the experience that Austinites have when they come downtown” (Findell 2017). Austin is not alone. In San Francisco, the economic impact of fewer people coming into the city has been a decrease in tax base and revenue for a metropolitan area (Cline 2022).

The federal government defined chronic homelessness in 2003 as “an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more OR has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years” (U.S. Office of the Federal Register National Archives and Records Administration 2003). This definition was recently updated by the federal government in a long, multi-point definition that addresses disabilities and the criteria for meeting unsheltered eligibility (HUD 2023 and Appendix L). Though being carefully crafted, many worry that the new definition will have a negative impact upon policy. Zlotnick (2020) says the first issue with this definition is that excludes segments of the homeless population, namely women and children. Secondly, the definition emphasizes rehabilitation rather than preventative measures. And third, it focuses its attention on a small segment of the homeless population, ignoring those with less severe economic and social costs. With studies indicating strong links between childhood trauma and adult events, policy makers and researchers may want to consider dedicating studies and resources to homeless prevention. And also focus efforts on identifying and treating the factors that lead to homelessness (Zlotnick 2020).

Studies are now beginning to explore the factors leading to homelessness in more targeted depth. A study in 2001, found that men typically become homeless due to addiction,

mental illness, or a job loss, while abuse or “violent victimization” often leads to women becoming homeless, especially if it is a domestic partner (Tessler et al. 2001). Another investigation found that women who have been victims of abuse or violence in childhood and as an adult have a higher incidence of multiple episodes of homelessness (Broll and Huey 2020). There is significant research on the contribution of mental illness and substance abuse in becoming homeless. Tsai says, “Reviews of risk factors for homelessness have revealed that adverse childhood experiences, mental illness, and substance abuse are strongly associated with homelessness” (2015, p. 113-4). A 2009-2010 Report to Congress found that maltreatment occurs in one of every 58 children in the US and was reported by four of our interviewees. Of the children experiencing maltreatment, 44 percent were abused, and 61 percent were neglected, some falling into both categories (DHHS 2010). The children suffered different and sometimes multiple forms of abuse including 58 percent physical abuse, 24 percent sexual abuse, 27 percent emotional abuse, 47 percent educational neglect, 38 percent physical neglect, and 25 percent emotionally neglected (Sedlak et al. 2010). The long-term effects of neglect and abuse commonly manifest into mental health issues and addiction (Strathearn et al. 2020).

Substance abuse is undeniably prevalent in the homeless community, and it is difficult to untangle the cause and effect of substance abuse and homelessness. Many women struggle with addiction prior to being homeless, often since adolescence, for a variety of reasons (Broll and Huey 2020). While on the streets, women acknowledged that, “this behavior increased their risk of victimization; however, they felt the need to numb the emotional pain caused by trauma and homelessness” (Bonugli et al. 2013, p. 830). It is important to understand the psychological, mental, and emotional issues of addiction since that is what may also lead to a cure (Khantzian 2008). With limited facilities and rehabilitation resources, it is difficult for homeless addicts to

get clean or sober without jail time. The incarcerated are put through a rehabilitation or detoxification program within the penal system and sometimes offered classes to learn coping and personal skills (Sneed and Teike 2019). One study examined attitudes toward quitting substance abuse and found that persons who exhibited positive coping strategies and were surrounded by others who desired to quit had the best chance for longer term success (Stewart et al. 2003). Another study observed that recovery requires social structure and community change for the women (Dekkers et al. 2020).

This body of literature also examines the local and national policies that address homelessness and contributing factors of mental health and addiction. The Bush and Obama Administrations supported efforts to address this problem with calls for action, policies and legislation, and funding for research and services (Tsai 2017). HUD tries to empower local and state agencies to address homelessness in their communities by using federal grants to create effective programs to serve the homeless. It can be difficult ascertain the effectiveness of grant recipient programs though. As Lee observes, indicators of performance are not necessarily transferable between locations and his study found an inverse relationship between capacity and need. He summarizes that sometimes the areas of greatest need do not have the ability or resources to implement programs to assist the homeless (Lee 2021).

Researchers have attempted to create a scale or test to assess risk for homelessness but isolating the variables and how they interact is difficult. Predicting who will fall into homelessness is contingent on multiple, identifiable, and unique risk factors, and current screening tests are not sensitive enough to pick up the complexities associated with homelessness (Apicello 2010). These findings roughly align with research that identifies risk factors for homeless entry to be sociodemographic, childhood vulnerabilities, homelessness history,

personal troubles before, during and after homelessness, and the social support network (Booth et al. 2002). Every person has a unique life story and circumstances, but the common themes of substance abuse, educational deficiencies, mental health issues and violence mixed with universal problems of limited affordable housing and economic downturn may theoretically be addressed preventatively within the population-high risk framework (Apicello 2016). The population-high risk framework has been conceptualized with an approach that focuses on identifying and targeting the causes of homelessness at multiple points (Apicello 2010). Table 3.1 shows framework for population and high risk to prevent homelessness.

Table 3.1 Population and High-Risk Framework for Preventing Homelessness

	Population/High-Risk Prevention
Goal	Prevent cases among high-risk populations and prevent incidence in the general population
Temporality	Focuses efforts on preventing new cases
Target Population	Entire population; high-risk populations
What distinguishes this framework from the others	Focus is on the context and causes of the preventable condition

Population and High-Risk Framework to Preventing Homelessness. Source: Apicello (2010).

There is public consensus that social welfare systems for the homeless in this country are not working (Pellegrini et al. 1997). In our modern age, government has tackled homelessness and housing insecurity as a social problem to be governed and legislated instead of trying to eradicate the causes of homelessness along with the associated economic, social, and political challenges (Willse 2015). The offering of supportive assistance preventatively to vulnerable populations is typically minimally funded, but in high demand. Transitional housing program

studies for women have found that social support and education were key predictors of successful program completion regardless of their background with jail time, mental illness, or substance abuse (Brott et al. 2019).

Overall, there is little research on the effectiveness of prevention and remediation programs for homelessness (Apicello 2010). Cities establish programs to meet local priorities and needs, then internally evaluate them accordingly. But programs and their standards are not typically transferable to the needs, priorities, and resources of other communities. It is hard to evaluate programs that are not uniform and have different contributing variables making the establishment of standardized cross program evaluation with reliable measures difficult (Newcomer et al. 2015). Currently, there are no national or state standardized metrics or methods for program evaluation on the effectiveness of homeless population reduction or prevention as they are difficult to develop (Cox 2011). Rapid Re-housing, a federal program, stated in its annual report that evidence generated through research does not answer the questions, but instead, “adds to the collection of findings that is helping to shape what we know” (HUD 2016). And an attempt to study the effect of permanent supportive housing found many pitfalls that limit the ability of research to inform policy with the goal of ending homelessness and demonstrate the need for experimental research to make policy decisions with limited federal funds (Benston 2015).

### 3.2 Women’s Vulnerability to Homelessness and Needed Services

A second body of literature address the women’s vulnerability to homelessness and the specific services that homeless women require. It is primarily derived from those who interact or conduct research with women who are at risk or already homeless. This includes professional healthcare workers, social workers, service providers, and researchers that address the health

issues of the women, challenges with housing, domestic abuse, women with children, mental illness, addiction, and other factors that contribute to homelessness. Many studies find similar reasons that consistently contribute to women becoming homeless, the resulting trauma that compounds exiting homelessness, and barriers to achieving stability (Katz 2017). A frustrating amount of literature focuses on women in the context of families, or women with children in studies and data, with limited data on women as an independent subject (Wenzel et al. 2000). It is unclear why homeless women are not studied as an independent subject group like homeless men or veterans. Not all homeless women have children, so focusing on homeless women as a population is important in understanding their vulnerabilities and needs.

Research has presented common threads of social circumstances that lead vulnerable persons into homelessness which include limited social support and networks, mental illness, addiction, poverty, and criminal activity (Booth et al. 2002). The list for women also includes domestic violence, sexual abuse, and financial instability (Broll and Huey 2020). Katz (2017) says that there is no single reason that people become homeless, but it is useful to distinguish between those whose homelessness is a function primarily of economic forces (usually the recently homeless) and those who have a range of mental health and addiction problems along with economic issues (typically the chronically homeless).

Studies are finding that homeless women, not surprisingly, have more health issues, often chronic, than the general population that work against them becoming stable and housed (Dickens et al. 2021). Access to health care for the poor and homeless is commonly through public health clinics or emergency rooms. And frequently care is not sought until after medical issues have compounded and take more care and cost to treat (White and Newman 2015). A lack of continuous care along with the stress of being homeless can contribute to chronic conditions,

more expensive care, higher rates of hospitalization than the general public, greater susceptibility to becoming ill and dying at younger ages (average life span of 42-52 years) (Maness and Khan 2014). Their analysis also found that homeless have high rates of secondary bacterial infections, edema and foot immersion from prolonged standing, wet socks, and poor-quality footwear, along with poor hygiene, including lice and bedbugs from unsanitary living conditions (Maness and Khan 2014). Older women have additional health factors to consider including deferred health care, aging diseases, cumulative trauma, and long-term barriers to healthcare access (Graf et al. 2022). Salem (2015) says that older homeless women point out needs for vision and dental care, pain management and access to comprehensive and wholistic care which includes diagnostic and specialist providers. The additional stress of gynecological care is another burden for homeless women (Salem 2015). Buying pads and tampons is unrealistic and they must rely on services for those items or use less sanitary methods such as toilet paper wads or found cloth (dirty or clean) which often does not effectively control the bleeding (Parillo 2017). Unsheltered women also experience post-traumatic stress, pregnancy, and high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and infections (Maness and Khah 2014).

Disabilities, both physical and cognitive, are another challenge for those on the streets. A recent HUD survey found that roughly 37 percent of homeless persons have a disability compared to just over 15 percent of the general population (Maness and Khan 2014). Navigating a city in a wheelchair, walker, or with other mobility challenges can be difficult with unlevel terrain, inclines, and lack of wheelchair accessibility despite the American Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements (Wusinich et al. 2019). Public transportation can be cumbersome with the loading and unloading of a wheelchair at multiple stops. Cognitive disabilities such as autism, obsession compulsive disorder, Aspergers and ADHD, also contribute to homelessness (Estrin

2022). Stone (2018) says that cognitive impairment was found to be both a risk factor and perpetrator of homelessness. Without a support network, autistic individuals have fewer means of avoiding homelessness and face challenges in resolving their homelessness, especially accessing and engaging with homelessness services (Estrin 2022).

Mental illness and addiction are also risk factors for women falling into homelessness (Duke and Searby 2019). Studies have estimated that up to 25 percent of homeless persons suffer from mental illness (Martin 2015). Common disorders are depression, anxiety, bi-polar and schizophrenia (Duke and Searby 2019). Many women go undiagnosed during their youth which may manifest in negative behaviors and perceptions. Graf (2019) says mental illnesses have different presentations, are generally characterized by a combination of abnormal perceptions and thoughts, along with changes in behavior and relationships with others. Some mental illness may result from the trauma incurred from physical abuse at home and on the streets (Browne 1993). Bonugli (2013) says that physical, sexual, and emotional abuse beginning early in life, are known to put individuals at risk for adulthood psychiatric disorders, including substance abuse and further victimization. The combined factors of homelessness, trauma and mental illness can be overwhelming for those with limited resources and social support. The use of drugs and alcohol is congruent with the self-medication hypothesis in which persons with a serious mental illness abuse drugs or alcohol to alleviate the suffering due of their symptoms (Padgett et al. 2006). Khantzian (1985) pioneered the theory of self-medication as a coping mechanism for trauma. He hypothesized how factors of the psychological state create a need to control pain and suffering through chemical substances, though self-medicators may not be able to control usage and become substance dependent (Khantzian 1997).

Katz (2017) says that economic forces compound the problems of people struggling with mental illness and addiction and that many are estranged from their families because their relatives were unable to care for them or their behavior resulted in eviction from their residence. He also argues that the decreased use and availability of mental health institutions and belief that persons with mental illness should not be treated against their will, if they are not of imminent harm to themselves or others, have resulted in large numbers of mentally ill persons living on the street. The availability of inexpensive drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine have increased addiction rates and the lower rates of incarceration for drug users have resulted in more people, who once would have been in prison being homeless (Katz 2017). These factors are difficult to mitigate preventatively and with limited resources for treatment and recovery.

There is a growing trend of collaboration between government agencies and non-profit groups to bridge gaps in services and address homelessness together from multiple angles (Thurman et al. 2021). The comingling of public and private funds in projects and services can be controversial but is relied upon in most communities to provide programs, housing, and services. With perpetually limited public funding, this can be a beneficial alliance to meet needs and provide creative solutions. Valero and Jang (2023) try to measure the impact of collaborative activities in their study of homeless policy and management techniques in the United States. Many of the non-profits engaged in assisting and empowering the homeless are faith-based organizations. William Bowes (2021) writes about the intersection of religion and service to society as he evaluates approaches and offering meaningful and effective responses to the homeless crisis. Non-profits are critical to the provision services in most American cities (Thurman et al. 2021). These nonprofits, which are overwhelmingly faith based, provide emergency shelter, food assistance, hygiene products, bus passes, showers, and haircuts, along

with dental and medical services. Private organizations have more flexibility in their responses, timeframe, and mobilization efforts than public entities. These collaborations between government housing and homeless advocates, and philanthropic are the backbone of the safety net in many communities (Lee et al. 2010). In Austin, agencies are beginning to work together to address the issue wholistically. ECHO serves as an entry point to services for the vulnerable and homeless. Through an evaluative intake survey, ECHO scores individuals and refers them to both public and private agencies for assistance and services (ECHO 2023).

Homelessness has many factors that researchers have historically explored as independent topics. There is emerging research though that points to the multifaceted nature of homelessness (Nyamathi et al. 2001). I hope to draw upon and contribute to this developing body of literature through the study and analysis of *Gospel Con Carne* podcast interviews with eleven formerly homeless women. Their stories shed light on a growing understanding that homelessness is the product of a multiple, inseparable, compounding factors and variables that include trauma, addiction, family dynamics, health, and education deficiencies. The podcast participants experiences are at once unique and similar with shared common elements. Ultimately, the goal of this work is to produce research that illuminates the interconnected risk factors and vulnerabilities that contribute to women becoming homeless. It also aims to demonstrate that homelessness is a gendered phenomenon; women experience homelessness differently from other populations (Graf et al. 2022). With a better understanding of the complexities of homelessness for women, it is hoped that more purposeful, preventative, and strategic services to serve vulnerable and homeless women can be implemented.

#### 4. Methods and Coding

This research focuses on podcast interviews with eleven women who live at Community First Village in Austin, Texas. These women were interviewed for the *Gospel Con Carne* podcast by Alan Graham. This podcast is publicly available and published on numerous audio outlets such as iTunes, Spotify, Soundcloud, Google-play and the mlf.org website. The *Gospel Con Carne* is self-described as “a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society through untold stories of homelessness” (mlf.org 2023). Each episode features an interview with a person who has experienced homelessness or serves the vulnerable. The podcast has over fifty interviews recorded during the years of 2017 to 2022. Eleven of the episodes feature women who were previously homeless in the Austin metropolitan area and resided at Community First Village at the time of their interviews.

The podcast interviews are conducted by Graham, the founder, president, and a resident of Community First Village (CFV). He conducts each podcast interview with a similar structure, beginning the conversation with questions regarding the guest’s foundational family dynamics during the formative years of childhood through adolescence. The conversations then discuss the journey into adulthood with all the experiences and events that shaped their lives, and eventually led to homelessness or into a lifestyle of service to the homeless. The interviewee is also asked to reflect on their current situation and to share a nugget of wisdom or insight with listeners. The podcasts range in length from twenty-five to fifty minutes.

The eleven women featured in the interviews come from a variety of life situations, ages, educational and economic backgrounds. Though the information is publicly available, the women will be referred to by their first names only in this document. Two interviewees are named Helen and will be identified as Helen B. and Helen H. Since the time of their interviews, two of the women, Bonnie and Letty, have died. Two others, Tracy and Robin, have moved out

of CFV. The source material, published in audio format, was digitally transcribed to text using Word-Online software. The transcript has been edited for accuracy to ensure that it reflects the dialogue used in the podcast. The complete transcripts are included in the Appendices A-K.

These transcripts were analyzed and coded for common themes, words, similar experiences, and events. As described by O’Leary (2019), the analysis of transcripts engages in what grounded theory proponents refer to as constant comparison. In other words, concepts and meaning are explored in each text and then compared with previously analyzed texts to draw out both similarities and disparities. I used a semi-structured coding technique to extract common themes from the interviews in which the women speak about their life experiences and the events that directed their lives toward homelessness. The transcripts were examined individually and then against each other to reveal commonalities present in and across the lives of the podcast participants. From this analysis, I created a codebook and applied the code to the eleven interviews and compiled the results for analysis. The podcasts, codebook, and following analysis are completed solely from the perspectives and memories of the women interviewed. The coded transcripts revealed nine common themes of vulnerability and risk factors for women falling into homelessness (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Chart of Identified Commonalities

<b>Physical Abuse</b>	<b>Substance Abuse</b>	<b>Mental Illness</b>
<b>Education/Employment</b>	<b>Incarceration/Jail</b>	<b>Family Dysfunction</b>
<b>Homelessness</b>	<b>Health/Disability</b>	<b>Trauma</b>

Nine common themes of vulnerability and risk factors for women and homelessness.

The author has a history of volunteering and employment at Community First Village over the past seven years. Therefore, personal interactions and conversations have occurred with most, but not all, of the women interviewed. For this analysis and report, I have only examined information made available in the published podcasts and have purposefully refrained from including any additional personal knowledge and information regarding other experiences, events, and outcomes of the podcast participants.

## **5. Women’s Identified Vulnerabilities to Homelessness in Austin, Texas**

### **5.1 Welcome Home to Community First Village**

Community First Village is master planned community located in eastern Travis County, Texas that houses the formerly homeless in tiny homes, RV’s and canvas cottages. It is or was home to the eleven podcast participants. The privately funded 501c3 organization raises funds from individual donors and community partners such as St. David’s Foundation, McCoy’s Building Supply, Frost Bank, Tito’s Handmade Vodka and the Austin Board of Realtors. Founded as a food-truck program to feed the homeless over twenty-years ago, the organization developed a housing community that opened in 2016 and now houses approximately three-hundred and eighty formerly homeless neighbors living among approximately thirty “missionals,” and five staff members. The missionals are unique to CFV and described as intentional neighbors who serve as a helpful resource to their formerly homeless neighbors and strive to create a positive community environment (mlf.org 2023). The neighborhood has many services and amenities on-site such a café and grill, small convenience market, car shop, community gardens, barber shop, Capital Metro bus stop, and the opportunity to earn an income on site. It also houses offices for services such as Integral Care, Family Eldercare, an EMS community outreach office, Restorative Justice, and community Healthcare. The communications office published a monthly podcast with interviews from residents, community leaders and homeless advocates. The community operates under the philosophy that “as a result of the multitude of connections we’ve made with our homeless neighbors, we’ve learned that the single greatest cause of homelessness is a profound, catastrophic loss of family” (mlf.org). The Community First Village residents comprise a ratio of seventy-two percent men and twenty-eight percent women with the largest group of neighbors being between the ages of fifty and seventy

years old (mlf.org). To qualify to live at Community First Village, the applicant must have been homeless in Austin-Travis County area for a minimum of a year, have a coordinated assessment completed by Austin ECHO, take a guided tour of the village, complete a housing application and interview. CFV residents must pay rent which ranges from roughly \$275 to \$600 per month depending on the style of their unit (mlf.org 2023).

5.2 An Introduction to the Podcast Participants

Table 5.1 introduces us to the women interviewed with a chart listing the order of podcast participants, their names, ages and the number of years they lived unsheltered. The chart reveals the wide variety in the women’s ages and the years spent homelessness.

Table 5.1 Table of Podcast Participant Information

Podcast Participants	Names	Age	Years Spent Homeless
P1	Bonnie	58	30+
P2	Cheryl	65	5
P3	Emily	52	12
P4	Helen B.	56	10
P5	Helen H.	74	1.5
P6	Leatha	38	4
P7	Letty	62	7.5
P8	Penny	53	40+
P9	Robin	47	10+
P10	Shea	33	4
P11	Tracy	53	20+

A majority of the women interviewed are over the age of fifty. Figure 5.2 presents a chart of the women’s ages at the time of their interview. Fifty-five percent of the podcast participants

lived unsheltered for less than ten years, while thirty-six percent of the women were chronically homeless for twenty or more years. Figure 5.3 charts the cumulative number of years that these women lived unsheltered.

Figure 5.1 *Ages of the Women at Time of Interview*

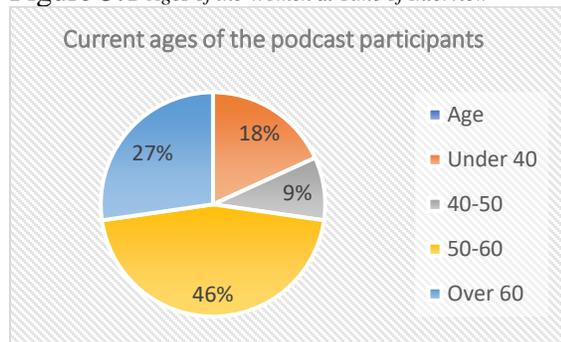
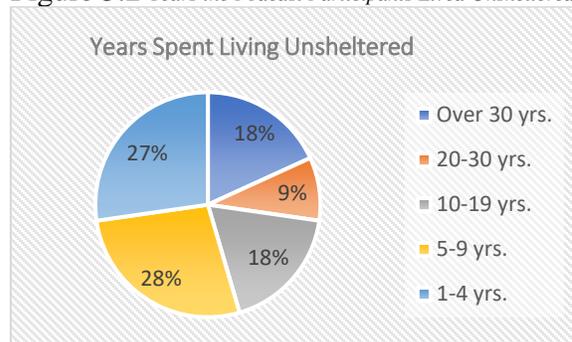


Figure 5.2 *Years the Podcast Participants Lived Unsheltered*



Data compiled from the *Gospel Con Carne* Podcast, mlf.org

The common factors of trauma, family dysfunction, substance and physical abuse, educational deficiencies, mental illness, homelessness, incarceration, health issues and disabilities are reflected in the personal experiences the women share in their podcast interviews and analyzed in the remainder of this chapter. First, however, I provide overall information about each of the podcast participants’ identity and life experiences to provide context for the following sections as well as to humanize the women and respect their individuality.

Bonnie (P1) was fifty-eight at the time of the interview, divorced with three children and a US Army veteran. She grew up in a stable household and after graduation enlisted in the army with the intent of earning her GI Bill for college. Bonnie was posted overseas where she suffered a traumatic event and began her journey with substance abuse, primarily cocaine and heroin. Her friend overdosed from the heroine bulb they had purchased to milk and take together. This resulted in Bonnie spending time in military psychiatric care before being put back into duty. After being discharged from military service, she married, had three children, and later divorced. Soon afterwards, she had a health emergency resulting in a long coma. Within a little over a year,

Bonnie got divorced, became seriously ill, lost her job, and became homeless. Bonnie is diabetic, nearly blind from macular degeneration and retinal pigmentosa, has had a heart attack, part of a leg amputated, and confined to a wheelchair. Bonnie has struggled with substance abuse and homelessness for the better part of thirty years.

Cheryl (P2) grew up in a large family in central Houston. At the time of the interview, Cheryl was sixty-five years old, widowed, with one son and several grandchildren. Despite her strict parents, she became pregnant as a teenager and withdrew from high school to have the baby. However, soon afterwards she completed her GED, earned a business certificate from community college, married, and worked for fifteen years at a state agency. Her first husband used her naivety as a non-drinker or drug user to lure her into trying drugs. This instantly began a 40-year battle with crack cocaine. Eventually they divorced and Cheryl went through periods of addiction and sobriety. She remarried and they moved to Austin. While retired and traveling, her husband was diagnosed with cancer and died a few months later leaving Cheryl in a dark place. Since that time, she has cycled in and out of addiction, had multiple episodes of homelessness totaling five years, and suffers from very low self-esteem. She tends to avoid her siblings since many of them struggle with addiction and those relationships also contribute to her low self-esteem which works against her sobriety.

Emily (P3) spent approximately twelve years homeless in the Austin area and panhandling at the intersection of Highway 360 and RM 2244. At the time of the interview, Emily was fifty-two had three children, worked in the food service industry, and recently married to a fellow resident of CFV. Emily's mother left when she was born, so she was raised by her father and grandparents. During childhood, her father remarried a woman who was resentful and physically abusive to Emily. After graduating from high school, Emily married and had a child.

She was sexually assaulted, resulting in twins which she kept. Her former husband raised all three of the children after they divorced. Emily suffers from high blood pressure and anxiety attacks. She does not mention any substance abuse or mental health issues in her podcast interview.

Helen B. (P4), age fifty-six, immigrated from England after earning a nursing degree. She accepted a job in the oncology unit of a hospital in Florida, later moving into pediatric oncology. She partied and struggled with alcohol in her twenty's but thought it to be mostly under control. Eventually, the high-stress job began to turn into burnout, her marriage became rocky ending in divorce, and her mother passed away while she was far away in the U.S., all leaving her feeling devastated. Looking for something more than alcohol to numb the pain, Helen B. turned to heroin and used all her savings on the drug habit while living in San Francisco. After a few years, she moved to a flop house in Nashville with a friend where she met her current husband. Together they ebbed in and out of sobriety, addiction, and homelessness for a decade. They camped in parks, learned to use community spaces for air conditioning and showering, were arrested for trespassing, and overall were exhausted and stressed from being homeless. While living in a dilapidated camper in Austin, Helen B. began to a business selling small paintings, then progressed to murals and consignment work before moving into CFV with her spouse.

Helen H. (P5), grew up in a military family, moving many times and later married a military officer. They had one daughter, who required extra care and therapy as a baby and small child. She was in her seventies at the time of the interview and divorced. Helen H. has two brothers, one with a learning disability, and a younger sister with severe Down's Syndrome. Her sister was taken away and institutionalized at age five and Helen H. never saw her again. This is a point of trauma for Helen H. as she likens it to a death. She previously had a career in

education and discussed a diverse list of occupations including teacher, school headmaster, executive director of a literacy program and earning an associates nursing certificate. Helen H. did not admit to being homeless but indicated that she was a guest at the Salvation Army for 14 months before moving into CFV in more of a missional capacity. Helen H. did not mention any substance abuse or mental health diagnosis. But the interview indicates potential mental illness or delusion as evidenced by the interview that is filled with stories of familial status, semi-denial and redirection of homelessness, a conflicting timeline of places and events, along with multiple references to interactions with many different politicians, celebrities, and persons of importance.

Letty (P6) was in her sixties at the time of this interview with two sons and a grandchild. She did not have a self-reported history of substance abuse but has endured multiple episodes of homelessness and is estranged from her siblings. Letty also did not report a history of mental illness, but the interview indicates there is deep trauma stemming from her childhood and family. Letty mentioned several times that she was an unwanted child, her mother was physically and emotionally abusive, and her siblings were the cause of her homelessness. She reported that her family was upper middle class in a mostly white neighborhood, lower class people referred to her a white Mexican, and she did not fit in with the Hispanic classmates. Letty gave conflicting memories of being a peacemaker at school, getting along with most people, and not being messed with because she was tough. But then she spoke of being a loner, getting bullied, not being liked by the Hispanic girls. She also felt prejudice since she was Hispanic but did not speak Spanish. Letty explained that her siblings conspired against her to have her removed from her mother's house, made theft and drug accusations against her, and disposed of her possessions at a yard sale. Following this significant family fallout, Letty became homeless for seven to eight years with intermittent periods of employment and housing.

Leatha (P7) is currently in her late thirties, single, and has two children. Both of her parents were substance abusers and divorced while she was young. Her father was incarcerated for an extended period of time, and she would visit him in prison with her grandmother. Leatha was raised by her mother and grandmothers and saw them as her strength and providers. She was traumatized to discover that grandfather's death by suicide had been kept from her and had difficulty in accepting this weak act from someone she admired. She got married young, had a baby, divorced, and eventually sent her son to live with her ex-husband. Her father was released from prison, disappeared, and was reported to have died. Over a period of several years, she lost her mother and both grandmothers and went through a difficult time of loss and loneliness. Leatha somewhat maintained employment but was addicted to meth for approximately thirteen years and lived in her car for four years. She was arrested for shooting off a gun on a New Year's Eve which resulted in probation and loss of her security officer job. A turning point occurred when her father reappeared very much alive and sober. He helped her get off drugs, meet her probation requirements, and find a place to live at CFV. Leatha feels that she has had a good life, is employed in the CFV community gardens, and has a young daughter.

Penny (P8) has spent over forty years living homeless, is a widow and was age fifty-three at the time of the podcast. Penny's childhood was filled with severe physical and mental abuse by her mother. Both of her parents were addicts and drugged their children to keep them quiet and unaware. After divorcing, her mother became unbearably abusive, and Penny completely ran away at the age of twelve. While on the streets, she hopped trains and traveled the country. She has been brutally raped on multiple occasions, beaten until hospitalized, and suffers from panic attacks, bi-polar and post-traumatic stress disorder. Penny has five children and though she had limited contact with them as children, she is trying to establish relationships with them now as

adults. Penny has had several long-term partners and those relationships were filled with verbal and physical abuse or fighting by both parties. Penny has been arrested several times. In Austin, she received a seven-year jail sentence for assaulting another homeless person who had been stalking her. Penny has suffered many traumatic events in her life from parental abuse, to sexual and physical assault. Recently, her current husband died with Penny witnessing his heart attack and then had to make his end-of-life decisions. Penny has been an addict since adolescence and goes through periods of high and low usage of a variety of hard drugs.

Robin (P9) was forty-seven at the time of the interview, had five children with one living at home, was divorced, but with a steady partner. Robin's parents divorced when she was in elementary school which resulted in her mother falling suddenly into alcoholism. Her father remarried an unsupportive stepmother. She began using alcohol and drugs while in high school. This usage grew into harder substances such as cocaine after graduation and entering the food service industry. Robin became pregnant at age twenty and gave the baby up for adoption. She did not fully recognize how traumatic this was for her until later after having other children. She reports that her relationships with partners have been toxic, full of fighting and discord. Robin is not afraid to throw punches and acknowledges the violence goes both ways. Her next long-term relationship, resulted in a daughter of whom the father was later awarded custody. Robin married and became a stay-at-home mom of two boys, though drugs and alcohol were still very much in the mix. Her husband disappeared with their boys and savings, leaving Robin in a bad place and searching for them. This began a period of extended addiction and homelessness, along with crime, sexual assault, and other violence. In Houston, she met Bruk and they lived together intermittently on the streets and sheltered for over a decade. Their relationship was steady, but volatile with the influence of drugs and violence. They had a daughter together that was removed

by child protective services (CPS) and placed with Graham and his wife while the couple worked toward becoming sober, stable, and employed. During the last five plus years, she has mostly had custody of her daughter with short periods of substance abuse relapse, jail, and rehabilitation.

Shea (P10) is in her early thirties, single, has autism, anxiety, ADHD, gets easily overwhelmed by noise, and was homeless for approximately four years. Her parents divorced when she was young with her father deciding he did not want to be a parent anymore. Her home had been a negative place, affected by parental fighting and her father's abusive behavior. Later, Shea's mother continued the verbal and emotional abuse. During her school years, Shea was frequently in trouble for behavioral issues though she spent a lot of energy trying to blend-in socially and ended up being homeschooled. She was diagnosed with autism as an adult. Shea completed some college courses but found learning laborious and stressful. After failing a class and frustrating her mother, their relationship broke down and she left home, beginning her years of camping in Austin. Shea has found the mental and physical exhaustion of dealing with people prohibits steady, full-time employment. Since moving into CFV, she has begun to receive mental health care services, repair the relationship with her mother, and work part-time.

Tracy (P11) was sober, divorced and age fifty-three at the time of this interview. Addiction, physical and sexual abuse, trauma, incarceration, and homelessness have been woven through her life since childhood. Tracy and her sister were sexually assaulted by her father in elementary school. Her sister was removed by CPS, but Tracy lied and remained in the home. Her mother suffered from schizophrenia, had depression, and was institutionalized several times. The cost of her treatment and medication kept the family in near poverty. Tracy left home at age fourteen, though she would come back when she needed a place to stay. She had several abusive relationships, was married for eight years, and had a child. When Tracy lost custody of her son,

she spiraled into a long cycle of addiction. She refers to herself as a “blackout user,” disappearing for years into the depths of addiction that included alcohol, opioids, meth, and crack cocaine. She has been arrested for theft, prostitution, and drug dealing, spending extended periods of time in prison. During her last incarceration, she embraced the rehabilitation programs, therapy and life-skills courses offered in the penal system. At the time of the interview, Tracy was living independently for the first time, sober and had a puppy.

### 5.3 Discussion of Coded Commonalities, Risk Factors & Vulnerabilities

In coding the interviews, I identified nine common themes of risk and vulnerability among the women. All the women had multiple risk factors that eventually manifested into homelessness. The common themes identified are physical abuse, mental illness, substance abuse, education and employment deficiencies, incarceration or jail time, family dysfunction, homelessness, trauma, health issues and disability. Table 5.1 charts the risk factors exhibited by each podcast participant, educational attainment, and their current age. All the podcast participants experienced trauma, and in the table, this was separated into emotional and violent trauma. Mental illness is charted as diagnosed and undiagnosed. Three of the women reported an actual mental illness diagnosis, two referred generally to mental health issues, while two others exhibited mental illness behaviors that were unreported.

Table 5.2 Identified Risk and Contribution Factors to Women Becoming Homeless

	Age	Education Employment	Family Dysfunction	Health Disability	Homeless	Incarceration Jail	Mental Illness	Substance Abuse	Trauma	Physical Abuse
P1	58	HS - Army		Disability/Health Issue	Homeless		Undiagnosed Mental Illness	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Emotional Trauma	
P2	65	GED-AD			Homeless		Undiagnosed Mental Illness	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Emotional Trauma	
P3	52	HS	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Disability/Health Issue	Homeless		Diagnosed Mental Illness		Violent Trauma	Diagnosed Mental Illness
P4	56	RN			Homeless	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Diagnosed Mental Illness	Emotional Trauma	
P5	74	B.Ed			Homeless		Undiagnosed Mental Illness		Emotional Trauma	
P6	62	HS	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Homeless	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Undiagnosed Mental Illness		Emotional Trauma	
P7	38	-	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Homeless	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Diagnosed Mental Illness	Emotional Trauma	
P8	53	-	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Disability/Health Issue	Homeless	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Violent Trauma	Diagnosed Mental Illness
P9	47	HS	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Homeless	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Diagnosed Mental Illness	Violent Trauma	Diagnosed Mental Illness
P10	33	HS	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Disability/Health Issue	Homeless	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Diagnosed Mental Illness	Violent Trauma	Diagnosed Mental Illness
P11	53	-	Diagnosed Mental Illness		Homeless	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Diagnosed Mental Illness	Violent Trauma	Diagnosed Mental Illness

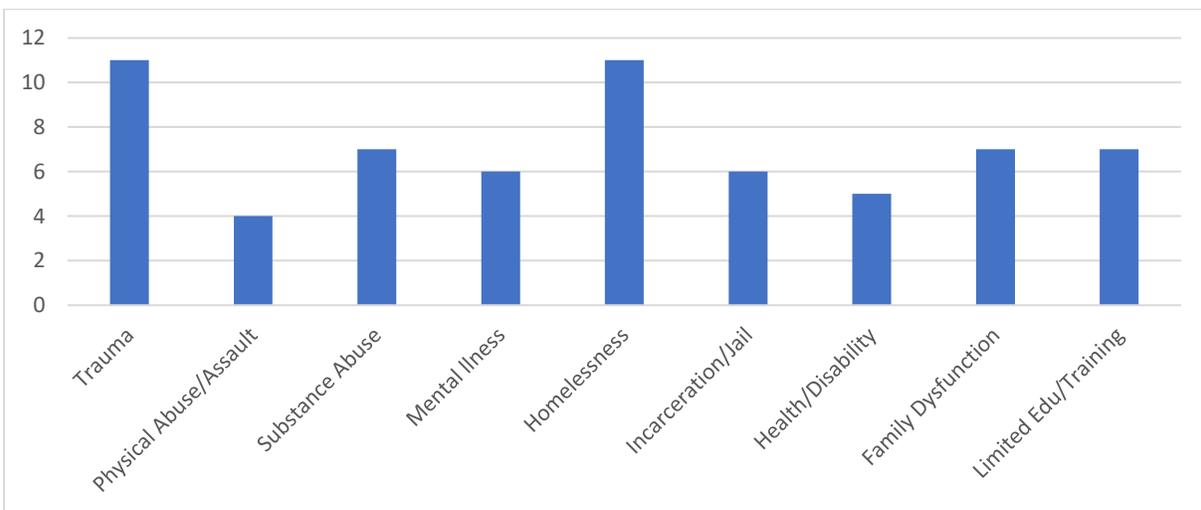
Key:

Undiagnosed Mental Illness	Undiagnosed Mental Illness
Emotional Trauma	Emotional Trauma
Homelessness	Homelessness
Diagnosed Mental Illness	Diagnosed Mental Illness
Violent Trauma	Violent Trauma
Disability/Health Issue	Disability/Health Issue

The applied code revealed nine points of commonality and risk factors. First, the women’s ages varied widely as to when they first experienced homelessness. Most of the women grew up in dysfunctional families with some experiencing physical abuse and trauma at home. A few of the women had typical upbringings, advanced education, and functional lives before falling into addiction or a mental health illness. All the women experienced multiple, but differing combinations of substance abuse, trauma, mental illness, physical abuse, educational/training deficiencies, incarceration, homelessness, health issues and disabilities. These common themes are not independent, but rather inseparable and intertwined through the lives of the podcast women. In the analysis, some of the commonalities are discussed from

multiple aspects as they are overlapping and have a cause-effect relationship. For example, incidences of abuse are traumatic and could be the result of family dysfunction, mental health issues and/or addiction. And substance abuse can lead to illegal behaviors to acquire drugs resulting in incarceration and homelessness. Various health issues and disabilities can be either a contributor or result of homelessness or long-term addiction. Many of the women struggle with substance abuse, have limited education and employment training, and experienced structural family dysfunction while growing up. Over half have been incarcerated or jailed and suffer from mental illness. Homelessness was included as a commonality since living unsheltered creates vulnerability for the other risk factors to manifest. Figure 5.4 reflects the occurrence of the shared or common experiences of the podcast participants. All of these women have experienced trauma and homelessness.

Figure 5.3 Coded Graph of Common Risk Factors



Results compiled from coded *Gospel Con Carne* podcasts.

a. Foundational Family Dynamics

Childhood experiences provide the foundation through which the world becomes knowable. Both traumatic events and the mundane interludes set expectations and train us to

react and adapt to life's joys and tribulations. In this critical phase of youth, we learn life lessons, self-control, communication, personal relationships, and social skills, and receive both informal and formal education. The effect of the foundational family dynamics is ingrained in lifelong behavior and plays a large role in one's current life situation (Anderson and Ravens 2004).

Childhood and adolescent trauma leave a damaging impact that is carried into adulthood with the potential for lifelong impacts on education, employment, social function, emotional maturity, and relationships.

Four of the eleven women interviewed had what might be considered to be good childhoods and family dynamics. In these situations, the parents were married with a healthy relationship, needs were met, education was supported, and there was an absence of substance and physical abuse. Helen B. had a close parental relationship and said her parents encouraged her to find a profession she would enjoy. "My mom said go get yourself a career, something you can feel good about. And I thought nursing. I want to take care of people and I want to feel of use." Though eventually, work burn-out, divorce and her mother's death sent Helen B. into a deep heroin addiction. Bonnie grew up in a stable family and was very proud of her father as a hard worker, provider, and medal of honor recipient. "My father when he retired, never really retired. Because he was always supporting his girls...Family, if you're there, know I still love you. Know that I'm still trying to live up to be Harry's girls." She expressed her desire to have him be proud of her also as a reason for joining the army. "Daddy, I'd like the experience. I'd like to be able to have my GI Bill. I like the fact that I want to be someone that you'll be proud of." That could possibly be the reason, upon military discharge, that she chose to hide her fragile mental and recovery state by not going home. "I didn't know where I was going. I knew that I couldn't go home, not in the shape I was in. I wasn't good for anybody."

However, the choice of partners, friends, events, and experiences can still influence life choices and outcomes. Cheryl lived in a family with strict and sheltering parents “My mom, raising me, and I didn’t really know how good of a woman she was until I got older. Because I was like, why is she so strict?...I was like mom – I’m sorry for being...for thinking you were so mean, but you did it to protect us.” Cheryl also feels that naivety made it easy for her husband to lure her into trying drugs and becoming an addict. “He was doing drugs and like I said, I was so sheltered so I didn’t really know...So he said – Why don’t you try? Won’t you?...that’s how my dilemma to drugs started.”

The interplay of vulnerabilities, risk factors, and experiences are complicated, and it is difficult to anticipate what will ultimately trigger a downward spiral into homelessness. Perception and attitude are important to the mindset one has of their life. Some of our interviewees were able to look past the bad to see positives and maintain a cheerful outlook. Leatha says, “I still don’t think I’m aware of its being a bad life and being a hard life. It was natural to me to be that...I think I had a pretty great life.” And Helen H. states that, “I’ve lived a charmed life,” though she’s had some challenges. Letty summarized her life philosophy as, “I just learned to persevere and to smile.”

Unfortunately, most of our interviewees had tumultuous childhoods that include divorce, unsupportive stepparents, single parents, physical and emotion abuse, drugs and alcohol in the home, and strained familial relationships. Having uncertainty in the home and feeling unwanted is very undermining to a child’s sense of security. This may manifest in the need to find relationships outside of their home that fill needs of acceptance, desirability, and community. Letty’s mother repeatedly told her that she was an unwanted child. “I told her you’re constantly telling me since, I guess since I was three years old, that I should never been born. And I told her

when I was a teenager, ‘the thing is, is that you may not have wanted me. But Daddy wanted me.’ Emily and Robin both had stepmothers who were not loving or accepting of them. Emily admits that she married quickly after high school to get away from her stepmom. “The only reason I got married was just to get away from my stepmom. Because my stepmom has really been abusive to me.”

Robin didn’t want to live with her father after her parents’ divorce, but her mom had fallen into alcoholism and her dad was awarded custody. Her stepmom favored her own children, neglected Robin and her sister who felt they were in the way, and the home was filled with tension. She went on to describe that a new mom in the house, “Who pretty much, I would say, favored her [own] children. And my sister and I kind of went by the wayside...So I felt like my dad was there...I could see him, but I didn’t feel his presence. I wasn’t close with him and I just wanted to live with my mom. And they wouldn’t allow that.” Shea’s father decided that he didn’t want to be a parent anymore and abandoned the family. Though his abusive presence was not missed, the stress on her mother as the sole provider amplified her own emotion and verbal abuse of Shea and her sisters. “My parents marital problems kind of reached a boiling point. They’ve been getting in some serious fights, for actually as long as I can remember. And my dad was not treating me or my sisters very well. He kind of had kids and then just decided later that he didn’t really want kids. And he didn’t want to pay for kids...My mother decided she had had enough. This wasn’t good for her or the kids...he was emotionally and physically abusive parent and she decided it was time...”

Leatha grew up in an unstable household but did not readily recognize the dysfunction. Her parents divorced while she was young and she was raised by her mother. “My mom, when she was in my life, the stuff she had to do to make money to keep roofs over our heads and

everything wasn't, as far as society is concerned and stuff, wasn't a healthy way of making money - dealing drugs, bartending you know. But I did...I looked at it and I still do is...I was proud of her for what she could do for me...You know, I was proud that even though she had to go through those ways in life to support us, she tried her best and I'm proud that she tried her best, you know?" Her grandfather committed suicide which was difficult to accept. "It was is very difficult to come to grasp with, believing that somebody so strong in my life could have done something so weak and...I just I never...I still don't understand that to this day." Her father was sent to prison when she was young and then disappeared from her life for several years. "We'd go two or three times a year to see him in prison. But it was natural. I mean it, I didn't – uh...It was...I had no other another no other life to look at to see how bad mine was, really." An aunt told Leatha that her father had passed away after her mother had died. "My dad's sister told me that he'd passed away in prison and then I lost my mom in 2010. I was like - I don't have any more parents. I don't know. I don't have any more parents. I'd already lost my grandmother, my dad's mother. And then I thought he was dead." Her father was not dead and reappeared in her life several years later. "For me to actually have a dad and um...I told him that was the hardest thing going through school, and you know, everybody's bringing their, their dads to school and everything for parent, teacher, parent day or whatever and not having not having a dad to bring. And so when we met back up, Oh my God - it was like a dream come true and he got me up here. He got me off the drugs."

There are parents capable of committing horrible atrocities to children. The scars of harm and abuse are carried by those children for a lifetime. Sometimes to the degree that the damage impairs their ability function, achieve stability, and have stable relationships. Tracy's parents were married throughout their life, but her mother had severe mental issues that required

expensive medications and periods of institutionalization. Her father sexually abused Tracy and sister resulting in severe trauma for Tracy. She recently confronted him about the sexual abuse. “I said, “What you did that day and I explained it and laid it out in detail, what you did to me affected me. And it scared me and when I looked up and you shut your eyes, it frightened me. And this is what I’ve been tormented with all my life...And he said, “I didn’t do that.” And I said, well I remember that you did.” She began her journey with addiction in her early teens and she left home at age 14. “It started out with methamphetamines, and it ended up with crack cocaine. So yeah, alcohol, I never...thought I was an alcoholic until this last go around. When I relapsed I, you know, I found myself drinking Schlitz malt liquor bull. The best thing I could find for the quickest buzz and, you know, I was drinking constantly for the effect. And let me tell you, when I am under the influence of drugs and alcohol, I’m a completely different person. It’s not nice.”

Penny’s parents were addicts and drugged their children to keep them quiet and unaware. “My mom and dad were what they called swingers back in the day...so she decided she was going to start drugging me and my sister so we wouldn’t know what was going on, but we already knew what the hell was going on.” Additionally, her mother was so physically and emotionally abusive that Penny ran away at age twelve. She has suffered from addiction and mental issues ever since. “Well, the reason why I started running away at six years old is because I was getting beat on a regular basis, being locked in closets, not being let out for hours on end, not being fed, not let go to the bathroom. Sometimes she’d welt me up so bad that I’d be bleeding.” Neither Penny or Tracy reports completing high school or holding steady employment, both suffer from mental illness, trauma, physical abuse and addiction. They left home at young ages with self-preservation being a higher priority than education.

The four women who had typical and functional family dynamics in childhood suffered from either substance abuse, mental illness or both in adulthood and experienced an average of three to four other commonalities also. The remaining women all had foundational family dysfunction along with multiple other risk factors that lead them into homelessness. These podcast participants had an average of over six commonalities with one woman experiencing all of the risk factors.

#### b. Education and Employment

The employment, educational and job training backgrounds of the women interviewed vary but skew toward low skill, employment, and education. Only three of the women achieved college degrees and five achieved a high-school level diploma. The three podcast participants who did not self-report their educational status were in unstable housing during their teen years and did not achieve self-sufficiency or have steady employment. Of the five women who completed high school or its equivalency, none found jobs leading to quality, long-term careers, or employment. Robin worked in food service, Leatha had a security guards license, while Letty was a traveling merchandise salesman for a time. Bonnie served in the military for 4 years then worked multiple jobs. Shea completed some college courses, but her autism makes studying and work overwhelmingly stressful.

Three of the podcast participants continued their education and earned a college degree. Cheryl earned an associate's degree in business and held a steady job for fifteen years with a state agency. Helen H. and Helen B. both received their bachelor's degrees and had professional careers. Helen H. was an educator and worked professionally for many years in a variety of roles from teaching to administration. Helen B. earned a nursing degree, passed the boards in the United States, and had a successful hospital oncology nursing career. In fact, she attributes her

slide into homelessness and addiction as a side effect of the intensity, emotion, and stress of her highly demanding career. She says, “I was burning out from all the years of caring...I had a lot of pain, so I wanted to numb the pain.”

Many women who lack education and training have difficulty finding well-paying jobs. Men with similar backgrounds typically become employed in construction, low skill manual labor, and mechanical jobs that pay a decent living wage. It is difficult for anyone to overcome poverty without assistance for further education, training, stable housing and access to banking and credit institutions. Without adequate income and lack of affordable housing, it is difficult for women to find housing, live independently, or even attempt to save money for unforeseen expenses, re-education, or retirement. Leatha lived in poverty in her car for years, “I was delivering newspapers, and so most of my money went back to feeding me and putting gas in my car so I could work. And uhm, so I lived out of my car...Let's see, probably a good...almost, almost four years. Almost four years.” Penny has worked sporadically at jobs throughout her life since she does not have a high school education or vocational training. “I got a job putting up the big top tent and taking it down...I was with them [the circus] for about five-six months” before landing in Austin with a mountain bike, two backpacks and eighty dollars. Bonnie worked two and a half jobs after leaving the Army and before becoming disabled, one of which was in a bar.

Those who do not have a support structure will have to find shelter or housing through an aide organization, form a partnership for housing, or become homeless. Many women become entangled in unhealthy relationships to secure housing or become vulnerable to predatory demands in exchange for assistance, potentially leading to further abuse and trauma. For example, when Tracy was released from prison she moved in with male acquaintance and agreed to help with his mom’s care. Over time, he became verbally abusive and eventually began

physical abuse her. Tracy eventually chose to move out and live in her car until moving into CFV. While homeless, Letty was repeatedly told she would need to have a man for protection, but she had several dogs for protection and was able to fight to defend herself. “I was having problems, even in my car, having problems with idiots telling me that I needed a man with me. In other words, and they tried to force themselves on me...I was like no, no, no, no. I said I can protect myself. I can fight and my dogs would get up in their faces and they’d leave. And I told the other homeless people...They said no, you need to come and move into this community with us. And I had a tent in there and everything. And it was alright for a while.” Letty had a variety of jobs through the years including selling merchandise, working in warehouses, and being a caretaker for senior citizens and property.

There are barriers to employment for the women who have experienced trauma and have mental illness, physical and cognitive disabilities (Maddineshat et al. 2021). Women who experience anxiety or depression have days when leaving the home is exceedingly difficult and interacting with people is daunting. Shea who has autism explains, “Trying to interact in a normal social setting takes up a lot of mental and emotional energy. To the point where doing anything around people costs me a lot...And it kind of translates to me that I can’t really work full time.” Bonnie was confined to a wheelchair with very limited vision an unable to work. She had to rely on her veteran’s disability pay for income.

Another barrier to work is lack of reliable transportation. Getting to work by bus is an arduous process that may require multiple transfers and long ride times. It is also possible that public transportation routes and timetables do not lineup with employment hours and location. Emily was employed at a restaurant, but eventually gave it up since it took several hours of travel round trip. “It was kind of hard because of the buses. It was a three-bus route.” Also, with

financial systems increasing becoming digital and cashless, vulnerable persons, the poor and homeless are struggling with the new cashless economy. Many women without means, (that are low income or have been a dependent,) do not have a bank account, access to credit and operate on a cash system. Without steady employment and their own credit history, they are effectively being locked out of the new economy that is based on credit and debit cards, direct deposit, Venmo and Apple Pay, designed for the elite with access to credit and computers to manage finances.

The ability and training to sustain employment that is self-supportive was a deficiency for most of the podcast participants. Three of the women completed higher education degrees and had career jobs before falling into substance abuse or mental illness. None of the remaining women, five obtaining high school diplomas and three not reporting any educational achievements, were employed steadily or in jobs that paid a living wage. Living unsheltered created an additional barrier to employment and receiving training for the women.

c. Trauma

All of the women interviewed in the podcasts suffered trauma at some point or multiple times in their lives. For this analysis, a distinction is made between emotional and violent trauma, though both are harmful to wellbeing (Anderson and Ravens 2004). Physical trauma for our subjects includes sexual and physical abuse from family members, violent attacks, rape, and assault. Emotional or psychological trauma for the women involves emotional degradation, isolation, loss of family or loved ones, betrayal, emotional and verbal abuse. Research suggests that victimization of violence is one of the most important and complex risk factors leading to homelessness (Anderson and Ravens 2004).

The sudden loss of a family or a loved one as a child can be traumatic. For Robin, her parents divorced while she was in elementary school and her mother became an alcoholic very quickly resulting in a traumatic double loss. “I remember being very close with my mother and then all of the sudden she was gone and having all these problems that I didn’t know what any of it means. So, it was a real struggle for me trying to make sure she was okay. And she wasn’t living with us...” Letty reports having an abusive mother and siblings who resented her being born. They told her stories of how her mother attempted to abort her and she wasn’t wanted. “My mom was very abusive to me, even though I was a good kid.... The reason I say I was born late is because I was not supposed to be born. Marilou and my mom apparently kept telling me growing up that they tried to abort me many times.” According to Letty, these siblings also removed her from her mother’s house and sold her possessions in a yard sale. “I first became homeless because of my siblings.”

A study completed in USA and UK cities by Broll and Huey (2020) found that women that are victims of violence, both in childhood and as an adult, are more likely to be homeless multiple times in life as adults. Penny, who was brutally gang raped says, “after something like that happens to you, anybody that’s been through that, you don’t feel clean ever again. It’s like you just feel defiled violated in some kind of way for the rest of your life. You just don’t never get over that, completely.” Emily was also sexually assaulted which resulted in twin boys. Eventually, she became homeless and her ex-husband raised her three children. Tracy was sexually abused by her father and then involved with several men who were physically abusive says, “It’s strange, but you look for a father figure, somebody to save you when you don’t have the nurturing that you need as a child. And then you almost pick someone just like your dad.”

Physical abuse with partners was reported by two of the women, though surprisingly, that abuse went both directions. Robin explains, “I always see the good in people. And so it’s like, well, if I could just tweak that and twist this, they’ll come out okay. And it just never works out and I will tell you that. Alcohol plays a huge part of it also. I don’t take shit from anybody, so a lot of times I was the first...I was the one to go in with the first punch. And I really got to the point where, and I don’t condone physical violence. I don’t think it’s okay for a man to hit a woman. But when for me, I got to the point where I was in acceptance of it. If I’m going to throw the first punch then, whoever it is, they have the right to defend themselves.” Penny once hit her partner so hard it cracked his dental plate in half, and he called the police on her.

However, over half of the women interviewed experienced physical abuse and assault. Penny says, “Men are the worst predator out there that you got to face. There’s that nothing else beats the men. The men are awful to women, women, women, young girls. It doesn’t matter. If you’re female, it’s over – yeah.” Tracy moved in with a male acquaintance after getting out of prison who physically and emotionally abused her. “I move in with him when I got out and starting helping him with his mom. And he started abusing me...First, it was verbal. Then it started getting physical. Then it was very physical. And this was severe. So, he started telling me that my family didn’t want anything to do with me...” Robin reports that almost all her relationships have been abusive. “One toxic relationship after another. I think I was in one non-abusive relationship in my entire life and everything else has been mostly physical abuse. There’s been emotional, mental all kinds of abuse. I mean any way that you can get it, I was getting it so.”

Trauma can be both emotional and physical with powerful, negative impacts. Violent trauma is well documented to have a strong correlation to homelessness for women (Broll and

Huey 2020). It is hard to accurately ascertain the impact it has on women, their mindset, life experience and trajectory since everyone experiences trauma and its manifestation differently, along with one's ability to negotiate effectively in the world (Browne 1993). Strikingly, trauma and homelessness are the strongest and most common risk factor among our podcast participants.

#### d. Substance Abuse

In this study, seven out of the eleven women have struggled with substance abuse. For a few, those habits were multigenerational and modeled by their parents. Leatha and Penny both had parents who were heavy users. "My mom...was in drugs way before her and my dad...that was their thing until they got pregnant with me," says Leatha. Several women took a typical path of progression beginning with drinking, light drugs and ending with hard drugs. Helen B. began her struggles in her early twenties. "I was already struggling with alcohol and little bit and being a nurse, I had to be real careful." The teenage years are typically a high-risk period for substance abuse to occur and habits to begin. Robin began experimenting with drugs in high school. "From high school I went on to – I worked tables. I started waiting tables. That's when I started drinking pretty heavily. Kind of comes with the job in the restaurant business and that leads to cocaine, just part of the deal, yeah. So that was probably about seventeen, but I had experimented with drugs way earlier than that. Probably about thirteen. Had my first drink when I was thirteen. Blacked out the whole nine yards." Unfortunately, substance abuse addiction is debilitating to the user, making employment precarious, draining the finances and harming relationships. Substance use disorders are more prevalent in the homeless community than the general population (Booth et al. 2002). Additionally, studies have found that substance abuse correlates with diminished cognitive abilities. Chronic drug use impairs cognitive abilities that do not improve substantially after several months of abstinence (Block et al. 2002).

Rehabilitation programs for substance abuse are expensive, have long wait lists and success is not guaranteed. The podcast interviews indicate that recovery is successful short-term, ranging from a few weeks to years. At the time of interview, none of the women had successfully stayed sober for an extended period (over ten years). Bonnie was kicked out of the VA rehab program for slow progress and non-compliance. “My question is, how compliant can you be when you are on a morphine patch? And they have given you continual drug use for the last year. I was going through major withdrawal, and I wasn’t withdrawing fast enough for them to allow me to stay in their facility.” Helen B. got off hard drugs, but still had to get clean from methadone. “It’s a long-acting narcotic. It’s used to wean people off of heroin and a kind of a maintenance drug...I got the monkey off my back with heroin, but now I’ve got a gorilla with the methadone. It’s, you feel really ill if you don’t have it.” When asked what makes rehab so difficult, Cheryl replied that everyone wants out but, “from my personal experience, I think – I did want out, but didn’t know how to do it. There is nothing outside of you that can make it go away. It’s you.” Her addiction rehabilitation program taught her important coping tools to stay sober and clean. A supportive community is also important component in recovery. Robin reports similar reasons for her and her partner relapsing back into addiction. “We’re from incredibly dysfunctional families and just all the emotional stuff that we carry. We just haven’t figured it out yet. You know, we’ll get to a happy place and then something happens and one of us will relapse. It’s been a struggle for sure.” Addiction also affects relationships with family, employment and stability. Tracy sums up this experience, “I was a blackout user. I would disappear for years. And then when I would go to jail, I would come to, because I would get clean. And then I want to get back involved in people...I was so mentally ill too. You know you

end up burning bridges with family and friends after so long. You know that it's just the same thing over and over and over and so, you begin to look for love in all the wrong places.”

The underlying reason for many that use drugs is to mask the pain of trauma and abuse. Many women who have been homeless have also been the victim of violent crime which further compounds the trauma. For instance, Penny, who was severely abused and drugged by her mother, then brutally assaulted and raped while on the streets said in her interview, “I didn't have a snowballs chance in hell of not being a drug addict my whole life off and on. I still struggle with my addiction off and on to this day.” When asked about the burden of addiction she replied, “I use it off and on because of the pain. To mask the pain, to stop the pain that I feel. And I don't want to feel it cause it hurts so damn bad I just don't want to feel it. I don't want to think about it. I just want to be numb. And that's just how it is. It's not that I don't want to stop, it's just that I don't know how to cope in any other way...there's a lot of things that factor into it besides just not wanting to feel the pain and that's why you drink or drug. But its psychological stuff that goes on in my brain all the time. That messes with me, yeah.”

Critical to success in staying sober is the environment, support structure and the community one will be in for recovery, short and long term. A study following women six-months after residential treatment found individuals with networks comprised of peers and friends engaging in negative behaviors (such as fighting, arguing and using drugs) were three and a half times more likely to return to drug use than those with friend networks engaging in positive behaviors (defined as getting along and helping each other) (Ellis et al. 2004) (Lookatch et al. 2019). Tracy affirms this with her last prison stint. “I got my trauma therapy, skillful living art therapy, AA church, everything I needed. And parenting courses every day for four and a half months. They're [Resolana program] very supportive of my recovery. You know the people that

you put around you. It just makes a difference if you surround yourself with people that are uplifting.” Leatha credits her father and young daughter as motivators in staying clean. “Oh God, now she’s the real reason that I’m staying on the straight, straight and narrow.” Research has also demonstrated that reducing one’s social network in recovery or becoming isolated can negatively impact one’s wellbeing, which emphasizes the importance of supplanting lost social connections with other support (Lookatch et al. 2019).

Substance abuse is a common theme and risk factor for women becoming homeless. Many of the women cited taking drugs to numb the pain or to make the pain go away. And recovery from addiction is difficult without learning effective coping skills or having a positive support structure. Eight of the eleven podcast participants reported suffering from substance abuse.

#### e. Mental Health

Mental health issues are a well-documented and visible factor of those living in homelessness (Tsai et al. 2017). Finding and receiving mental health services while living unsheltered is a challenge and makes exiting homelessness difficult. Five of the eleven women interviewed either self-reported a diagnosis or indicated that they had mental health issues such as autism, depression, anxiety and bipolar disease. And two podcast participants seemed unaware or unwilling to admit having mental health issues. Living on the streets may trigger conditions such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and contribute to cognitive impairment, while some women have pre-existing mental health issues which precipitate homelessness (Duke and Searby 2019). Shea reports that, “I’ve seen some people who never touch drugs just slowly mentally degrade over time. That last year that I was homeless, I started accessing services in downtown and there was this one woman freshly out of jail which ended up straight to homelessness. Uh –

went from being someone I like being around to just slowly mentally degrading. I don't know if she was like off her meds. Or what was going on, just slowly mentally degrading into almost completely incomprehension."

Cheryl suffers from such low self-esteem because of her substance abuse. She says, "Do you know it took me a couple of years before I could even like pass the mirror and look at myself...My esteem was so low, I didn't even look in the mirror." After Bonnie's friend died from an opium overdose, she went to the 'kraken house' for mental help in the military but was soon sent back into active duty. She has been in cycles of addiction and recovery ever since.

Having access to counseling for diagnosis, treatment and medication is key, but it can be difficult to find counselors, is cost prohibitive and getting medication can be unaffordable even when it is available. Taking medication continuously without gaps is a challenge when one is homeless or has limited resources. The teaching of coping skills such as removing oneself from the situation, a self-check for hunger and blood sugar status, deep breathing techniques, and the recognition of symptom onset to mitigate the effects is beneficial. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of counselors, and it is expensive for those with limited or no resources.

In many cases, diagnosis of a mental illness does not come until the person is already in crisis (Stone 2018). This can be from an encounter with law enforcement or difficulties living with family (Anderson et al. 2004). Shea has autism, depression, anxiety and ADHD. She cites the failure to diagnose and treatment her disabilities at a young age as a significant contributor to her homelessness. "Mostly my undiagnosed and unacknowledged mental health problems like I had...I'm on the autism spectrum. I'm ADHD... I desperately needed mental health resources and I didn't know how to get them. I didn't know how to access them. I was frankly too scared to even go and find them, even if I knew where to go. I'd spent most of my life being told if you

need services like that, you're crazy or you're stupid. It's it's – I didn't, I didn't know what to do and I probably would have been too scared to do it. A shame there was a shame factor when in reality. Yes, yes. I I was afraid and I felt ashamed that I needed the assistance, and I was honestly scared that it would end up hurting me more than was going to help. That was that was distinctly not true in the end. But that was like the main factor, because like my, my my depressed and ADHD brain did not deal well with the real world.”

When mental illness or disabilities aren't diagnosed until adulthood, many opportunities for intervention, education and skills training are missed. Additionally, self-esteem may be severely damaged by this point, affecting relationships and healthy interactions. Receiving treatment and medication while living unsheltered or in poverty is a challenge and sometimes not a priority for those living on the margins.

Mental illness is typically associated with homelessness and five of the eleven podcast participants either self-reported a diagnosis or indicated that they had mental health issues such as autism, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disease. The difficulty of receiving treatment and services for mental illness while living unsheltered is a challenge.

#### f. Homelessness

Living on the streets is its own trauma and increases the vulnerability for experiencing other risk factors. Being unsheltered in the elements without having regular access to food and sanitary facilities, while finding safe places to sleep and keep your few possessions is exhausting, dangerous, difficult and time consuming. Bonnie states that hope and charity is all, “you have to live with on the street. Because you are unable to fulfill the choices and the expectations of

yourself because you're lost." At the time of their interviews, over seventy percent were over the age of fifty and approximately forty-five percent lived homeless for at least ten years.

Shea says, "When you're homeless, you got all of the problems of just like staying together to keep you occupied." She also describes her time on the streets. "This is mean, but I actually, for like that first year, I was happier. It was had gotten so bad with my mother at that point that I was actually for like that first six months. And I still I where I still have a little savings. I found a little portion – I was I was actually slightly happier living in the woods by myself than with my mother. But at that point I still had hope that I was going to be able to figure out a way out of that and I didn't. My solution too, is I couldn't really figure out a way out of homelessness. So, I just did my best to stay out of trouble, so to speak. So, I spent most of my time at one at one or one of the other branches of the Austin Public Library. I had this little laptop that I had with me for over a year before, for years before I was homeless and I just took that thing with me everywhere, wrapped in garbage bags so it wouldn't get wet."

Robin says of the streets, "we did lots of crazy shit. It was just a certain freedom...I've seen it all, man, I have seen it all. I've been raped out there by knifepoint. I've watched people get strangled with wire coat hangers. It's a really rough atmosphere...You have to have fight for everything." However, Tracy found her homeless friends to be generous and compassionate. "They love me for who I was. If it came down to it, they really had my back. They would share their last with me. I'm talking about food...The reality is, is our friends on the streets are all that compassionate human beings but locked in a place that's very difficult to climb out of."

It can be challenging to navigate access to services while unsheltered. When Shea became homeless, she found the following impediments. "Then there's accessing other resources like, to keep myself safe I stay in the middle of the woods. But I didn't know how to access food

pantries. I couldn't get, couldn't figure how to get food stamps because I didn't have an address and I didn't have a case manager for the first three years that I was homeless so I didn't know how to get access to food at all... I can't work full time hours and I didn't know how to get a job...I didn't have any prior record of having an apartment, so I had no credit actually at all because I never had a credit card either. Uh, but mental health, I think, was like the main impediment to getting off the streets. Getting getting mental, getting mental health help and actually managing to get an affordable housing."

Small gestures make a big impact for those living on the streets. Leatha missed showering while living unsheltered. "I'd have a place to take a shower and that was my God, the first good private shower I've had in over a year. Oh my God, I loved it. I just loved it." And Shea was grateful for clean clothes while living unsheltered. "I met a wonderful woman there who actually started doing laundry for me every week. I would bring my dirty clothes and she would wash them so I could have clean clothes throughout the week. Absolutely wonderful." Moving back into housing was appreciated for the basics. Shea says, "I just want like lay on this bed forever because I've got a bed now and my back's not hurting anymore from sleeping on the ground and I've got a door that's going to lock. And I can just ignore everything that if I want. I can like get my computer out and I don't have to go anywhere, except like outside to go to the bathroom, of course. But still, like I have access to a shower anytime I want to have access to an actual bathroom anytime I want. I can go cook something if I want. I've got a microwave. I've got a fridge. Oh my God, this is fantastic."

Living unsheltered on the streets is dangerous and stressful as related by the personal experiences of our podcast participants. It can also be difficult to navigate assistance and services when you do not know where to look, do not have resources or a case manager, and most of a

day is spent gathering basic necessities and finding sanitation facilities. All of the women interviewed were homeless for various lengths of times and points in their life. Forty-five percent of the women were chronically homeless for over twenty years and seventy percent of the women interviewed were over the age of fifty.

#### g. Incarceration and Jail Time

Around half of the podcast participants have been arrested, with some resulting in long-term incarceration. Charges for the women interviewed ranged from theft, prostitution, assault, to trespassing, possession and dealing narcotics. Their jail time length ranged from overnight stays, to juvenile detention, mental hospitals, and long-term incarceration. Helen B. was arrested on trespassing charges while living on the streets and looking for places to shelter. Leatha received conditional probation for four years on a weapon discharge arrest. “I’ve gotten in trouble with the police and um...For shooting off a gun on on New Year’s Eve and I was on probation. I had to give up my security license and all that and then he comes in my life (her father). And I’m I was struggling with drugs myself at that time, real bad. I had been on meth, I don’t...thirteen years I had been on meth... Yeah, I didn’t want to go to prison. I always say I’m not prison quality. They’d eat me alive in there, I think.” Robin reported being arrested on multiple occasions, but does not refer to the outcome of the charges. Penny and Tracy both served long-prison sentences for charges involving assault and theft. Penny says, “I was being stalked by another homeless man for three months and the police wouldn’t do anything...I finally just got sick and tired of this guy messing me...You know he would take my stuff, but what made me snap finally on him and go off and lose it and take a baseball bat to him was him stealing my cat and his food and water.” While in prison, Tracy sobered up and then completed a program that taught, coping, parenting and life skills that she found beneficial.

There are other factors to consider when interacting with the legal system. Those who are homeless or in poverty do not have the resources to hire representation leaving them with assigned public defenders. Incarceration can result in further trauma just from being confined, and then more so if assault, rape or bullying occurs while in prison. After release, it is typically required to disclose arrests and convictions on work applications which is another barrier to employment. Also, women often have lower education levels, more limited work histories, along with lower economic status prior to prison than men. (Morrison et al. 2018).

Seven of our podcast participants have been arrested or incarcerated at some point in their lives. This can lead to further trauma and be an employment barrier, or a time to detoxify from substance abuse and receive some rehabilitative life training skills.

#### h. Health Issues & Disabilities

Only four of the women interviewed reported having health issues or disabilities which was the lowest of the common risk factors. Few women living unsheltered or in poverty have a regular doctor with continuous care, though most qualify for Medicaid and have access to community care clinics. Daily tasks of survival and transportation challenges may hinder a woman in prioritizing her health (Salem et al. 2015). Deferred medical care though can result in more acute conditions and difficult treatment. Bonnie, who received VA care, has diabetes, suffered a heart attack, and has vision deficiencies. She lost a leg to amputation and is nearly blind with macular degeneration and cataracts. This makes employment and self-sufficiency for her very difficult. Bonnie uses a wheel chair for mobility which is an obstacle in living on the streets. Emily suffers from high blood pressure which affected her health and added to her stress while she was living unsheltered. “I needed to get off the streets as quick as I could. Because of my health was going bad. Because I was in the hospital at Westlake many times with blood

pressure, passing out.” And Penny who has spent nearly her entire life living unsheltered has health issues such as bi-polar illness. She also suffers from medical and mental conditions that resulted from a homeless lifestyle and endured trauma such as panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder and other unnamed conditions. Helen B was worried about her husband living in the heat unsheltered. “Vernon was getting very stressed. I was worried about him. We’d sell art for gas. We’d go to food banks. You know that’s how we survived in the dead of summer, when it’s really hot, it’s 100 degrees. He’d have to go and try and find someone who would take a piece of art for a couple of gallons of gas. He was getting pretty fried during the summer, no AC.”

A study by White and Newman (2015) observed, “The homeless encounter obstacles in obtaining adequate clothing, food, shelter, and transportation because of limited financial resources. The inability to acquire these basic needs has deleterious consequences on the health of this population...Homeless individuals are more focused on meeting their physiological and safety needs, and may delay medical treatment... Chronic stress presents challenges in the management of chronic conditions, as well as, the promotion of overall well-being.”

Shea was diagnosed with autism as an adult. The lack of a diagnosis as a youth affected her education with teachers assuming that she had behavior problems instead of a mental disability. “They just thought I had behavioral problems. And when I actually had was a comprehension problem. Like you get a lot of noise that comes in, they think you're misbehaving. You're just covering your ears like this and you're trying to ignore them. But reality is, you're getting bombarded with like lights and sounds and it's messy and eventually you get overloaded and you start freaking out... I usually preferred to be around quieter people, and I eventually learned not to be around large groups of people. Because that's usually like the absolute worst is being like a large crowd of people with all having conversations at the same

time. So even if you're trying to talk to somebody, you're getting bombarded with all these conversations that are trying to take equal place in your head as the conversation you're having with the person in front of you...” She feels that this missed diagnosis was a large contributor to her becoming homeless.

Though only four out of the seven podcast women reported having health issues or disabilities, it is still a risk factor. The homeless community generally has less continuous health care which can result in more serious conditions and complex treatments. Living with a physical disability is a challenge especially when it comes to accessibility and transportation, while mental disabilities such as autism can be misunderstood and stressful.

## **6. Conclusion: Vulnerabilities and Risk Factors for Women and Homelessness**

The risk factors and vulnerabilities that contribute to homeless for women are a product of multiple, inseparable, compounding factors and variables that shape each other, and cannot be isolated in each women's unique life story. Addressing the life events and experiences that lead women into homelessness should be approached comprehensively as it is difficult to anticipate what will ultimately trigger a downward spiral into homelessness. Quantitative analysis would seek to isolate variables that are co-dependent, however the factors contributing to homelessness are mutually reinforcing. This directed research project seeks to illuminate the need for a multi-variate approach to designing and providing services for assistance, recovery and self-sufficiency and contribute to the understanding that women have gendered vulnerabilities and risk factors in homelessness which should be approached holistically. Specifically, I identified nine common risk factors from interviews with formerly homeless women who live in Community First Village in Austin, Texas. These risk factors, substance abuse, mental health, incarceration, education and training deficiencies, trauma, health and disability, physical abuse, homelessness, and family dysfunction, interact in a cause-effect network that can increase susceptibility and then entrap women in homelessness. Living with multiple vulnerabilities can be overwhelming, debilitating, and leave a negative impact that contributes to other risk factors, all impairing a woman's ability to obtain employment, achieve self-sufficiency, stability and healthy living.

This research draws upon and contributes to two bodies of literature. These include the definitions and causes of chronic homelessness and women's vulnerability to homelessness and needed services. Examination and further study of the interplay of vulnerabilities and compounding of risk factors for homelessness will yield insight for policy makers and care providers that lead to strategies, assistance, and recovery programs that mitigate and prevent

homelessness proactively and wholistically instead of as independent problems and issues to be solved.

In conclusion, there will always be a stream of vulnerable people at risk of falling into homelessness and the gendered factors that contribute to homelessness for women are situational, difficult to identify and quantify, cumulative and interconnected. With a better understanding of the complexities of homelessness for women, more purposeful, preventative, and strategic support to serve vulnerable and homeless women can be designed and implemented rather than singular, generic, gender-neutral solutions.

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## APPENDIX A

### GCC\_BonnieDurkee\_4.25.18\_SoundMix.01\_2.mp3

May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018

00:28:48

Speaker 1 – Bonnie Durkee

Speaker 2 – Narrator

Speaker 3 – Alan Graham

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/34/>

**00:00:00**Speaker 1

Hi, welcome to Community First we are talking with Alan Graham, making a podcast.

**00:00:11**Speaker 2

You're listening to the gospel con carne a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society, through untold stories of homelessness. Your host, Alan Graham, is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades, Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative community, first village, the country's only master plan community designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne here's your host Alan Graham.

**00:00:54**Speaker 3

I am really super excited to have in the studio right now, my friend and neighbor, Bonnie Durkee. She's actually a veteran, was part of the United States Army, and we'll talk about that here in a few minutes. Bonnie, how long have you and I known each other? to kind of. Can you remember what year that might go back to?

**00:01:17**Speaker 1

That goes back to the year of 2009.

**00:01:23**Speaker 3

2009. So that's that's nine years now. Bonnie - welcome into the studio. Thank you for being here. So 2009. Where were we? How did we meet? Tell me about that.

**00:01:31**Speaker 1

Thank you. In actuality, I met this kind man at a dinner, given downtown at Thanksgiving. I had benefited, and had had a wonderful experience of being fed off the trucks.

**00:02:06**Speaker 1

Umm, when I arrived in town, homeless, having just been thrown out of the VA hospital, because they said I was non-compliant. My question is, how compliant can you be when you are on a morphine patch? And they have given you continual drug use for the last year. I was going through major withdrawal and I wasn't withdrawing fast enough for them to allow me to stay in their facility.

**00:02:57**Speaker 1

I met a gentleman up there who said, I'm homeless. I don't have a good place to go, but if you need help, I'll help you. I know of a wonderful group in Austin, who is planning to have a community of home, formerly homeless people. Would you like to come and see if you can fit it?

**00:03:35**Speaker 3

So, umm, take me back a little bit to your childhood and tell me about your Mom, and Dad, brothers and sisters, how you grew up.

**00:03:47**Speaker 1

My father was a posthumous award winner of the Medal of Honor. And he was my daddy. He and my mother raised 5 girls, of which I'm the third. And I left home at 17 after I conned dad into allowing me to join the military. He told me it...females in the military don't match. Why the only kind of woman that joins the military is one looking for a man.

**00:04:45**Speaker 1

I said daddy, I'd like the experience. I'd like to be able to have my GI Bill. I like the fact that I want to be someone that you'll be proud of.

**00:05:05**Speaker 3

So your mom and dad were uh?

**00:05:08**Speaker 1

I lived in the thumb of Michigan. The only thing I had to look forward to was marrying into a nice family that never got any further than the Detroit area. And consider that to be a major trip.

**00:05:32**Speaker 3

So what was your childhood pretty solid?

**00:05:36**Speaker 1

My, my father was working basically a job for every daughter. I was the 3<sup>rd</sup>. When I was born he had three jobs. He was a farmer. He was a carpenter. And he was a postal employee, part-time - just waiting for someone to die so he could become a full-time postal employee. My father when he retired, never really retired. Because he always was supporting his girls. And when we buried him at the Mount Holly Veterans Cemetery, hint, hint. Family if you're there now, I still love you. Know, I'm still trying to live up to be Harry's girls.

**00:06:54**Speaker 3

How, how old were you when he passed?

**00:07:02**Speaker 1

My father died the same year as I arrived here. The reason I couldn't call my daddy up was during the time that I was in a coma. He was unable to come here because he was basically in the same kind of shape. He would go, I take it back - he was on his way back from South America, where he had hopped on his bike, taking one of my cousins as a graduation present from nursing school, and laughingly told the relatives, 'hey at my age how many people do you know that can jump on their bike, go to South America to go to carnival.'

**00:07:58**Speaker 3

So let me ask you this, where your where your mom and dad pretty close, was it a tight?

**00:08:05**Speaker 1

My mother and my father, until my mother died.

**00:08:10**Speaker 3

She she passed first.?

**00:08:12**Speaker 1

Yes sir, my mother was an Alzheimer's patient who escaped from her nursing home two weeks before my birthday. And she was going home because she knew one of her girls had a birthday coming up. And she had to be there in time to get my cake made.

**00:08:42**Speaker 3

So your mom and dad had a pretty good, tight relationship up up until the time that your mom and your mom got sick, yeah?

**00:08:49**Speaker 1

Yes

**00:08:51**Speaker 3

And then you went off at 17 to join the army. Tell me about that experience and how long you were in the service.

**00:08:56**Speaker 1

Yes. Sir. I managed to make it through from 1977 when I, two months after I graduated from high school. I went and, I started, I signed my contract. I went from there to basic training AIT and then I went to Deutschland by way of Fort Benning, Georgia. Georgia, excuse me. And from there I went to Germany. And was in the most wonderful Rhine Valley. And during that time I turned 19.

**00:10:01**Speaker 1

On my 19th birthday, a friend of I, and I decided that we were going to celebrate my birthday by going to Turkey on the train. We went to Turkey on the train and came back with four very carefully wrapped bags of heroine bulbs.

**00:10:37**Speaker 1

That when you scrape the outside of a heroin ball it will give you the milk. My friend said, 'we are going to celebrate your birthday with a bit of that milk.'

**00:11:00**Speaker 1

I said great. I'm going back to the barracks. I'm going to pick up a...the birthday cake that should be there that my mom sent. It's in the mailroom and I haven't been able to get it because the mailman hasn't delivered it. Or rather, I haven't been able to get there during the time that he's there. I went, I picked up the cake. I went back. My friend had started the celebration without me and died.

**00:11:44**Speaker 3

Wow. That's a, that's a.

**00:11:45**Speaker 1

Yeah - I went to the Kranken house and, because I was having difficulty. The doctor there sent me back to the military. I managed to keep it together long enough to make it to my 21st birthday. And then I got discharged.

**00:12:31**Speaker 1

Flew over to Fort Dix. From Fort Dix, I didn't know where I was going. I knew I'd, I couldn't go home, not in the shape I was in. I wasn't good for anybody. But I did know.

**00:12:46**Speaker 3

Because of the because of the drug use.

**00:12:49**Speaker 1

No, by that I I I was off of everything. I just knew that if I went back to Michigan, I'd start the whole process over again. I wasn't strong enough yet.

**00:13:13**Speaker 1

I called one of the guys that I'd met at Fort Benning, who had jokingly been after me -we really should get married, you know? We've had sex with each other. You went to Korea on a vacation and visited me under DMZ. And we were illegal there until you got the train back to Seoul and went back to Germany. Now, don't you think we could get married?

**00:13:57**Speaker 1

Well, that was 27 years later. He retired. We'd had three children by then. And he walked into one of the 2 1/2 jobs that I was working then, in a bar, with his latest girlfriend. That everyone knew by name. Debbie, thank you for blessing me with the intervention that made me realize I was strong enough to stand on my own, or so I thought. I, my divorce became final in 2007. October, I believe it was either the 22nd or the 23rd. I got sick, lost my job, lost my home basically between Thanksgiving and the New Year of 2008. And I was in a coma in 2008, until I ended up at the Temple VA domiciliary. And met the gentleman that said I'll help you find a new place where you can establish a home.

**00:16:03**Speaker 1

Well, guess what? I'm currently living in my basically my 4th residence since then. And they've all had Mobile loaves and Fishes as the actual site owner.

**00:16:28**Speaker 3

Now how many how? Many years did you live on the streets?

**00:16:34**Speaker 1

In actuality, off and on for 30 years. Like everything else in my life it was an up and down journey and now I am at the crest of a long continuous beach. That is going to be my last time I move if I have my way. But until God tells me I can't. I have to leave this earth. Well, I know where my next home is - I don't care if it's on the right hand or the left-hand side. I'm going to be heaven bound and I'm going to make it.

**00:17:32**Speaker 3

Well, the one of my friends.

**00:17:34**Speaker 1

Oh friends, here are incredible.

**00:17:36**Speaker 3

Well, one of my friends claims that he believes that heaven is like a rock concert. Some of us are going to be on the front row and then some of us are going to be in the nosebleed seats up at the top. But we're all inside the concert, so...

**00:17:51**Speaker 1

I just know that, it'll be here. And it won't - it'll be an out of body experience. Because I'm going to leave this bit of flesh here. And when I get there everything that I've ever done to myself or anything one else has done to me. Because I do accept responsibility for 'this.'

**00:18:24**Speaker 3

Well, you know Bonnie I, I admire you in a number of different ways. And one of them is just the resilient nature of who you are and...

**00:18:33**Speaker 1

I'm a survivor.

**00:18:33**Speaker 3

You've lost a leg and you're and you're blind or 95%.

**00:18:36**Speaker 1

I'm blind and well, come on now, don't be giving me any less than I've got.

**00:18:45**Speaker 1

I have 10 to 20% vision left. I'm allowed to interact.

**00:18:56**Speaker 3

Well, tell me what's going on with your eyesight? What's what? What is that?

**00:19:00**Speaker 1

I have macular degeneration, which means I should have tunnel vision.

But I also have cataracts. I also have retinal pigmentosa. And in other words, I'm blind as a bat. But I'm allowed to, with the tools are available, I will no longer accept surgery as being an option. Because the last time I even went to get my mouth fixed. Thank you, Mobile Loaves and Fishes. They told me my chances of making it out was less than 10% - of making it through anesthesia. I've been a... I've had a heart attack. I'm a diabetic.

**00:19:58**Speaker 3

You've lost, you've lost...

**00:19:59**Speaker 1

I'm falling apart all over the place. But you know the wonderful thing about it is.

It's not gonna stop me.

**00:20:10**Speaker 3

Well, you've lost a leg and you've lost that due to diabetes. Correct?

**00:20:14**Speaker 1

Correct.

**00:20:15**Speaker 3

And when did you lose that leg? Remind me?

**00:20:19**Speaker 1

Oh, I lost it, 2008 and I wasn't even aware of it.

**00:20:23**Speaker 3

So before before we met you, you were. You had lost that leg, okay?

**00:20:27**Speaker 1

Oh yeah, and then, then I came to Austin with my friend. And we were working on year old information. By the time we arrived at what is commonly called camp crack.

That was on a dump site here in Austin where I lived.

**00:20:53**Speaker 1

And we contacted Mobile Loaves and Fishes and said, 'what happened?'

**00:20:59**Speaker 1

You know we were told we were told. The neighborhood wouldn't accept a bunch of druggies. A bunch of homeless freaks.

**00:21:15**Speaker 3

Well, the neighborhood didn't realize how beautiful you were and are. So tell me about, yeah, you've lived with us in a couple of different RV parks and that that was okay. I mean, it was good to be off the street.

**00:21:27**Speaker 1

This is my third one and Alan Graham, and if you think you're getting me out of here, you are loco in your cabeza!

**00:21:34**Speaker 3

Well, tell me what it's like to live in this community, the Community First Village and and together Bonnie. We finally got here and you were part of that journey. A big part from...

**00:21:44**Speaker 1

I was part of the 1st 20 that arrived. Now we're sitting closer to 200 than not. Because every day they actively endeavor. To make one soul will be blessed. Allow us to be a neighbor sometimes. Your neighbor may be someone you look at and go we are so far apart in our journey. But I'm glad you're here. Have we ever had problems? Of course, but if you think back to your personal family. And if you tell me that you've never had a problem with a sibling, a parent, a child? I'll ask you. My gosh, where did this family come from? Did God send you to Earth?

**00:22:59**Speaker 1

Because you're telling me. You're all angels, you're perfect. There's no such thing as a perfect person. Hey look who I'm talking to the man who is still striving to pull us all, to a better place. And he's not part - the only one. Crud, he thought he was going to get away with just giving somebody a bottle of water and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich that he had pulled out of the back end of a soccer moms van.

**00:23:44**Speaker 3

Before we close in this interview, give me the top three to five things that you love about this community.

**00:23:53**Speaker 3

And if you want you can throw in a couple of things that - or maybe struggles for the community.

**00:24:00**Speaker 1

OK. Every day that each of us wakes up in the morning. We have the same struggles that everybody has. We have to make the choice. There are three major rules that you have to live by out here. One, you will pay your rent. Two, you will obey federal and state laws - the ones that you'd like to skirt. And three, I always forget #3. I think it has something to do with?

**00:24:41**Speaker 3

It's like we have rules like a homeowners association or a condominium association that it's.

**00:24:47**Speaker 1

Because this is our house.

**00:24:50**Speaker 3

It's our houses, so keep it, keep it nice, keep it clean.

**00:24:53**Speaker 1

Yeah, yeah. Are we? Do we always remember all three of those, no. Sometimes we need a gentle reminder.

**00:25:04**Speaker 3

So you like the order you like the order.

**00:25:04**Speaker 1

I kick in the butt.

**00:25:09**Speaker 3

And some structure.

**00:25:12**Speaker 1

I have always been structure orientated from the time I. My father said it's time for you to get your diaper changed. Well, I'm still listening to my father, in my head of course, telling me be a person of integrity, make me proud.

**00:25:36**Speaker 3

Well before we run out of you before we run out of time, I want you to nail a couple of other quick things that you love out here.

**00:25:44**Speaker 1

One I love the peace. I love the serenity. It isn't here all the time. But we are all striving toward that. Peace, serenity, hope. We don't have to live by charity alone, which is what basically you have to live with on the street. Because you are unable to fulfill the choices and the expectations of even yourself because you're lost.

**00:26:25**Speaker 3

Is there anything about the community that you would change?

**00:26:28**Speaker 1

Sure, I'd like you to be more ADA positive, but I'm positive it's on the way. And if I keep grumbling, griping, snarling in appropriate times, in appropriate measures. AKA being willing to put up with short term negative, hoping for the best. Hoping that long term this place will be so ADA qualified. Which is American Disabilities Act, in case you aren't up on your acronyms.

**00:27:16**Speaker 3

I'm up on them.

**00:27:18**Speaker 1

That's right, because who is snarled at you for how many years about.

**00:27:23**Speaker 3

You have a, you have a sweet snarl.

**00:27:25**Speaker 3

Hey listen Bonnie, I I'm very grateful that you've come into the studio with us today. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for being in here and opening up the way that that you have.

**00:27:38**Speaker 1

And what I say to you is...and one of the places I tried to think of myself, because it's one of the last truly places I was happy with. I'd like to say – 'vobiscum' which means go with God and it's also another form of hello.

**00:27:58**Speaker 3

So, ladies and gentlemen, as we close this Gospel Con Carne podcast. We want you to go out and be the goodness in your community. God bless.

**00:28:08**Speaker 1

And come by and see us sometime y'all here.

**00:28:15**Speaker 2

You've been listening to the Gospel Con Carne with Alan Graham.

**00:28:18**Speaker 2

When he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Alan at the helm of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry, in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless. Music for today's broadcast has been provided by Community First neighbor and musician John 'JR' Rogers. Learn more and find out how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

Notes: Year of birth – 1960. Deceased – 2021

## APPENDIX B

### Cheryl\_Williams\_edit1.mp3

September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020

00:29:21

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Cheryl Williams

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/13/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society through untold stories of homelessness.

**00:00:20**Speaker 1

Your host, Alan Graham, is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless.

**00:00:32**Speaker 1

For more than two decades, Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative community, first village, the country's only master plan community. Designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne, here's your host Alan Graham.

**00:00:52**Speaker 2

Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast.

**00:00:55**Speaker 2

I am excited today to have in the studio, my neighbor and somebody I admire and really, somebody that is one of the most beautiful people - both physically and spiritually that I've ever met and and this is Cheryl Williams.

**00:01:19**Speaker 2

Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast.

**00:01:22**Speaker 3

Hi, thank you.

**00:01:24**Speaker 2

I am so grateful that you're with us today.

**00:01:28**Speaker 2

I can't remember - when did you move in to the village?

**00:01:31**Speaker 3

March 2016.

**00:01:34**Speaker 2

Oh my goodness. So, it's four years. It's over 4 years.

**00:01:38**Speaker 2

I I told somebody this morning. I think there's so much water going under my bridge that I can't hardly remember. I was going to say that it's been about two years, but it's been 2X that.

**00:01:54**Speaker 2

So, tell us a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up? Tell us about your mom and dad and brothers and sisters and whatever life was at that point in time for you.

**00:01:57**Speaker 3

Okay

**00:02:00**Speaker 3

Okay, I was born and raised in Houston, TX.

**00:02:06**Speaker 3

My mother, Freddie Collins and my father, Marvin Tibbs, and I am one of nine sisters and five brothers.

**00:02:17**Speaker 2

Oh wow – yeah, beautiful.

**00:02:21**Speaker 3

So it was and it was good being...My mom raising me and I didn't really know how good of a woman she was until I got older because I was like, why is she so strict.

**00:02:37**Speaker 3

You know she actually put a 8 foot fence around our our home. She wouldn't let us go parties or nothing like that.

**00:02:46**Speaker 3

And actually, when I got older, I was like mom - I'm sorry for being...so thinking you were so mean, but you did it to protect us.

**00:02:57**Speaker 3

And I really had to come to forgiveness for that. But growing up, like I said, and we didn't want for anything, and that was another reason why....

**00:03:12**Speaker 3

How could my mom do this here? I mean the Christmas tree half stacked high with gifts. You know, how could she afford it. and uh - but anyway, it was a good child life that I grew up in and besides, I thought she was too strict. And when I went to school, I got to the 12th grade and I got pregnant. and back in them times pregnant women couldn't go to the regular school.

**00:03:43**Speaker 3

I'm like no mom, I don't want to go to no school like that because I'm about to get on that little bus. So I didn't go. But I went back after I had my baby and got my GED. And I went on to go to Houston Community College and got a business certificate.

**00:04:00**Speaker 3

And then I got married and then I started working for the State of Texas Department of Human Services where I resigned from, after 15 years, because I wanted to be a stay-at-home Mom and lo and behold, my my husband thought that that meant be a stay-at-home Dad. So everything start to go down. And he was doing drugs and like I said, I was sheltered so I didn't really know.

**00:04:29**Speaker 3

The only thing I knew about was marijuana and they talked about heroin on the news and stuff, but he was doing crack to my unbeknownst and so he - Well, don't you try? won't you?

**00:04:44**Speaker 3

I'm like no because I was a Christian woman, a family woman, but I didn't even drink herself for holidays. But that's how my dilemma to drugs started.

**00:04:57**Speaker 3

Yeah, and it went on to take me to a real real dark, dark place and I must say this here,

**00:05:08**Speaker 3

When me and my second husband was together he was like babe, I'm gonna retire. Where do you want to move? And do you know what I said?

**00:05:18**Speaker 3

Austin and I never knew anything about Austin, had never been, so I will...(look at that you (reference Alan))...so I knew it was a God thing that brought me here to the village. And I'm grateful that it did because this is where I had my struggles. But overall, I love this place and, like I said, it was a path that God set me on and now He has set me on another path.

**00:05:53**Speaker 3

He's reunited me with my son, my grandkids, and my great grandkids, and pardon me if I'm skipping over.

**00:06:02**Speaker 2

You you do not have great grandkids, so don't be lying on this deal. Now I'm I'm looking at a 35 year old woman here that can't have great grandkids, yeah.

**00:06:06**Speaker 3

No no, no no I have.

**00:06:11**Speaker 3

And you know what, it's it wasn't what I did. It was by the Grace of God that kept me, through all the midst of my troubles, and I am really, really just so grateful that.

**00:06:26**Speaker 2

So when when you got introduced to drugs what what year roughly was that?

**00:06:31**Speaker 3

This was like in the late 80s.

**00:06:34**Speaker 2

Oh late 80s OK and then that run must have gone on for....

**00:06:39**Speaker 3

Up until 2020.

**00:06:42**Speaker 2

Yeah, up until now, yeah, yeah and yeah.

**00:06:48**Speaker 2

And so I guess crack cocaine was your drug of choice.

**00:06:50**Speaker 3

Yes, and it was my drug of choice. And after I came to the village, I guess I was up here about two years, and I found myself indulging more and more. And I really don't think that you'll probably knew that I was having an issue, but...

**00:07:12**Speaker 2

Oh - we know. And the reason we know is that we care. And and we know and we you know you can see it right.

**00:07:21**Speaker 2

I mean you, you know, don't you know when people are are using and indulging and yeah?

**00:07:23**Speaker 3

Yeah, you're right.

**00:07:25**Speaker 3

Yes I do.

**00:07:28**Speaker 3

That was what I thought because I didn't want nobody to know my messed up thinking. And I came to....

**00:07:31**Speaker 2

No, of course, yeah.

**00:07:36**Speaker 3

Talk with Tricia and told them that I needed help and they you know made it where I could go to rehab, and I did two months and I came back, stayed clean for a little while and then lo and behold, I'm back into a deeper deep every spot in my life with drugs and I,

**00:08:02**Speaker 3

when I'm like oh God, please please do something, help me and I went back - came back to y'all again because I need it again. And y'all sent me and I'm so grateful for that because I was going to be gone for 60 days and I'm like I'm not ready.

**00:08:23**Speaker 3

And you all say, OK, we'll let her stay and I stayed like four months, and that was in this past July and I've been sober - you know, since then, and I was only, by the grace of God working through this community, and....(clap.)

**00:08:46**Speaker 2

What what do you - what do you think? And look in my younger days I was an abuser, you know alcohol and you know powder cocaine it you know. Back in the 1980s. But I never got that monkey on my back, uh - that I couldn't shake off. And you know, I've my life has always been around addicts and I've never ever met an addict that wanted to be an addict.

**00:09:19**Speaker 3

Okay.

**00:09:21**Speaker 2

You you - didn't you want out of that?

**00:09:23**Speaker 3

Of course.

**00:09:30**Speaker 2

And and and and the people that you were around that were in that deal they wanted out. Everybody wanted out. What is it? What is it - do you think that is so difficult about that climb out? Because I know that it's one of the tallest mountains on the planet to climb. What what makes that? From your personal experience, what makes that so difficult?

**00:09:50**Speaker 3

From my personal experience, I think - I I did want to, but I didn't know how to do it.

**00:10:05**Speaker 3

And I learned that, during I got the principles and all of this here to cope with it or to keep me sober. And because of it was a lot of things....

**00:10:18**Speaker 3

Family, you know, kept me using. That's why I wanted to blame it on. But it was really, I think, that I just hadn't surrendered. For me. That's what it was. And I finally surrendered.

**00:10:33**Speaker 2

That's the there's nothing outside of you that can make it go away. It's you.

**00:10:39**Speaker 3

Right.

**00:10:39**Speaker 2

Yeah, there's no system. I mean you can learn the things, but it's still entirely up to you.

**00:40:45**Speaker 3

Exactly

**00:10:46**Speaker 2

Did your mom and dad stay married all their lives?

**00:10:50**Speaker 3

Yes, uh-huh.

**00:10:50**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, and was your father.

**00:10:54**Speaker 2

I mean did y'all have a great relationship as well?

**00:10:56**Speaker 3

Yes, me and my father had a real great relationship.

**00:10:58**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:11:01**Speaker 2

And your siblings are you in touch with most of them or is there some disconnection?

**00:11:06**Speaker 3

I had to disconnect from them because. Well, the ones that's love was at the family house in a way, if it's five of them, four of them is doing drugs, and I've always had a low self-esteem that came from a childhood with my siblings.

**00:11:28**Speaker 3

Because - so they say that my mother and father favored me, so I was really cute and I always wanted to be with - no, don't be mad at me. No, you can play with this. Oh - they bought you this because of that. I didn't get. And I'm like, but you can have it. And they might tear it up or something like that.

**00:11:47**Speaker 3

So I really came from a - oh I don't know the word to use, but my self-esteem was just totally low and I, I wasn't me, I was who they wanted me to be. And it took me 40 years to realize, you know, I have to be Cheryl. That it's not Cheryl being what other people, wanting wanting me to be so...and they're basically still the same. So I disconnected from them, you know about a year ago.

**00:12:24**Speaker 3

But thank God, my immediate family is my son, my grandchildren.

**00:12:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, beautiful. Now of of the 14 what number are you?

**00:12:36**Speaker 3

Six.

**00:12:37**Speaker 2

Six, so you were pretty fairly early on in that in that deal.

**00:12:42**Speaker 2

Was it fun growing up with such a ginormous family?

**00:12:46**Speaker 3

It was for me.

**00:12:47**Speaker 3

Yes, we had our own baseball team. And my mom made sure that we had any type of game - pool table game, board game. I mean it was like how could we have it all of this here, but that was her way of keeping us, you know, at home and not going everywhere. So it was a real upbringing.

**00:13:15**Speaker 2

Well, I was I was born born in Houston as well.

**00:13:18**Speaker 2

Hermann Hospital is where I was born.

**00:13:19**Speaker 2

Where were you born?

**00:13:20**Speaker 3

JD

**00:13:21**Speaker 2

Yeah, is that?

**00:13:21**Speaker 3

Jefferson Davis.

**00:13:22**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah OK yeah.

**00:13:24**Speaker 2

And we, you know our original home place was in Bel Air where where were you?

What part of Houston?

**00:13:31**Speaker 3

Like 610, was like what we call was Foster Place. It was like between Third Ward and 610. South Loop.

**00:13:41**Speaker 2

Uh-huh yeah yeah yeah. I mean 610 was under construction when I was growing up so yeah.

**00:13:49**Speaker 3

And that was like right off of Cullen Blvd. and Scott.

**00:13:53**Speaker 2

Yeah. And so you you clearly at one point in time you you were homeless. How how long were you?

**00:14:01**Speaker 3

Well, after what happened after my husband that I was with. He...well, we used to go vacationing all the time. And that was the one who said Where do you want to move when I retire. And so, anyway, we would go on vacation and he would be sick all the time, so I like I'm going to take you to the emergency room. That way they would run all kind of tests and he came up here esophagus cancer and they gave him like six months and and it was six months. And then two months after that, my ex, he passed.

**00:14:44**Speaker 3

So, I was in this oh real dark place. And uh, So, my son was here with his girlfriend, so I wound up coming here. But then I went back and then I came back again. And the question again? I went off the question, what did you ask me?

**00:15:10**Speaker 2

Well, the question was when you became homeless.

**00:15:13**Speaker 2

And yeah, yeah.

**00:15:13**Speaker 3

Yes, and that's that's when it was that he passed.

**00:15:17**Speaker 2

And what year was that roughly?

**00:15:19**Speaker 3

This it was in 2007.

**00:15:21**Speaker 2

OK, and so how?

**00:15:23**Speaker 2

How long did you spend on the streets?

**00:15:25**Speaker 3

About five years? Wow, yes, because it was thirteen, 2013 when I came back and it was another hurricane or something that had happened and I came.

**00:15:42**Speaker 3

My son told me he said, well, mom, come here, until you get yourself together and he was telling me, well, you know you probably can file because of the storm. Because I'm like, yeah, but I told them that I was, had somewhere to stay at that time. So anyway, that's how I wound up staying FEMA helped me and I stayed here for a couple of years after that and then...

**00:16:04**Speaker 2

And then, how did you find your way to the community First village? Who who helped out there?

**00:16:10**Speaker 3

OK, so when I lost my apartment through FEMA went back to Houston. I came back. And so a friend of mine told me when, I had a friend - my ex daughter-in-law, she said, why don't you go down to the Salvation Army and they'll you know help you, try to get you some help. And I went to the Salvation Army. And I got a case manager and I would go every morning. You have to leave out, so I went. And we would go to the Trinity Center and it was a guy that were worked in the back, a young guy. He said, have you ever heard about community first village?

**00:16:50**Speaker 3

I'm like no. And he was like...he kind of gave me, you know, what it was about.

And he said, well, if you want, I can set you up and you can go take a tour and that's what I did. And like a year or so later. Uh, I was accepted and I moved in.

**00:17:12**Speaker 2

Yeah, your your perception at first of moving in. What was that perception like of this place?

**00:17:21**Speaker 3

When they told me you know what, I'm like that's cool - your own little house, you know, and that's like of course I have my own door key, not to be sleeping on somebody's couch.

**00:17:34**Speaker 2

And it was probably very hope filled.

**00:17:40**Speaker 3

It was.

**00:17:41**Speaker 2

Moving into a new place and.

**00:17:44**Speaker 3

It was very much that, and even like when I when I came and took the tour, it was just something about the people that I was like, oh, they're so nice and you know, I just felt the loving. You know? Of some, you know something of help, hope, and all of that.

**00:18:07**Speaker 2

Yeah, but this place isn't perfect, is it?

**00:18:10**Speaker 3

Oh what not, by no means. Not here or nowhere else.

**00:18:14**Speaker 2

So there's plenty of temptation and tension and and it just reminds us of family, right?

**00:18:21**Speaker 3

Yes, it does. Yeah, yeah.

**00:18:23**Speaker 2

We're a mess.

**00:18:25**Speaker 3

And people have said, well, oh, the community first village this, this and this and that I'm like, well I can't, I can't see how you can blame community first village of the negativism that's going on in the village because us as individuals living here.

**00:18:46**Speaker 3

You know we have to want or don't want a certain thing. So I I can't say nothing, but I don't haven't seen anything you know to blame community first village for my whatever my drug use or my whatever because they all have been there for me, on all levels. And I was, you know, and I accept it.

**00:19:16**Speaker 3

You know y'all help and I just think that that's what a lot of people here who struggling with different things you know you have to open up and say I need some help and accept it.

**00:19:32**Speaker 2

You know, recently one of our neighbors, Vanessa, yeah, passed away and you know, I I glory in the belief that she's resurrected and is in heaven. So, my my sadness doesn't go too deep because I'm also very happy that, you know, that I believe that she's in heaven, but that day,

**00:20:02**Speaker 2

From my perspective I thought was profound, watching all of the people out there for hours until she was removed from her home. And that's a that's a process that most people probably don't understand how that unfolds, and there's got to be investigations. And the coroner comes out and does their deal. And who knows when they can get out. And, uh, but I was watching 50,60,70 people out there praying singing, Amazing Grace, laughing, crying, doing all that, what, what?

What did that look like from your perspective? Because we had an opportunity to talk when we were there.

**00:20:42**Speaker 3

Yeah, that day.

**00:20:42**Speaker 2

And I just thought it was your conversation was beautiful.

**00:20:47**Speaker 3

Yes, well that day, you know I cried and I was happy and we in the rain get out. And didn't bother by getting wet, but it also took me to a place where we never know, you know, if we have another day. You know, just try to live the day. It's good, you know the way God would want you to live and like I said, we all have our struggles and I don't know, I just I was real saddened by that and then some people wanted to say, well it was because, I don't know if I should say, well it was because of the drugs, that's why and they shouldn't let the drugs come in.

**00:21:34**Speaker 3

To come and say, well, look, it's it's drugs everywhere. You know, but you can't say that community first village is the reason why people are using drugs, because I know for me when I went and got my drug, I didn't get it here I go out somewhere and get it so it's not going to keep you from doing drugs unless you are ready.

**00:22:01**Speaker 2

Yeah I would. I mean we would all love for drugs to go away.

**00:22:09**Speaker 3

Of course.

**00:22:09**Speaker 2

They're not going away and so we live in that we live in that environment.

**00:22:16**Speaker 2

I wish I could wave a magic wand and and remove that from everybody's deal, but that's impossible. I'd be, I'd have to, I'd have to glue my... And I had to hand my cuff myself to everybody in the neighborhood.

**00:22:28**Speaker 2

To even remotely begin to to do that, you just can't.

**00:22:33**Speaker 2

I don't think you can force people into that, can you yeah?

**00:22:35**Speaker 3

Right and I was still, you know, the people who, saying that they think the staff have to do that. I'm like come on, the staff came knock at your door and grab your hand and said come on go to this meeting. Or come on go to rehab so don't blame it it's it's not community first.

**00:22:55**Speaker 2

No, it's that's that's that's a good perception, I think that you have.

**00:23:04**Speaker 2

And so, when will, when will you be going to Houston, when?

**00:23:07**Speaker 3

I will be leaving October the 1<sup>st</sup>, October the first, yeah.

**00:23:13**Speaker 3

And that's going to be such a beautiful thing, because like I say, I try to stay on God's path where he's got me in because I had my plans was this is where I was going to when I leave and go to heaven. I'll be leaving community first village, but.

**00:23:33**Speaker 3

Uh, God has united me and my son back together and he was like mom, I just I just want to come. I just want to be with you Mama. I want us to do things that we didn't do, you know, because we didn't have time because we was into drugs or whatever. And it just stuck with me because it was like I just want my Mama and he said they're like 5 or 6 times that that night.

**00:24:00**Speaker 3

I would be waking up and that's all the thing that I could hear and I prayed about it and..it's time.

**00:24:08**Speaker 2

How many children did you have?

**00:24:09**Speaker 2

Just the one the one son and how old is?

**00:24:10**Speaker 2

46

**00:24:12**Speaker 3

He's now, he's 46.

**00:24:17**Speaker 2

That would make you.

**00:24:19**Speaker 3

Oh man, 65.

**00:24:22**Speaker 2

Were you born in 55? Yes, I was.

**00:24:25**Speaker 3

June 27, 1955

**00:24:27**Speaker 2

When?

June 27th, 1955.

**00:24:31**Speaker 2

December 24th, 1955.

**00:24:33**Speaker 3

Alright, Christmas eve - wow.

**00:24:35**Speaker 2

Wow, well I I just got my Medicare card in the mail so me and you are, yeah, yeah, we're right there.

**00:24:44**Speaker 2

Yeah, well, you actually make me mad now because you don't even look anywhere remotely close to being 65 years old.

**00:24:51**Speaker 2

And I probably look like I'm 75, so you know, yeah, well, I'm really super excited for you and it's been a blessing for over 4 years.

**00:24:52**Speaker 3

No doubt.

**00:25:05**Speaker 2

To have you as a neighbor and I always enjoyed seeing your smile and and and just grateful for you and and praying that.

**00:25:18**Speaker 2

You know the demon of addiction that's behind you.

**00:25:20**Speaker 3

Now, yes I do.

**00:25:22**Speaker 3

And I would love to say this, Sir.

**00:25:24**Speaker 3

And I remember when I see you and your wife and you know, we'll speak and you'll say, hey, beautiful and I'll be like.

**00:25:32**Speaker 3

Do you know it took me? A couple of years before I could even like past the mirror and look at myself. And I would think about what you said and I'll be like, Cheryl, you know, look at yourself because I was myself. My esteem was so low I didn't even look in the mirror. And you were one of the reasons I begin to stop and look at in the mirror. And I said, Cheryl, this is what God you know, gave you. So embrace it and I want to say thank you, because that really did help me, really.

**00:26:09**Speaker 2

Well, that's, that's moving and because what I'm looking at right now is a gorgeous creation of God and and it's painful for me to understand that that you were in a place where you couldn't look at what I get to see - and how beautiful it is.

**00:26:39**Speaker 2

But I'm stand here in complete joy, knowing that you know how beautiful you are now, because God created us each equally in his image and he is not a crummy artist, you know he is a very talented and gifted master of creation. And you're that.

**00:27:02**Speaker 2

So thank you.

**00:27:05**Speaker 2

So tell me, Cheryl, over the course of your life, what one thing have you learned or that you want to share with our audience that comes out of your life?

**00:27:17**Speaker 3

That comes out of my life. And I'm not just saying that because of Community first village, and I've shared it with Tricia, your wife, that I never felt love. (emotion) as I've had since I've been here at community first village, the people, your wife and the staff, and it's it's just overwhelming. And it's so beautiful. These are tears of joy because I was able to be connected, you know to love. And you all show me that and it's like God this is you know my family and thank you.

**00:28:03**Speaker 3

That's where I'm supposed to be and that's one of the main things. And that's the truth

**00:28:09**Speaker 2

Yeah, but when you're in Houston, don't forget that we are still your family here so and we will.

**00:28:15**Speaker 3

Of course not. I never forget you all.

**00:28:18**Speaker 2

We will, we will. We will miss you, ladies and gentlemen, my my friend, my neighbor and will always remain.

**00:28:27**Speaker 2

My neighbor, Cheryl Williams. Thank you for being on the Gospel Con Carne podcast.

**00:28:32**Speaker 3

Thank you.

**00:28:33**Speaker 2

Ladies and gentlemen, with all the goodness in the world, go out and be the goodness in your community. God bless.

**00:28:46**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Gospel Con Carne with Alan Graham when he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Alan at the helm of mobile loaves and fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities.

**00:28:59**Speaker 1

Into a lifestyle of service with the homeless music for today's podcast has been provided by community first neighbor and musician John 'JR' Rogers. Learn more and how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

## APPENDIX C

### GCCPodcast\_EmilySeals\_SoundMix.01\_1.mp3

June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018

00:24:24

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Emily Seals

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/33/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society through untold stories of homelessness.

**00:00:20**Speaker 1

Your host, Alan Graham, is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades. Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative Community First Village, the country's only master planned community designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne, here's your host Alan Graham.

**00:00:55**Speaker 2

Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne. This is the place where we explore the grittiness of who all of us are as human beings and work hard on putting the meat back on the gospel bone, and I'm so excited to have in the studio, one of my friends and so excited to call my neighbor, Emily Seals. Emily, Welcome to the Gospel, Con Carne.

**00:01:20**Speaker 3

Thank you, Alan.

**00:01:23**Speaker 2

We've known each other, probably for about 10 years, and I have seen you standing on multiple street corners around the city of Austin, but particularly in the Westlake area where Tricia and I lived for so long. And kind of tell me about that experience in your life and how you ended up in that in that place.

**00:01:52**Speaker 3

Well, the main reason I was on 360 and 2244 was because of homelessness. Also, needing to have a family started knowing a lot of people from the streets that were helping me when I really needed it. And because I had lost all my family and my kids.

**00:02:13**Speaker 2

So tell me a little bit about your family life, where you come from about your mom and dad. The struggles that you had as a child and kind of take us back and tell us where you come.

**00:02:25**Speaker 3

From originally from Houston, TX, my dad was an only child. I was an only child. My mother I was an only child.

**00:02:34**Speaker 3

My mother left me when I was first born, so my dad raised me from the age of 10. I was also raped twice, once at the age of 10 and once at the age of either 20 in my 20s close to 30s. I had a really rough childhood. All my marriages were very abusive. And me being an only child, I had three children. My first one was from my first husband.

**00:03:07**Speaker 3

My second one from the rape.

**00:03:13**Speaker 2

Those times in your life must have been very painful for you.

**00:03:18**Speaker 3

It was very painful, yeah.

**00:03:24**Speaker 2

Yep. I assume your mom and dad are gone now, are they?

**00:03:27**Speaker 3

Yes, my mom, my dad and my grandfather.

**00:03:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so you're in Houston, TX. Where in Houston, did you?

**00:03:34**Speaker 3

Off of Chimney Rock Bellaire Area 3 went to.

**00:03:36**Speaker 2

Did you know that I was? Grew up in Bel Air and we talked about that yeah so near Chimney Rock in Bel Air.

**00:03:39**Speaker 3

Yes, yes.

**00:03:43**Speaker 2

I graduated from Bel Air in 1984.

**00:03:44**Speaker 3

Hi Greg.

**00:03:46**Speaker 2

1984? Yeah fantastic. Had I stayed there. I would have been in the mid-70s.

**00:03:55**Speaker 2

You graduated from Bel Air? What happened to you after after you left Bel Air High School? Where did where did you go from?

**00:04:01**Speaker 3

There after I graduated from Belair High School. I was interested in a gentleman at the Burger King that I met. We ended up getting married and the only reason I got married was just to get away from my stepmom. Because my stepmom has really been abusive to me.

**00:04:19**Speaker 2

Yeah, and how long? How long were you in the...was your dad while you were at home? How long were you with your stepmother? Was that since you were 10 or younger?

**00:04:29**Speaker 3

Right after I graduated in 84 when I got married.

**00:04:32**Speaker 2

Yeah you got married then. But when did your stepmother come into the at the age of 10 years old and did she have children?

**00:04:35**Speaker 3

At age of 10. No, she was an only child.

**00:04:40**Speaker 2

Yeah, and that kind of described a little bit that your relationship was still good with your father at that time.

**00:04:47**Speaker 3

My father and I tried to get along as much as we could, but my stepmom was always trying to interfere with our relationship.

**00:04:55**Speaker 2

You think that was it? I find it interesting because oftentimes divorce and broken families bring in even more brokenness, and it sounds like that that happened in in your life with your stepmother.

**00:05:11**Speaker 3

I think a lot of it was because my stepmom was jealous because I was an only child and my dad was giving me more attention than he did to her.

**00:05:21**Speaker 2

And that was somewhat competition and that may have perceived that as well and it was difficult for me and my brothers doing that because you're, you're their interest.

Is not focused on you, their own children. Their interest is focused on their spouse and that that creates tension.

**00:05:44**Speaker 3

Yes. Right

**00:05:47**Speaker 2

So you get married and did you have children with that first marriage and tell me your child's name?

**00:05:57**Speaker 3

His name was Brian Alan Hedger. He's now 30 years. No, and I have not really had any contact much with my kids.

**00:06:08**Speaker 2

Yeah - desire on your part to reconnect.

**00:06:12**Speaker 3

I try every day to call them up and ask if they'll come by and visit. I haven't seen them. Or heard from them. Right.

**00:06:19**Speaker 2

And where do they live?

**00:06:20**Speaker 3

In Buda, TX with their dad.

**00:06:25**Speaker 2

So they're still living with.

**00:06:27**Speaker 3

They all live with their dad still so.

**00:06:30**Speaker 2

All three of your kids live with the first husband?

**00:06:35**Speaker 3

My ex-husband. My first husband yes.

**00:06:42**Speaker 2

One of your children was, I thought conceived through that sexual assault with.

**00:06:45**Speaker 3

There was two of them, the twins.

**00:06:50**Speaker 2

Yeah, but your ex-husband raised them. They said if it was.

**00:06:52**Speaker 3

Yes, he raised him with the - when they were first born.

**00:06:56**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so when and so, when was the last time that you really saw your children?

**00:07:05**Speaker 3

Probably way before the marriage. Before I got married in April.

**00:07:12**Speaker 2

And so there's still moments of connectivity. Do you?

**00:07:19**Speaker 3

Whenever I do call my ex. My ex tells me how they're doing, but I've never actually talked to them unless they start drinking and that's when they call me when they need something.

**00:07:27**Speaker 2

Yeah, so there's still that level of level of contact.

**00:07:33**Speaker 3

Very little.

**00:07:34**Speaker 2

Yeah, and what are the ages today?

**00:07:37**Speaker 3

My oldest one is 30 and the twins just turned 27.

**00:07:44**Speaker 2

So you're how many years on the streets were you?

**00:7:47**Speaker 3

12 years.

**00:07:49**Speaker 2

12 years on the streets? I always thought of you as a pretty awesome pan handler. Tell me about that experience and I mean I would see you go into the HEB with a pretty good pile of change and put it in that change machine so that it seemed like that you had moments of doing all.

Right?

**00:08:08**Speaker 3

I had a lot of really good people that would come by.

**00:08:11**Speaker 3

I also was offered a lot of job offers while I was down there for cleaning houses for people. So I did work not just on the streets, but did house cleaning for people. And helped out where people needed.

**00:08:23**Speaker 2

It talk to me about some of the bigger relationships that you developed while you were out there. Some of the people that you encountered. Who were they?

**00:08:32**Speaker 3

Well, like like you said I did see you and I saw your wife from time to time when I went over to Hat Creek. I talked to Drew Gresset many times to try to see if I could get a job there, but they told me I could not do it because of being on the streets.

Too many people knew me and I know I saw a lot of different people over there and asking me if I was ready to come.

**00:08:53**Speaker 2

People were asking you if you were ready to come for an awful long time. But, why did it take so long? What was going on in your mind, people say. There's this place out there.

**00:09:05**Speaker 3

It's just too many people are like my family. That I was getting to know on the streets that I felt like I didn't want to leave them.

**00:09:13**Speaker 2

Well, that's interesting, so you had quite a bit of community right there on the streets.

Tell me what that was like. Describe a couple of your friends that were on the streets so...

**00:09:22**Speaker 3

I've enjoyed a lot of them. Like Lori, Lori used to take me to church a lot. I even had Rebecca took me to church sometimes at All Saints Presbyterian. I was offered to go to a lot of different churches while I was on the streets and that made me feel good.

**00:09:40**Speaker 2

What was the do you remember the moment when you made the decision that you wanted to at least come out here to the village to check this place out?

**00:09:49**Speaker 3

I had a lot of people telling me about what it was like telling me that you can at least have a place to sleep, place to relax, place to call home and not have to be going from place to place and finding places every day.

**00:10:03**Speaker 2

Well, ultimately when you got up off the streets, you did get a job with Hat Creek hamburgers. that didn't last a long time, but you were there for maybe six months or?

**00:10:15**Speaker 3

It was kind of hard because of the buses. It was a 3-bus route.

**00:10:20**Speaker 2

And in public transportation is pretty difficult, isn't it? Yeah, so tell me about Ken.

We're going to get into your marriage in a minute, but you got married recently.

But it was Kent that you chose to walk you down the aisle. Tell me about that relationship.

**00:10:39**Speaker 3

I had seen Kent many, many times on the streets, he would come by and he also offered to ask me if I wanted to ride. One time when I was heading to the bus stop, I introduced myself to him and he felt like a real father figure for me. Finally, he invited me over to his house. He asked his wife and stuff and they became like a big family for me. I helped him out whenever they needed help.

**00:11:05**Speaker 2

Who was it that brought you out to the village the first time?

**00:11:07**Speaker 3

Nancy.

**00:11:09**Speaker 2

Was Nancy oh? Okay. That's yeah - and so describe for me what that was like. Describe for me what it was like just getting in Nancy's car and driving across town, what you thought you were going to come see and then describe for me what you witnessed when you got here.

**00:11:27**Speaker 3

When I first came out here, I really enjoyed seeing the different houses. Seeing people so friendly you could walk across and they'd wave at you and really know that you're there. And made you feel like part of their family.

**00:11:43**Speaker 2

Was this place what you expected or not at all what you expected and so describe a little bit to me what you expected in your mind.

**00:11:47**Speaker 3

Not a, I expected it to be a little bit having more people noticing you when you come up people. Also, you know treating you like, oh, you're so I'm really, really happy to see you and glad to be seeing you off the streets.

**00:12:10**Speaker 2

Yeah, did you think of this as a like a a tramp camp before you got here that there'd be tents and blue tarps? Things like that or?

**00:12:21**Speaker 3

Well, when I came out here, it wasn't as much as it was as it was now. Yeah. There was a lot more model homes open and that's what we got to go look at.

**00:12:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so how long have you been here now in the village?

**00:12:35**Speaker 3

I believe almost two years WOW and.

**00:12:39**Speaker 2

So tell me about when you met Steve Seals.

**00:12:45**Speaker 3

Well, I was I was working down here for a while, still doing the restrooms, then started working at Hat Creek. I didn't know he was working in the grill at the time. I was working with Dina. And he had saw me when I was at Hat Creek and started talking to me. And I was kind of like real shy because I had had some real rough relationships and real bad marriages, so I didn't know if I could trust anybody anymore. Finally, I started working with Keaton. Dina left, and then Keaton took me on at the concession stand. And we had met inside the hot grill. He had asked me to go out and stuff. And I was still really scared to see if I could trust any gentleman. And I finally saw how kind and kind hearted he was in it. Made me feel more comfortable.

**00:13:36**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so where did y'all go on your first date?

**00:13:39**Speaker 3

Over here at this kitchen.

**00:13:41**Speaker 2

Just hanging out, uh.

**00:13:43**Speaker 3

He cooked me a nice dinner, a BBQ dinner at the kitchen. And then walked me home and then we were able to start talking.

**00:13:52**Speaker 2

That's beautiful, you know we were standing in our offices one day on the 2nd floor of the building. Donna was, uh looking out at the two of you before you got married, and he reached around and gave you a little Peck on the cheek and you kind of swatted him away. Kind of in a, you know, a high school, junior high school type of way. It was really really cute, cute you.

**00:14:25**Speaker 2

Y'all were actually pretty sneaky about all this because none of us really knew. And you had announced at one point in time that you were going to get engaged. But nobody knew who. And how were you able to keep that such a top secret?

**00:14:43**Speaker 3

I have no idea. I know it was hard for me because I know with before he we got engaged he had thrown a question to me that put me to a stun, asking me what was my ring size. And I was like, what do you mean? And then he proposed to me on the day of my birthday.

**00:15:00**Speaker 2

Wow, and what what day was? what month?

**00:15:03**Speaker 3

November 12<sup>th</sup>, when we had our gathering.

**00:15:07**Speaker 2

And then you guys decided that you wanted to get married out here at the village and so tell me from November the 12th the engagement up until, well, it was April Fool's day, April 1st that you got married. What happened in that period of time?

**00:15:29**Speaker 3

It was pretty hard going back and forth visiting each other and working together as being engaged. I would stay at my place. I'd go to his house and visit with him.

**00:15:40**Speaker 2

And y'all were meeting with certain couples including Tricia and I. And what was that process like?

**00:15:45**Speaker 3

It was very interesting. We met with y'all. Met with Wendy and her husband and then met with Matt.

**00:15:53**Speaker 2

And what were some of the questions that y'all would dialogue about during those meetings.

**00:16:00**Speaker 3

Tips are money situation. We've working together as a team.

**00:16:08**Speaker 2

And so you decided to get married on Easter Sunday morning, April 1st, here at our Sunrise Easter service. Kind of described for me what that morning was like for you.

**00:16:23**Speaker 3

I was pretty scared the night before because I stayed over at my friend Lori's, which was the matron of honor. And I'm always the type that gets real paranoid and scared about things, so I

was more worried that he was not going to wake up in time and be there at the wedding that I was going to be the. Only one that was going to show up.

**00:16:41**Speaker 2

Yeah, and then that morning as you're standing in the back of the of the wings of the amphitheater, what was what was going through your mind?

**00:16:49**Speaker 3

Very nervous. Nervous and happy.

**00:16:53**Speaker 2

And then you you invited Kent Redding to walk you down that aisle. And was that something you figured out right away in your mind?

**00:17:04**Speaker 3

Well, what it was is I, my, since my dad was my dad is just.

**00:17:10**Speaker 3

He was hearing I was hearing his voice talking to me many many times and said he would be there with me in spirit but he couldn't be there to walk me down the aisle and ask me to find someone to fill in his spot. That would be like a father. And I felt like Kent has been like a father to me.

**00:17:29**Speaker 2

And so you're tied the knot. Now you're married. You were living in two tiny houses, and within the past I don't know 3-4 weeks, maybe you guys have moved into one of the RV's. How's that been to really join your family together?

**00:17:46**Speaker 3

There's a...it's been nice, but there is a couple of challenges now when you're staying in the same place with the same person all.

**00:17:52**Speaker 2

Right now, tell me what those challenges are.

**00:17:56**Speaker 3

Some of the challenge for a lot of it's the challenges. Now knowing that the person's there with you all the time and it's not like you know you can always go away whenever somebody's working. Or if the other one's going to the store. But it is nice to have someone that you can talk to whenever you're really needing them.

**00:18:12**Speaker 2

Yeah, now you moved in to the village about two years ago and I would not classify that transition as being an easy one for you, would that be correct?

**00:18:28**Speaker 2

Yeah, so describe for our audience that movement for you, the struggles that you had at the at the beginning, and then how that began to to settle out over time.

**00:18:42**Speaker 3

When I first moved here, I was pretty scared. I was always wanting to go back to the streets. Because I felt like that was more of a family than being down here. Because I was not really friends with anybody and knew anybody because I would stay hiding inside and not really come out as much.

**00:18:58**Speaker 2

And how did that change over time?

**00:19:00**Speaker 3

I started getting enough courage thinking I could talk to people and then start.

**00:19:05**Speaker 3

I'm the type that likes to visit with people. And I don't stay behind if I don't like to stay behind closed doors. I try to find work or socializing with people.

**00:19:18**Speaker 2

Your work ethic is actually quite extraordinary, even on the panhandling side. Because I remember you...and how far is it from the Taco Bell to the corner of 2244 and 360.

**00:19:30**Speaker 3

It's a walk. I can't tell exactly.

**00:19:33**Speaker 2

I mean, it's at least a mile and 1/2. I think maybe 2 miles, yeah?

**00:19:36**Speaker 3

At least, and then you're going uphill. A lot uphill, downhills, yeah now.

**00:19:43**Speaker 2

When I would see you walk along the street, I'd pull over and snag you and take you one way or the other. But it didn't happen that often, but I would imagine that other people

**00:19:50**Speaker 3

Right. Oh yeah, I've had a lot of...

**00:19:53**Speaker 2

would stop and pick you up. Would that be 50% of the time?

**00:19:59**Speaker 3

I'd say anywhere between 20 and 30. our son would see me and they would bring me down to the corner when they'd see me coming down that way or bring me back.

**00:20:08**Speaker 3

I had even an experience with a guy on a motorcycle and I didn't even know. And I that was pretty scary.

**00:20:17**Speaker 3

That was scary. Not knowing who this person was.

**00:20:21**Speaker 2

Wow. Yeah. Wow.

**00:20:23**Speaker 3

I even met Molly every Thursday over at the McDonald's.

**00:20:29**Speaker 2

Yeah, you must have put in a lot of steps during that period of time.

**00:20:33**Speaker 3

That's what made me mainly feel like I needed to get off the streets as quick as I could. Because of my health was going bad. Because I was in the hospital at Westlake many times with blood pressure, passing out.

**00:20:46**Speaker 2

So describe for me now living in this community and being more settled, you're married. There's a lot of settlement involved, and I know there's unsettlement too as well. When you're joining together like that, but there's a lot of settlement that's happening. You seem to me to be such a vital part in life giving a part of this community. Describe, I mean, you're my neighbor and if I if

if I go period of time without seeing you, I'm going what's, you know, what's going on. So describe what that looks like from your perspective.

**00:21:19**Speaker 3

I just love to get out and help people whenever I can. But right now it's hard for me to get out in the heat because of having blood pressure issues and anxiety attacks.

**00:21:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, do you do you have relationships with other neighbors here? Other friends.

**00:21:39**Speaker 3

Yeah, I've been talking to Amy a lot. Amy Griffin. I go to church with from time to time and I've talked to Kristen and Vanessa.

**00:21:48**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, Vanessa lived over by you I guess, or near you when you were living in the micro home, yeah.

**00:21:57**Speaker 2

What would you like our audience to know about the Community First Village?

**00:22:05**Speaker 3

It's a great way to get off the streets. Also, to help people know where they are, but also know that they're not being alone.

**00:22:15**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so over the course of your life you've met an awful lot of people on the streets. What would you like our audience to know about the people that you've known on the streets?

**00:22:30**Speaker 3

I would still like to at least see a little bit more of the people that were on the streets with me and have welcomed them in to.

**00:22:38**Speaker 2

And that they're good people as well, and that sometimes we stereotype them to be one thing when in reality they're good people is that, is that correct?

**00:22:49**Speaker 2

So so if you can make wave a magic wand out there in the world, what would be the one thing that you would want to accomplish with that magic wand?

**00:23:02**Speaker 3

Let everybody have peace and happiness.

**00:23:06**Speaker 2

Well, ladies and gentlemen, this is my friend, Emily Seals, not only my friend, my neighbor. I want to thank you, Emily, from the bottom of my heart that you came into the studio. And and I just want our audience to know how awesome our friends are that are standing out there on the street corners. When you begin to learn their stories and that's the purpose of the gospel of Carne podcast and in closing, I would like everybody to go out and be the goodness in their community. God bless.

**00:23:48**Speaker 3

Thank you.

**00:23:51**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Gospel Con Carne with Alan Graham. When he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Alan at the helm of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social

outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless. Music for today's podcast has been provided by community first neighbor and musician John 'JR' Rogers. Learn more and how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org)

## APPENDIX D

### Helen\_Bird\_Final.mp3

April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

00:42:17

Speaker 1 – Narrator, Amber Fogarty

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Helen Bird

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/4>

**00:00:08**Speaker 1

Welcome to the gospel.

**00:00:09**Speaker 1

Gospel Con Carne and meandering journey of gritty conversations that explore the significance of community through untold stories of homelessness and hopefulness.

**00:00:19**Speaker 1

Your host, Alan Graham is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes. A social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades, Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative Community First! Village, the country's first and largest master planned community designed specifically for men and women who are coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne, here's your host, Alan Graham.

**00:00:52**Speaker 2

Wow, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast. We are in a brand new season. I'm thinking it's season 5, but there's we don't know 100%, but we're somewhere around season #4 or five, which is incredible that we've been doing this for this period of time. But today I've got in the studio, my friend and neighbor, Helen Bird.

**00:01:22**Speaker 2

A phenomenally and when I say phenomenally, I mean it to the core of my being gifted artist who is also married to a phenomenally gifted songwriter named Vernon Rust. Google that guy's name and you will see. Google Helen and see all of her art.

**00:01:41**Speaker 2

And how these two knuckleheads came together is going to be a fantastic story today. So welcome back to this new season Helen. Welcome to the studio.

**00:01:58**Speaker 3

Thank you, it's an honor to be here.

**00:02:00**Speaker 2

Well, you can tell already she comes from a different place and this guy from Texas and tell me where you hell from?

**00:02:10**Speaker 3

I grew up in the United Kingdom. I was born just outside Oxford and grew up in a little town called Newbury, which is about 40 miles West of London with mum Dad.

My Nan lived with us my whole life and...

**00:02:27**Speaker 2

What's a nan?

**00:02:28**Speaker 3

My grandma, my my mother's mom.

**00:02:28**Speaker 2

Oh OK, OK.

**00:02:31**Speaker 3

And an older sister, Leslie, who's three years older than me, and we grew up in a little town called Newbury. They were all from London.

**00:02:41**Speaker 3

And my parents survived the London Blitz of World War Two. My mother finally was evacuated being a young, young girl for about a year or so during the intense bombing. And my dad stayed in London - him and his brother, his father worked for the London Fire Brigade. So his dad was very busy putting out fires and from bombing and everything during World War Two.

**00:03:09**Speaker 3

So I grew up hearing a lot of stories about war, rationing, how to survive, and just how to keep the faith alive in spite of all obstacles.

**00:03:21**Speaker 2

Yeah, I watched a a great documentary. I don't watch TV hardly at all, but we did a deal on a Churchill recently that I found extremely fascinating.

**00:03:33**Speaker 2

Yet in a lot of ways, traumatizing to try to imagine what that time frame would have been like and what it took for the English to say no, we're not - yeah, we're gonna win we're gonna battle this deal we're not.

**00:03:50**Speaker 3

Yeah, exactly.

**00:03:51**Speaker 2

We're not walking away. We're not settling.

**00:03:54**Speaker 3

Yeah exactly yeah. My mom even had an old box with all her ration books in my dad had every.

**00:04:04**Speaker 2

Ration books meeting with coupons.

**00:04:06**Speaker 3

Coupons yeah for eggs, dry powdered milk. Just things that were in real short supply that you could only get so much each week.

**00:04:14**Speaker 3

Mm-hmm and my dad collected every war illustrated magazine. We had volumes of war illustrated magazines in our in our library.

**00:04:24**Speaker 3

So I grew up with in a family that read a lot my, my mother was very creative.

She could really decorate a cake that was one of her things. She loved to do and work in the garden. She was constantly making needle crafts and crocheting, so I think that's where I got a lot of the creativity from.

**00:04:47**Speaker 2

You know now they they at some point in time they moved 40 miles west and you're born in that city, yeah?

**00:04:51**Speaker 3

Right, right, they got out of the city, yes?

**00:04:54**Speaker 3

Yes, yeah yeah, I was born more in the country. My sister was born in London.

**00:04:59**Speaker 2

Are you a 1950?

**00:05:00**Speaker 2

0'66. OK, yeah.

**00:05:01**Speaker 3

'66 Yeah, my sister was born in 63 and I know I'm still a spring chicken, yeah?

**00:05:04**Speaker 2

I call you young and yeah, yeah, yeah, you hadn't even hit that magic 6 0 number yet, so.

**00:05:11**Speaker 3

Right, right? Yeah, it's still a little way...it's get getting close, so.

**00:05:13**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, so you you grew up and then at some point in time you went off to nursing school.

**00:05:22**Speaker 3

Yes, age 18. I was out the door.

**00:05:24**Speaker 3

Well, my mom said go get yourself a career something you can feel good about and I thought nursing I want to take care of people and I want to feel of use.

**00:05:33**Speaker 3

You know, my dad was an accountant. He said Helen don't push a pen your whole life. Go and do something where you're a a few used to this public, you know, public servant.

**00:05:43**Speaker 3

So I went into nursing. And I went to the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading and I did a three-year diploma course, but I later went back to college and got my Bachelors of Science in nursing. So, so and I graduated.

**00:05:58**Speaker 3

I think it was about - when would that have been 87 or 88? Kind of Christmas 87. I graduated from that program and then I moved to Cambridge and I worked at Adam Brooks Hospital which was a big University Hospital and got a job in oncology.

**00:06:19**Speaker 3

And I worked for about 18 months and I thought, you know, I want to see more of the world. And I was already struggling with alcohol a little bit and being a nurse I had to be real careful.

**00:06:33**Speaker 3

You know, I certainly had - I wouldn't allow myself to drink while I was on duty, and it was only on a day off, but I didn't see the rest of my life going to the pub like so many people in Britain.

**00:06:45**Speaker 3

So I had a real problem with that. I thought this is gonna this is gonna wear me down. So I thought let me travel to the US and go to Florida and get some sun and you know see some of the world.

**00:07:00**Speaker 2

Now you're relatively young at that point, huh?

**00:07:03**Speaker 3

Yes, yeah, I was 21-22. You had 22 and there was a big drive for nurses in the US back then.

**00:07:05**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah. So how did your education translate to a US?

**00:07:16**Speaker 3

Nursing I came over and I took state boards in Florida and they gave me credits.

**00:07:20**Speaker 2

OK.

**00:07:22**Speaker 3

For like an associates degree and then I went back to school in Florida and finished my Bachelors so I came over to Melbourne, FL and I took the state boards and then I flew back to England and waited for the results.

**00:07:36**Speaker 3

It was all pen and paper back then. Yeah, it was two days of exams. It was pretty grueling. And of course I passed. And then I got a call from a lady at Florida Hospital, which is an Adventist system. And she said, Helen, we sure would love to have you on our oncology unit. So I came over August, August 80? August '89. Sorry - August '89 and it's so funny because March in 89 I was able to slip behind the Iron Curtain and visit Russia. I backpacked with a friend.

**00:08:14**Speaker 2

March of 89.

**00:08:16**Speaker 3

March of 89.

**00:08:18**Speaker 2

Well, that was right at the at the fall.

**00:08:20**Speaker 3

It was right... Yeah, Gorbachev was opening up the country a little bit and a friend of mine said, hey, you know, I work for a tour operator we can go over and visit Moscow and Saint Petersburg. So I was like great, I was always in for an adventure travelling and we went over there and I just loved the country.

**00:08:41**Speaker 3

It's just beautiful and then it's funny. August 89. I wound up in St. Petersburg FL so St. Saint Petersburg, two parts of the world.

**00:08:54**Speaker 2

This is off-topic, there's a painting a in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Rembrandt - the 'Return Of the Prodigal.'

**00:09:00**Speaker 3

Yes, that's right, yeah.

**00:09:01**Speaker 2

That would kind of be on my bucket list of paintings to see personally and but otherwise I don't have a big desire to go to Russia, and obviously now it's a mess.

**00:09:04**Speaker 3

Yeah, definitely. I know they're not now.

**00:09:13**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, but good on you being able to, yeah.

**00:09:17**Speaker 3

Yeah it was, it was a fascinating experience.

**00:09:19**Speaker 2

But when did you make your commitment to move to the United States and.

**00:09:23**Speaker 3

That yeah '89 I'm like yeah let's let's go over and.

**00:09:28**Speaker 2

So you came to work at that Adventist hospital.

**00:09:30**Speaker 3

Yeah, I I fell in love with the United States and with the American people. I just, I think I think they're...they have more faith, you know British people, I think, have kind of - and you can't generalize.

**00:09:49**Speaker 2

No you can't.

**00:09:49**Speaker 3

OK, you can't, but.

**00:09:50**Speaker 2

But we can stereotype here for a minute, so proper that they seem so proper.

**00:09:52**Speaker 3

Yeah, I think I think it's stronger? Yeah, reserved and Americans are more open. Yeah, they were easier to talk to and get along with and I just made friends right away with a lot of people at the hospital.

**00:10:10**Speaker 2

In your accent, we love the British accent.

**00:10:12**Speaker 3

Yeah, that helped that.

**00:10:12**Speaker 2

For some reason, yeah.

**00:10:15**Speaker 3

Helped a lot so I worked in oncology for about two years and then one one night. I worked night shift which was pretty grueling.

**00:10:25**Speaker 3

One night shift, a nurse came up from the pizza unit and she said there are two doctors starting a pediatric oncology service down on Pete, she says we know nothing about chemotherapy radiation. So she got talking to me and I wound up transferring down to Pediatrics and that was it. My career took off in the pediatric oncology world and I got finished with my bachelors. I got certified in pediatric oncology nurse.

**00:10:55**Speaker 3

And I started teaching other nurses how to take care of little kids that are getting chemo and everything. And it's pretty scary. A lot of nurses don't want to have to do that, you know, but I learned.

**00:11:09**Speaker 3

My faith got really strong during that time. I met so many incredible parents and kids that just really taught me how to make each day count so.

**00:11:23**Speaker 2

Yeah, and then the the alcohol along the way.

**00:11:28**Speaker 3

You know what it was? I was pretty controlled back then. I would just, you know, party on a weekend. It wasn't a daily thing. Um – I, I had it under control, definitely. It wasn't until 2000 and it wasn't for almost 20 years. And I started having marriage problems with my first husband.

**00:11:54**Speaker 2

Was he an American?

**00:11:56**Speaker 3

And yes he was. He was a musician too, but of no nowhere near the caliber of Vernon he thought he was, but he wasn't. Well, but anyway, so I was starting to have a marriage problems and my mum passed away in 2003. And that just devastated me.

**00:12:14**Speaker 2

See what's interesting here, Helen is, you know, I believe so profoundly, and I, I know it to be true that the single greatest cause to homelessness is a profound, catastrophic loss of family. But your childhood doesn't speak to that.

**00:12:30**Speaker 3

No, no.

**00:12:31**Speaker 2

You don't have this abusive father.

**00:12:33**Speaker 3

No, not at all.

**00:12:35**Speaker 3

I had a very loving family. I, it was perfect and it was the idyllic childhood. To be honest I was an anxious nervous kid. I had some, you know, some. You know - some little things that used to bother me.

**00:12:48**Speaker 3

I was kind of I I hated to go to school. I just was nervous around other people a lot, which my mom knew. She coddled me. But see when my mom passed away that was just devastating. It was just I really lost the most important person in my life at that, at that time, you know.

**00:13:10**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so did the alcohol increase.

**00:13:14**Speaker 3

Yes, it did. I started drinking more. I decided to take a job in California. I, I felt like I needed to uproot myself.

**00:13:27**Speaker 2

And you left your husband.

**00:13:28**Speaker 3

No, he came with me, I would.

**00:13:30**Speaker 2

OK.

**00:13:31**Speaker 3

I would have been wise if I'd left him in Florida to be honest, but he came with me and I made some new friends in California that were um - they partied more and I just went down that track and my, my nursing career just started to move to the back burner. I called in sick a lot. And just my heart wasn't in it anymore.

**00:13:57**Speaker 2

It just became a job.

**00:13:57**Speaker 3

I think it was. It was a job, yeah, and I was burning out. I was burning out from all the years of caring. And just being there, being present in that that job it just. It just got too much. I didn't like to drink. I've I've always thought it's it's the worst. It's the worst substance, but I I had a lot of pain so I wanted to numb the pain.

**00:14:22**Speaker 3

So I used narcotics. I started using heroin.

**00:14:26**Speaker 2

Yeah, and that was in California or?

**00:14:28**Speaker 3

In California.

**00:14:31**Speaker 2

And how how did how was that introduced to you? Was it pharmaceutically?

**00:14:34**Speaker 3

You know what?

**00:14:35**Speaker 2

Basically, I mean like morphine or.

**00:14:38**Speaker 3

You know what? I marched into Golden Gate Park and I asked and the nearest bunch of kids. Hey, do you know where I can get some heroin? I remember it was, it was the 4th of July in 2008. I remember the day. And one of the kids ran and got me about 3 grams. And, of course, I knew how to inject, so I tried it and I was like - whoa, that's it. Boom, two years later, I finally decided I had to, I had to stop. I was going to kill myself.

**00:15:09**Speaker 2

OK, so that's in California, but you end up in Nashville, TN, so.

**00:15:13**Speaker 3

Yeah, well. If you have an addiction to heroin or cocaine, your money, you blow through your money, real quick on my savings. Also, I went through a divorce with the ex-husband that, that consumed a lot of my savings.

**00:15:29**Speaker 2

Well, that and upon itself the loss of your mom, the loss of your husband. Profound, catastrophic loss that was that you're here in the United States. You don't have your support network.

**00:15:38**Speaker 3

Right.

**00:15:39**Speaker 2

Your support network is now drug addicts and alcoholics.

**00:15:42**Speaker 3

Exactly, yeah, basically, yeah yeah. I was really proud of myself.

**00:15:47**Speaker

Yeah, yeah no I got it man.

**00:15:49**Speaker 3

I was fortunate. I had a landlord in Haight Ashbury who knew I was struggling and for about the last four months he'd let me slide on my rent, which was almost 2000 a month. San Francisco was very expensive and he just he just knew I would find a way out of there and he didn't harass me for rent or anything he just stood by me. So I was really blessed to not just wind up on the street.

**00:16:19**Speaker 2

Yeah.

**00:16:21**Speaker 3

But I had a I I met a guy. He was a the son of one of my friends out there. And he was from Nashville and he was doing doing drugs with me and he said listen my dad will take us in in Nashville.

**00:16:35**Speaker 3

It's it's kind of a flop house. There's a lot of alcoholics and knuckleheads that live there and he told me about Vernon. I said ohh - interesting and I looked him up on Facebook really and I said, listen.

**00:16:48**Speaker 2

And what year is this now?

**00:16:50**Speaker 3

This would have been 2010, so yeah 2 1/2 years into a pretty bad heroin addiction.

**00:16:54**Speaker 2

OK.

**00:16:59**Speaker 3

And I looked him up and there was this goofy picture of Vernon and I looked at him. I'm like, gosh, he needs help, he needs help. So we wound up greyhound in all the way across country to Nashville from San Francisco. Packed up two bags, left everything else on the side of the road for whoever wanted it.

**00:17:24**Speaker 3

Um, and that's where I'm at Vernon in that house, and unfortunately it was a house with a lot of alcoholism and a lot of violence.

**00:17:35**Speaker 2

So that it wasn't a place where the drugs weren't allowed was.

**00:17:39**Speaker 3

It was, it was full on and I I thought I can't be here. I was trying to be sober. I was trying to go straight and Vernon was still using and he said look, we got to get out of here. And he had a little minivan, so we just took off one day in the minivan. Took me out of that situation. It was pretty bad.

**00:18:03**Speaker 2

And and but y'all stayed in Nashville for a while.

**00:18:07**Speaker 3

We did yeah. He had a job where he'd go out and sell meat out in the country. Just load up a refrigerator in the back of the truck and go house to house out in the country and sell meat. And he said one day, come out with me and help me sell meat and that was it put together from that day forward, yeah.

**00:18:25**Speaker 2

That is so bizarre. You know to think about Vernon and his gifted songwriting.

**00:18:34**Speaker 3

I know, yes, yeah, and we'd be out and about and it was a really hard time to sell door to door and he would be out all day and wouldn't sell anything.

**00:18:48**Speaker 3

And what little he did he would buy pills with it. And I got to the point where I said there's no sense me going out with you. I just sit on the side of the street in downtown Nashville, make art and sell to tourists. And I'm like, oh, this is good. I can survive doing this. And Vernon said, you're making more money selling art on the street than I am driving around trying to sell meat.

**00:19:13**Speaker 3

All day, so I said, well, don't do it then because it was stressful for him. So we started, we lost the minivan that got towed. We couldn't afford to get it out of tow.

So we wound up under a bridge in Nashville and I'll be honest with you, Alan.

It, I'd had a 30 years of schedules and and continuing education and lectures I had to give. And you know, I looked out at the lights of Nashville. I thought, gosh, I feel free, I don't have a penny in the world. I don't have a roof over my head, but I kind of felt free. You know it was a really, it was a it...There's um, there's quite a moment. But Vernon was dope sick.

**00:19:58**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:19:59**Speaker 3

So like we had.

**00:19:59**Speaker 2

And where were you at? That time on the dope.

**00:20:03**Speaker 3

I was pretty pretty clean actually.

**00:20:04**Speaker 2

Yeah, for the dabbler.

**00:20:05**Speaker 3

Yeah yeah yeah I was having a drink here and there but I was pretty. I wasn't taking any drugs at all, and Vernon was dope sick. He was hungry. I said, well, let me hustle across the bridge, go get you a hot dog or something to eat.

**00:20:19**Speaker 3

So I found someone who took a piece of art gave us some food and I rushed it back to him, but... So we were on and off the street for a good year in Nashville and it was harsh. It was very harsh. Nashville, a hostile town to homeless people. We got arrested sleeping on the church steps been nowhere else to go. Trespassing charges, you know...Just they like to put you through. They like to sweep the streets before a big event. Make sure all the homeless are locked up or out of out of sight, out of sight, out of mind.

**00:20:58**Speaker 3

It was very difficult and then Vernon got a call out of the out of the blue. We'd go to the library a lot. And a friend contacted him via Facebook. We use computers in the library and I think we had like through a handful of minutes left on a burner phone. And his friend called him and said, how can I get you and Helen off the street?

**00:21:23**Speaker 3

And put us in a a motel for a couple of weeks just to get get ourselves a bit more grounded and then we found out that Scotty McCreery had one American Idol and cut one of his old songs he wrote with Keith Urban. And I I told him, I said, Vernon, you're not going to believe this, and he he didn't believe me.

**00:21:44**Speaker 3

He said really and I said yeah, so it takes a while for royalties to filter through, but it was during a time when CD's were still produced, so he got a nice check and we were able to get the camper.

**00:21:59**Speaker 2

I'm thinking that that check was around 15 or 20, 30.

**00:22:02**Speaker 3

About \$20,000 yeah, and it trickles in. But it was enough to pay off some debts and get the camper. We got a laptop which we barely needed and we rescued a puppy dog and he got the banjo. Excuse me he, he got a 6 string banjo. He'd lost so many guitars. He'd buy a guitar pawn it so he could, you know.

**00:22:31**Speaker 2

Do the dope sick thing.

**00:22:31**Speaker 3

Yeah yeah do drugs. And I I started taking methadone with him so.

**00:22:33**Speaker 2

So now. OK, so was that happening before the the van was bought, yeah?

**00:22:43**Speaker 3

Yes, yeah yeah. I started, you know, just to deal with the pressure of being on the street. You know it's it's painful out there. Yeah, sleeping in a Bush.

**00:22:54**Speaker 2

What is methadone to describe methadone to me? I mean, in terms of heroin?

**00:23:00**Speaker 3

It's a, it's a long-acting narcotic. It's it's used a lot to wean people off of, off of heroin and a kind of a maintenance drug.

**00:23:12**Speaker 2

And I have people here that are, you know, on on lifetime.

**00:23:14**Speaker 3

Still on the yeah yeah, some people you know I always saw it as okay. I got the monkey off my back with heroin, but now I've got a gorilla with the methadone.

**00:23:24**Speaker 3

It's you feel really ill if you don't have it. So and that just didn't sit right has never sit right with me. You know, having to constantly? Be on that mad hamster wheel of you know, getting well by using a drug and then you know. And then it wears off and then you gotta find that truck again or be able to afford that drug again. It's it's insanity. It really is.

**00:23:50**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, but now y'all are on this methadone deal.

**00:23:53**Speaker

Right? You got the you got the RV thing going? You're in Nashville.

**00:23:58**Speaker 3

So we were pretty comfortable for a while because it was used RV, but everything worked on it. We we had no money. We stayed at parks, national parks. We started writing music together and recorded a five song CD. My art was really flourishing.

I was making a lot of art. That's one thing about methadone, it'll keep you up all night drawing.

**00:24:24**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, yeah...

**00:24:27**Speaker 3

So, we weren't drinking at all alcohol, that was easily ditched. That alcohol was the first thing to go, but yeah. And Vernon's daughter was getting married in Shreveport, and this would have been 2014 around Thanksgiving.

**00:24:50**Speaker 3

And I said, well, let's go down for the wedding, and instead of coming back to Nashville where we had contacts for pills and everything else, I said, why don't we just keep going to Austin. Let's go down there and see what happens.

**00:25:05**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a production of mobile loaves and fishes in Austin, TX.

**00:25:11**Speaker 4

Hi everyone, this is Amber Fogarty, president of Mobile Loaves and Fishes. We'd like to invite you to join us as we serve our neighbors who need us. Most men and women who are struggling with or have experienced chronic homelessness and who deeply desire being in community with others. Our work at Mobile Loaves and Fishes would not be possible without you. We have regular volunteer opportunities through our Food Truck Ministry and also at Community first village and we welcome you to jump in and be part of the movement.

**00:25:40**Speaker 1

Learn more about volunteering and other ways you can get involved by visiting us online at [MLF.org](http://MLF.org). Enjoy the rest of the episode.

**00:25:53**Speaker 2

And Austin was chosen some vision of music capital, you know.

**00:25:55**Speaker 3

You know what it was? It's kind of. Yeah yeah. Live music capital of the world and I thought Vernon would do well down here. Um - I said to him, it's going to be really hard. Let's just detox on the way down. Let's just get out of our system. So we did, we did. It was rough.

**00:26:15**Speaker 2

Because I've detoxed a couple of people at my house and it's not the prettiest thing.

**00:26:18**Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah. No, no it's not.

**00:26:23**Speaker 2

Off of heroin, you know.

**00:26:25**Speaker 3

The funny thing was we were both on antidepressants. Those were harder to get off of too, we yeah.

**00:26:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, well those are dangerous.

**00:26:32**Speaker 3

Yeah, we were both on SSRI's and I'm telling you that was the hardest thing to to get out of my system. That took a couple of months. And we wound up coming to Fort Worth to see his mother. And we spent Thanksgiving with her. And when we left her something....

**00:26:52**Speaker 2

But that's a pretty strange relationship, right? OK.

**00:26:56**Speaker 3

Very strange, yeah, she's elderly and I was old. Let's let's stay as long as she wants us here. Help her out. We hung pictures around the house, cleaned up. You know we were companionship for her. But something funny happened, she... I won't, I won't pinpoint it, but someone filled our gas tank with water.

**00:27:23**Speaker 3

And we pulled out of there to come on down to Austin, and we must have got maybe 7 miles down the road, which is a miracle when we just flooded and and pulled off and we landed in the the Tdot Area Texas Department of Transport and all these guys were trying to help us get get going again. Couldn't figure out what was wrong and we wound up getting towed to...ohh I can't remember the name of it.

**00:27:53**Speaker 3

It was a park South of Dallas and we wound up there, broke down and there was no one there. It was winter and we were just stuck. And Vern got on the phone, some people wired us some money. We got a tow to a mechanics and he came out and he said where'd y'all get your gas? And it was a beaker full of water.

**00:28:16**Speaker 3

And I looked at him. And I said, how was your mother? I swear, and he said, you know, I think it was she didn't want us to leave or she wanted to hamper our journey or something I don't know. So we got our engine fixed up and we came on down to Austin and we arrived safely. Christmas Eve, 2014. Wow yeah it was pretty harrowing being stuck on the side of the road.

**00:28:45**Speaker 2

Now at this point, the date you through the detox.

**00:28:49**Speaker 3

Yes, we are clean.

**00:28:51**Speaker 2

You're free. Yeah, you've been free since then.

**00:28:57**Speaker 3

Yeah, we have and you know, since we moved into the village we've quit cigarettes too.

**00:29:03**Speaker 3

You have? So tell me...

**00:29:06**Speaker 3

Yes. And that was the one last thing.

**00:29:08**Speaker 2

Yeah, you're on the streets. Austin is far more friendly in your opinion to the people on the streets and you're here for about three or four years.

**00:29:12**Speaker 3

It is. So yeah, we we bounced around in South Austin. We met a really nice restaurant down there. David Amaya from Amaya's. My career. And he fell in love with my art and we were parking a lot behind the Firestone down there at South Park Meadows and he said, Helen, do you think you could paint a mural on my wall and I? Said Ohh yeah I can do that. So that's what Vernon night did we. We took over the restaurant, we painted a scene with three Mexican ladies, cooking tacos. And then he said I want you to paint behind the bar. So we did a Texas license plate with the Myers behind the bar. And then out on the patio we did the Pennybacker bridge. Out on the patio so he would feed us and we kind of hung out behind the Firestone. And that's where we met Larry Crawford. Yeah, yeah, he'd be, he'd be gone into the restaurant and he noticed my art on the wall. And he said, wow, well and David and I, I said ohh, you can go meet them and they parked around the back in an old RV and we were starting to have a lot of problems with the camper.

**00:30:33**Speaker 3

It was really falling apart. It would leak terribly in during the rain. It was becoming a real struggle, you know. Still a roof over our head and we were grateful, but it was starting to break down a lot. And that's where Larry came and saved the day, many times.

**00:30:53**Speaker 3

And he told us about the village that would have been 2016. Yeah, and he said y'all would work perfectly out there. So we we came out and we toured and thought about it and it was hard to give up that the freedom of getting in a an RV and driving off.

**00:31:14**Speaker 3

You know there's something free. Free will about that you know to just be able to drive off and go wherever you want.

**00:31:23**Speaker 2

How is that that memory or that yearning with you right now.

**00:31:28**Speaker 3

Now, since I don't miss it at all I don't miss.

**00:31:31**Speaker 2

Yeah, you're, you're now in full nesting.

**00:31:34**Speaker 3

Yes, I love being home. I'm everyday I wake up and I'm grateful to God, Community First Village and a home.

**00:31:43**Speaker 2

What was the transition like? Because I remember the day I moved in and that you know the the the RV was a was a junker at that time.

**00:31:52**Speaker 3

It was, it was really dilapidated.

**00:31:55**Speaker 2

Yeah, it really wasn't meant to live in full time.

**00:31:58**Speaker 3

No, not at all. Yeah, now when we got there it was pretty, it was a pretty good yeah. It was second hand.

**00:32:03**Speaker 2

But meant to take out a few times a year and go camping.

**00:32:05**Speaker 3

Exactly exactly, yeah, go to the lake you know, cook some steaks and come home.

**00:32:07**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:32:10**Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah, it was pretty dilapidated, and Vernon was getting very stressed. I was worried about him. We'd sell art for gas. We'd go to food banks. You know, that's how we survived and in the in the dead of summer, when it's really hot, it's 100 degrees.

He'd have to go and try and find someone who would take a piece of art for a couple of gallons of gas. I couldn't imagine what that would be like now with the price of gas at the moment.

**00:32:38**Speaker 3

So, we thought about that the other day, so it was really hard on him. He was getting pretty fried during the summer, no AC. You know, and you learn ways to navigate.

You go to the community pool, you know, and you get a shower. There you go to the library during the day and got AC. So you learn to navigate different challenges.

**00:33:03**Speaker 2

But that that gets hard.

**00:33:07**Speaker 3

It was wearing down on both of us.

**00:33:07**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah yeah yeah. Yeah, at first there's a fantasy, but then it.

**00:33:11**Speaker 3

Yeah, we were exhausted. Yeah, it's yeah it gets. It's further and further away. So I I thought for the goodness of our health, we need to come out and apply and we did the homeless navigation at Sunrise. Yeah, thank thanks so thankful for the folks at Sunrise and Pastor Mark Hilbelink.

**00:33:32**Speaker 2

Yeah, they're great people, Mark...Well, yeah.

**00:33:34**Speaker 3

Oh, what a lifesaver. Yeah yeah, we pulled in there many times hungry and they had food and things we needed, you know.

**00:33:43**Speaker 2

And I guess you ate off the food trucks periodically, yeah?

**00:33:45**Speaker 3

Yeah we did. Yeah gosh, that was a welcome sight on a hungry Sunday, you know, a sandwich and some nice people. And a yeah, yeah, definitely we'd see the Mobile Loaves and Fishes all the time.

**00:33:58**Speaker 2

So how long have you now lived in?

**00:34:00**Speaker 3

The village and we've been...we will have been here two years in August. So it's just flown by.

**00:34:08**Speaker 2

Now are you selling much of your art online?

**00:34:11**Speaker 3

You know, I get some. I, I just finished a Commission that was very interested thing. It was a a wine management company out in New York and he wanted me to design 2 new wine labels, so I'd just had that interest in Commission there.

**00:34:29**Speaker 3

I've just completed that ticket. The odd sale here and there. I have a lot of digital uploads. And I sell prints and framed art. That's pretty random. Not very often. I do well out of the store here in the market with needle crafts and small art. And the needle crafts of really - and I can thank missional Jackie for that she got me back into sewing, which I hadn't done in years.

**00:35:00**Speaker 2

Yeah.

**00:35:04**Speaker 3

Yeah, she helped me pick out a machine for home. And yeah, I learned a lot from her.

**00:35:11**Speaker 2

That that is, that's great.

**00:35:13**Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah.

**00:35:13**Speaker 2

So so living in the village. I mean it's I mean. Obviously, I'm biased, extremely subjective, but I live here and I find it to be a phenomenal place that that includes some of the issues that any community is going to going to struggle with.

**00:35:22**Speaker 3

I know, right? We are. Yes it is.

**00:35:36**Speaker 2

You know what I affectionately call the knuckleheads and the knucklehead behavior, and.

**00:35:38**Speaker 3

Yeah, of course, yeah.

**00:35:40**Speaker 2

Stuff like that, but from y'all's perspective. What does that look like?

**00:35:47**Speaker 3

Well, we don't really encounter, um- in our little area.

**00:35:52**Speaker 2

Oh, I get an e-mail every now and then from Vernon on a dog deal or something so you know where he's going off the rail.

**00:35:55**Speaker 3

Oh oh, you've seen his emails? Oh no.

**00:36:00**Speaker 2

Well, he'll he'll include me in him sometimes I don't, everybody thinks because I'm the CEO that I've got all this power here.

**00:36:02**Speaker 3

Just just drop them in the spam file.

**00:36:06**Speaker 2

I know.

**00:36:07**Speaker 3

I did that alright.

**00:36:07**Speaker 2

But you know, in reality I don't.

**00:36:11**Speaker 3

I don't think he'd have a happy week unless he sent an e-mail complaining about something. It's just him.

**00:36:15**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, yeah. That's OK, yeah, but I mean, you know we look we, you know there is drug activity and things like that and that you know we try to help manage our friends because we would like people to be out from underneath those demons.

**00:36:22**Speaker 3

Right, right? Yeah, of course. Right, but it is a demon I'm.

**00:36:31**Speaker 2

Because it's a demon. It's a gorilla.

**00:36:34**Speaker 3

I don't think you're ever gonna...No, no matter what community, wherever in the world there's always going to be that I think that's just the sign of the times. I think that it's drug drug use has proliferated so much in the last four or five decades.

Yeah, it just has, and it's it's taken on a new vein with some of the drugs are different and with fentanyl and everything too, I just Vern and I said it the other day, you know?

**00:37:05**Speaker 3

I think there were some football players down in Miami, got into some cocaine and about four of them OD D, and it was fentanyl and the cocaine and we said I'm so grateful to God that we don't even touch the stuff anymore because you, you know.

**00:37:17**Speaker 2

You know?

**00:37:20**Speaker 3

One line could be the last you know, and it's lights out, so drug activities become very dangerous.

**00:37:26**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, yeah.

**00:37:27**Speaker 3

It really has, and you know there's a lot of speed meth methamphetamines, which I just I just couldn't. That stuff scares me. It really does. So it's I think it's hard to stamp it out completely. You just basically you drive it into the shadows and that's that makes it even harder for people to kick if if you just ignore it or or pretend it's not there so. I think offering support groups is the best thing you can do, you know and keep putting out there.

**00:38:05**Speaker 2

Well, in the community here you know, because I'll I'll I will confront you and go.

**00:38:10**Speaker 3

Right?

**00:38:10**Speaker 2

I know that you have a problem.

**00:38:12**Speaker 3

Right, right, that's good.

**00:38:13**Speaker 2

And and if you need help.

**00:38:15**Speaker 2

But you need to know that we know.

**00:38:17**Speaker 3

Yeah, of course yeah yeah.

**00:38:19**Speaker 2

You're not hiding every drug addict thinks

**00:38:22**Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah yeah, I know, yeah.

**00:38:22**Speaker 2

They're stealth, nobody can see them. Yeah, the radar's not on but our \*\*\*\*\* meters dialed in pretty good around here and we know and but we don't want to kick people back to the street we we want them to.

**00:38:27**Speaker 3

Right? Of course. No, of course not. No, you've got to offer them support and that's why I think keep having support grew. Oops, keep telling you keep telling them hey, we're here if you need it, you know.

**00:38:40**Speaker 2

Yeah, and growing in that, yeah.

**00:38:45**Speaker 3

Yeah, I agree, you can't just kick them back to the street. It's not going to help anyone, yeah?

**00:38:51**Speaker 2

Well look we we're running out of time here I've got and this has been a phenomenal interview and I really appreciate your authenticity and your vulnerability.

**00:38:57**Speaker 3

Thank you.

**00:39:01**Speaker 2

Helen and both yours and Vernon.

**00:39:04**Speaker 2

And I personally consider you a a gift to me personally, as a a neighbor, and a really a vital.

**00:39:09**Speaker 3

Thank you.

**00:39:14**Speaker 2

And that word means life giving part of our community, your art, his songs, just awesome.

**00:39:17**Speaker 3

Thank you, I appreciate that.

**00:39:24**Speaker 2

But one last question. Over the course of your life, what nugget would you like to share with our audience? Learning experience or something that's a a part of the Helen Bird DNA? What would you like to share with our audience?

**00:39:45**Speaker 3

They should have prepared for this.

**00:39:47**Speaker 2

I I don't want you to...I want it to come out of this.

**00:39:51**Speaker 3

You know what I think. Having been a nurse. I would say that health is wealth.

It really is. Mm-hmm, I think your health and your whole being, and that includes, you know, being free of substances, having faith in your heart. I I include that in health, it's a holistic statement, but if you don't have your health, you don't have anything. You just don't, you know, so we have to we have to take strides to keep ourselves healthy. Yeah, and it requires work and it's easy to just kind of plot down.

**00:40:28**Speaker 3

Say I can't be bothered and pass the pipe, you know, and that's where your health problems start, because unless you shake those demons loose, you will never feel

whole, you know, you'll never wake up. You'll never take a good night's sleep knowing that you know. That you did, you just you toxified your body a little bit.

You know what I mean? You've you just infected your temple. Does that make sense?

**00:40:55**Speaker 2

Yeah no, absolutely.

**00:40:56**Speaker 3

You know and.

**00:40:56**Speaker 2

I believe it I'm I'm a I'm a I'm a I'm a I'm a case study and.

**00:41:01**Speaker 3

Yeah, and I said to Vernon, unless we go to Austin and get clear of all this stuff, we're not going to sleep well. We're not going to be able to look each other in the eye. So health is wealth definitely, yeah yeah.

**00:41:12**Speaker 2

Yeah, and I love that health as well.

**00:41:14**Speaker 2

Ladies and gentlemen, health is wealth. Helen, thank you so much. God bless you for for being here and ladies and gentlemen, lucky you to have had this 40 minutes with my neighbor and my friend Helen Bird and along with Helen and I, why don't we all go out and be the goodness in our community?

**00:41:38**Speaker 3

You bet, hey God bless everyone.

**00:41:39**Speaker 2

God bless.

**00:41:45**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Gospel Con Carne with Alan Graham when he's not busy sharing stories from the streets of life, you'll find Allen at the helm of mobile loaves and fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless.

**00:42:01**Speaker 1

Music for today's podcast has been provided by community first neighbor and musician John 'JR' Rogers to learn more on how you can be a part of the revolution and goodness, visit us online at [mlf.org](http://mlf.org).

## APPENDIX E

### GCC\_S2\_HelenHopkins\_SoundMix.1\_1.mp3

Oct. 9, 2019

00:26:59

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Helen Hopkins

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/20/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society through untold stories of homelessness.

**00:00:20**Speaker 1

Your host, Alan Graham, is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based mobile loaves and fishes, a social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades.

**00:00:34**Speaker 1

Allen is also the lead visionary behind the innovative community, first village, the country's only master plan community. Designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne, here's your host Alan Graham.

**00:00:54**Speaker 2

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to the Gospel Con Carne Podcast I have in the studio today. Okay, a a great friend of mine and a neighbor Helen Hopkins. She and I are actually collaborating to bring some words back into the common English language uses. One would be swell, correct? And I think we've worked on Groovy a little bit.

**00:01:19**Speaker 3

Right?

**00:01:19**Speaker 2

Is there something else out there, Helen?

**00:01:20**Speaker 3

Well, I I watch a lot of those old fat, old timey movies and every - they use the word swell. So I I refer to you as my swell friend yeah.

**00:01:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah and so, I love seeing how language cycles around when we start getting to be our age and and you're now into your 70's. You see, things begin to cycle around so...but welcome to the podcast.

**00:01:47**Speaker 2

Helen, I'm glad to have you.

**00:01:48**Speaker 3

Thank you so much I'm glad to be here.

**00:01:48**Speaker 2

In the studio, tell me where you come from, where you grew up?

**00:01:52**Speaker 3

LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

**00:01:52**Speaker 2

Tell me about your mom and dad and your brothers and...

**00:01:55**Speaker 3

Lacrosse, Wisconsin is on the eastern border of Wisconsin. You cross the bridge and you're in La Crescent, MN. But my parents and my grandparents come from there.

**00:02:06**Speaker 3

I'm German and my 2 grandmothers were English. And my dad had what was called leg preathes disease where the ball and the socket don't dig and haul. So the Army Air Corps wouldn't take him, so he took his birth certificate and put an H on the end of our name Oldenbourg with an H and he jumped the border and went to Winnipeg, Canada.

**00:02:27**Speaker 3

And joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. And he became a pilot and a pilot instructor and he got the moniker Bones because because he taught the Canadian aviators how to shoot craps. They'd say ah, here comes the Yank with the bones.

**00:02:41**Speaker 3

Downriver is called as a town called Prayer de Chien. And the Hutchinsons own the lumber mill. There it was David and Ed. And David went to West Point and Ed married Lulu and he took over the the lumber mill. Well, Dad came back and worked for the Lacrosse Tribune as the newspaper man. And his brother my Uncle Norm was there also. And he got recalled, and since he was already a rated pilot, they shipped him to San Antonio, where where my mother, Sweet Lorraine Mae Heft Holdenburg.

They were married and and they're buried there at Fort Sam Houston. Well, come to find out David Hutchinson, was a full Colonel then, and my dad became his pilot and his aide to camp.

**00:03:23**Speaker 3

So my first -we lived at 718 King Street in Lacrosse, but my first home.

**00:03:29**Speaker 2

So you were born in Wisconsin?

**00:03:33**Speaker 3

No. I was born in, I was conceived in Wisconsin. Born in Enid, OK, Daddy was stationed at Vance Air Force, then we moved to Rabat, French Morocco and to this day, I can draw you a schematic of what we lived in.

**00:03:37**Speaker 2

OK.

**00:03:44**Speaker 3

It was it was fabulous. We lived there until my 4th grade and then we moved to Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, VA. From there we moved to Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, SC, Hawaii and Tokyo. I graduated so I started my schooling in Africa and I graduated in Tokyo. I went to the university. It was called Sophia University. It was run by Jesuit priests and we literally sat at wooden tables and wooden

**00:04:13**Speaker 2

Were you raised Roman Catholic or just?

**00:04:15**Speaker 2

No, no. I just went there. We, I just went there. But I modeled for Mr. Honda. I was in movies and he gave me the very first red Sports car convertible and my father and Sammy Davis Junior auctioned it off on New Year's for \$1,000,000.

**00:04:31**Speaker 2

Now, now tell me you you have two brothers, right?

**00:04:33**Speaker 3

I have a brother David who's 13 years younger and a brother, Chuck who's 17 months younger.

**00:04:40**Speaker 2

Now, how how much younger is David than you?

**00:04:42**Speaker 3

12 ½ years old.

**00:04:43**Speaker 2

Oh wow.

**00:04:44**Speaker 3

And then I had a sister Sue Ann. When I was born, when she was born, we were at Langley and I was ten and she was born with Down syndrome. So back in those days they called them mongoloid idiots. And I remember my father one time I was trying to teach her how to tie her shoes and daddy walked by and he said Helen Lynn, don't love her too much we're going to have to give her up and I looked at him and I thought what is he talking about? Never dreaming.

**00:05:14**Speaker 3

We had a lady that came in every day. Her name was Laney Ray. There's a lot of Turkish people in South Carolina. Thomas Sumpter - General Thomas Sumpter, said I want the fiercest, most loyal fighters, and they were the the Turks. And Laney was Turkish and she kept Sueanne and I remember I can see it to this day when we were we were going back to Lacrosse. My great Aunt Helen, she was a famous photographer and she had a cottage on the Mississippi River.

**00:05:48**Speaker 3

The cottage was next door to the Gillettes and we were kind of in a slew and before he went out to the main channel but her her her windows looked out on the Mississippi River and I remember to this day waking up.

**00:06:02**Speaker 3

The day before Suanne was going to turn 5 on August 31st and my mother, the Aunt Helen had this huge table that sat 12 with a beautiful oil cloth with birds of paradise and my mother had her arms stacked, her head stacked on her arms. And I I was sleeping on a sleeper couch in the living room.

**00:06:22**Speaker 2

So you knew something. There was some body language going on that was.

**00:06:24**Speaker 3

Yeah, and I could not get up and go to her.

**00:06:26**Speaker 3

Well we were taking Lori, I mean Susie Sue Ann, to Chippewa Falls to the northern Colony training school. And I'll never forget the day this it looked like William and Mary and this beautiful woman walked out and SueAnne just put her arms up. And SueAnn and and the lady picked her up, and I never saw her again.

**00:06:46**Speaker 3

So at age 14, It was like a death, never my husband and I moved to Iowa City, IA and he, he said, Helen, if you go and visit, yeah that I'm married Wallace Hopkins, who was a navigator on the RF4 at Burkham Air Force. That was the Hopkins part of the days and he said, if you go, you'll want to bring her home and I said no, I just want to see her and that was the first fissure in our marriage that he forbid me to go and see my own sister.

**00:07:19**Speaker 3

But she lived a wonderful life. She looked a lot like my brother David and my mother Lorraine, and she died in Ellsworth, outside of Milwaukee. But her obit was wonderful, she had a good life.

**00:07:32**Speaker 2

So, so where was she? How many?

**00:07:33**Speaker 3

She was ten years younger than I was, and I was Chuck's 17 months and then a 10 year period in Sue Ann and then David,

**00:07:37**Speaker 2

So there was you, then there was your Chuck, and then?

**00:07:46**Speaker 3

And then David was born with - he was sort of a Forrest Gump. He wore braces and he never learned to read and write. Although we had him with the best instructors in America, but he could build a house with his hands. He graduated from ACC with a degree in buildings trades. He's a good oral learner. And I learned more about refrigeration and air conditioning than I care to do yeah. Anyway. So, I married. I graduated from Southwest Texas when there were 13,000 students. And I got a BS in education with....

**00:08:16**Speaker 2

And was it a party school then?

**00:08:21**Speaker 3

No, yeah, I'd never. You know - back then it was like a high school. You know there was nothing.

**00:08:26**Speaker 3

And I never wanted to leave home. I my mother was Jake Pickle, our representative said she was the sweetest woman he'd ever met. And when she died, suddenly at age 57, he sprayed her coffin with roses and had a banner that said, Sweet Lorraine.

**00:08:44**Speaker 3

And my dad retired from Bergstrom, uh, well there anyway, I met Wally Hopkins when I was in Hawaii. A friend of mine, Mike Maddox, his dad was a general living next door. To my best friends whose father was a general. They were in their NAV class at Mather in Sacramento and and Mike said. Golly, where are you going, he said Bergstrom, Air Force Base. He said well bitchin, that was a Hawaiian term said.

**00:09:14**Speaker 3

That's where my friend Helen Oldenburg lives. He said, well, I'll look her up. Well he called me and my best friend was getting married but her parents were in Hawaii so we were putting on the wedding and I said well, I can't go. And the next time he called he was in the bathtub. And the third time he showed up, my mother said a GTO just pulled up out there and my dad looked at him and said, you certainly look familiar.

**00:09:37**Speaker 3

And Wally said he hung his head, he said that they all the squadrons have their own tables at the Office Club and and happy hour. Some girl wanted to see an RF4 and while he took her out on the flight line when when the AP's came and got him. Dad said you sure look remember and so. Anyway, we were married there. And our daughter, Laurie Lou, was born there. She'll be 48 September 21st and she's special needs. Although no, no, she just I had.

**00:10:05**Speaker 2

Was she Down syndrome or not?

**00:10:10**Speaker 3

AB negative blood and the titer had built up, and they were supposed to have taken on my dad's birthday. The 20 the 16th because I got pregnant on Christmas Eve and they didn't. And a friend of mine was a nurse. She said, well, come up and let me see if that's the amniotic fluid and it wasn't. And so they let me go another seven days. And the um - everything that could have gone wrong went wrong. I was transfused three times. They didn't give me the rhogam shot which would counteract the RH factor, and so I could never have any more children.

**00:10:49**Speaker 3

So Karen Teal was our doctor and she was, she sent us down to the Bluebird Clinic and Lori had muscle hypotonia. Or she couldn't uh - she was a floppy baby. And she she couldn't sit up right and there and they stuck the electrodes in her and it was awful. Wally, he said he spent the first three years wiping up the heel Marks and going in and out of hospital.

**00:11:12**Speaker 3

But anyway, she she graduated from high school, she reads and writes beautifully.

She lives in Waco in a group home and she retired from the VA. Hospital now she goes to a workshop with the other ladies, but she's my pride and joy.

**00:11:27**Speaker 3

Her dad and I divorced when she was about 9 and he went to – uh. He was based in Thailand, but he flew over every day The Hanoi Hilton, where John McCain was and then we lived in.

**00:11:43**Speaker 3

We moved to Augusta, GA where I started the first alternative school. And that's probably why I became the Executive director for the Literacy program in Columbia, SC because people I used to go to the Rotary Club and I'd say I'm going to ask you a rhetorical question, how do you define the word literacy? And they'd go that's easy. It means you can read. And I said no. Reading is a tool. In order to be literate, you must read, write, communicate and problem solve in order to be self-sufficient.

**00:12:15**Speaker 3

And so, uh? You know, my brother David doesn't manage his money well. And, but like I said he he put in all the cooler boxes and the convenience stores here. The problem was he couldn't read the street signs, so I worked for Doctor Bordelon as his - I managed the audiology department. And I would have to leave my job and take him to deliver because he couldn't read the street signs. That's how handicapping being illiterate is. And so he he lives here, and he he does, all right. He lives in public housing. My brother, Chuck retired as an account executive for AT&T. His wife, Cindy, is from Kerrville and she also retired there and they travel it pretty extensively and so.

**00:13:10**Speaker 3

The way I got here. I live downtown and I let my lease go. And they at the Salvation Army on the top floor they have a workers dorm. And I went back to school and got my certified nursing

assistants certificate. So, I lived there for a while. Then I had an income. In Texas, you can either take your Social Security retirement or your teacher retirement. I took my Social Security and so I had an income and I traveled for 15 months, months. I cashed in a life insurance policy that my parents got me at birth and so I traveled 15 months. And like your wife says, you don't fit the the criteria you know when you fill out that that, uh.

**00:13:59**Speaker 3

Questionnaire, I mean, it was like what? 10 pages? No no no. You know, I've never been mugged. I don't do drugs. I've never been, you know, I mean nothing fit me, but the fact that I had an income and I didn't have a permanent address for 15 months – uh, saved me.

**00:14:19**Speaker 3

An awful thing happened to me. I had a Honda and it was hit. So I was the headmaster at Thomas Sumpter Academy where I grew up. We went to Hillcrest, they closed Thomas Sumter because they didn't want to integrate. And so I had taught there. I taught seven different lessons and brought home \$1000 a month. But I lived in two beautiful homes back in those days. You could live beautifully, you know on that.

**00:14:50**Speaker 3

Then Hurricane Hugo came and I was in the last house that was rented and it sold. So Air Force captain had moved to Germany and I moved into her Cape Cod house and I was the manager for continuing education for University of South Carolina on the Sumpter campus. Then I went and taught school at Thomas Sumpter. Then I moved to Columbia and became the executive director for the Literacy program.

**00:15:16**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so how long ago was it that you moved here to the village?

**00:15:19**Speaker 3

July, it was three years, July 21st this year. I wanted to live in the country. I didn't want to live in an apartment.

**00:15:26**Speaker 3

I've lived in beautiful homes and I just wanted to live in the country. So I live in a dog trot and I picked that because it was next to the Chapel and I could go and go to the vespers with the with the deacons in the mornings.

**00:15:39**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, and yeah, you still do that.

**00:15:43**Speaker 3

Every day, most every day.

**00:15:45**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah - and so you were at the Salvation Army for a little while.

**00:15:50**Speaker 3

Right about, I think my course was like 9 or 10 weeks so that qualified me, you know.

**00:15:59**Speaker 2

But I kind of remember you around the street.

**00:16:02**Speaker 3

Well, I well I'm a I'm a musician and I used to hang with them sometimes to hear their stories.

**00:16:03**Speaker 2

Quite a bit.

**00:16:09**Speaker 3

That there there was a girl that I wrote a song called. Well, someone had hacked into my Yahoo Mail and anyway she give you she take the dime off your back. I can't remember the story, but I had to hear their story and I would go to breakfast at that Methodist Church and I would.

**00:16:32**Speaker 2

That's probably where I would run into you.

**00:16:33**Speaker 3

That's where I met you initially. And so I I hung around to hear their stories.

**00:16:34**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:16:38**Speaker 3

And that's why I wanted to do this mission. I'm more an intentional neighbor than a missional yeah, and I wanted to do missional resident, you know, and kind of cherry pick the ones that have really done well here, you know, so I've enjoyed living here.

And, you know, I love the people most of them. And the the ones that are hard to love I just pray over. You know, there's a saying that. You know, I remember I sent you that on my e-mail when I was in Seattle. He drew a circle and left me out. I drew a bigger circle and brought him in and Rod is probably my favorite deacon and he sort of keeps my sharp edges soft. He really is a devout, praying man. And you know Tammy has been, was given to me as a gift and you know, I, I just help her as much as I can. He said, well, you're, you're the the legs and the - you know she, she just struggles, but she doesn't realize it's a struggle. She just chooses to to drink and and it's just her choice.

**00:17:56**Speaker 2

Been interesting moments however recently.

**00:17:58**Speaker 3

Yeah, she's fallen and she.

**00:18:01**Speaker 2

Of well, but there's some interesting moments of sobriety.

**00:18:04**Speaker 3

Oh yeah. Not not many, but some yeah.

**00:18:08**Speaker 2

No, I understand.

**00:18:10**Speaker 3

But I think it's because I haven't given up on her. Yeah, I, I don't like swearing and when she would come in early on 2 1/2 years ago and she stopped. I just said, you know, in my house there's my rules, yeah, and she stopped. And if she slips up she she apologizes.

**00:18:31**Speaker 2

Kind of explained. You mentioned the word intentional neighbor a second ago and kind of what?

**00:18:35**Speaker 3

Well, I feel like I've been.

**00:18:36**Speaker 2

What does that mean?

**00:18:37**Speaker 3

I feel like I was intentionally put with those kinds of people there. Arnold is a favorite of mine. You know Chris, he was there.

**00:18:48**Speaker 2

Don't you find it interesting? Though on the, on the those kind of people that we all seem to be those kind of people, I mean all of us.

**00:18:54**Speaker 3

Yeah, well there's a that Ken Keys. I'm reading Jan Karen's Father Tim's favorite Bible word or quotes and it's Ken Key says I live in a living I...I love if I'm in a loving world. I'm hostile if I'm in a hostile world. Everyone I meet is a mirror of myself. And I I think that's that's pretty much, you know, it keeps you from pointing fingers.

**00:19:26**Speaker 2

I think a lot, yeah and you know, and I think we use language sometimes and I certainly do when we you know when we want to separate ourselves from someone else or what we perceive as someone else's behavior.

**00:19:37**Speaker 3

Right

**00:19:40**Speaker 2

So we end up putting them in to those people like people will ask me what's it going to be like? Having 250 of those people all living in there. And I always tell them it'll be a lot like their family, but... And what I've discovered is, is that we're, we're all a lot alike.

**00:19:55**Speaker 2

You know some people cuss more some people.

**00:19:58**Speaker 3

Like like you said that you know it's a catastrophic loss which causes homelessness. I know people that have suffered homelessness with a roof over their head.

**00:20:08**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, yeah.

**00:20:09**Speaker 3

Because their houses or their homes were so dysfunctional. And you know, I can't read the part on Will Langley, how his father did the things. Or Ellis, it just breaks my heart. I lived a charmed life. You know our tragedy was losing SueAnne. Yeah, and my mother literally never got over it. Thank God she had David because he kind of picked up the slack and even though you know there were problems. You know they say my dad was kind of a street Angel and the house devil.

**00:20:44**Speaker 3

He was, he was sometimes very difficult. We'd be sitting at the dinner table. He had this big 12 seat dinner table with reostat chandelier and he one time we had all these guests and he'd say, well, we'd ask Helen Linda say grace, but the food would get cold. And I looked at him and I said Daddy that wasn't funny. And if you said someone's comin' over, he'd say I beg your pardon, 'It's coming.' he would have hated Sarah Palin.

**00:21:13**Speaker 3

Yeah, I mean he was a real taskmaster. And one time he had an old royal type recorder and I was sitting out by his pool typing and I said, Oh my God, my mind is starting to atrophy. Afterword, he said who are you trying to impress with those 50 cent words? You know he he wounded me, but he never...he chipped at me but he never wounded me. He chipped and he wounded my brother Chuck. Chuck perceived that I was the most loved. I was the most available.

**00:21:42**Speaker 2

Yeah, but you and Chuck y'all are still close. Yeah?B ecause we see Chuck out here periodically and David's here all the time and...

**00:21:49**Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah. Well he hasn't been out here in in a while, but no, neither of them have been out here for a while.

**00:21:54**Speaker 2

Chuck has.

**00:21:57**Speaker 3

They go on cruises and stuff they went on that viking cruise. No, Chuck - and his wife and Germany and he said the best part of that trip was coming home.

**00:22:03**Speaker 2

Oh, OK.

**00:22:07**Speaker 3

He said it was a long trip.

**00:22:08**Speaker 2

So now you're out here.

**00:22:13**Speaker 2

You know you're you're being intentional about living out here and you built some friendships with people.

**00:22:16**Speaker 3

Right, right?

**00:22:20**Speaker 2

Like Tammy, which you know and other people that could be a struggle at times, but you seem to be attracted to that.

**00:22:21**Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah. Well, you know in my you know the last will and testament in high school it said I was either going to be a Playboy Bunny or a social worker. I did psyche at my friend from her name was Emily Flippin. She's Emily Lawrence now. I was I dated a City Councilman and a mayor here for 20 years. But I couldn't go to three parties, and I'd write that his speeches on the back of envelopes. And we were at a cocktail party.

**00:22:57**Speaker 3

That night in and Ron Mullen had been was the mayor and he got into it with someone. He's a typical Leo like I was. And I was like this, Ron, you lost the you lost the battle, but if you go back and hold your tongue you won't lose the war and Lee said well, what were you? What'd you do?

**00:23:16**Speaker 3

Him I said well, I just told him blah blah blah and I said who am I I'm a nobody.

He said don't ever say you're nobody again and we were, uh, Lee and I went to a a thing at the Convention Center in San Antonio and Henry Cisneros was on one side and a who was the car sale sale, own the Vikings. The School of Business? Red McCombs was on the other side and we were smoking there was ashtrays there. And old Red McCombs puffed himself up and he said, well, what we need to do...

**00:23:51**Speaker 3

What Wally had gotten a scholarship to Trinity in hospital administration and he said, well, what we need to do is build libraries and I hit that ashtray and it flipped up, and I said, First off, you gotta teach him how to read like this.

**00:24:09**Speaker 2

And So what other intentional residents, neighbors are out? Here that you...

**00:24:14**Speaker 3

I'm I'm not sure you know, uh?

**00:24:18**Speaker 2

I mean people that you you connect with?

**00:24:20**Speaker 3

I connect with Paul and Carol Gauche real well. We we have wine together and meals together.

**00:24:26**Speaker 2

The the Merlot nights.

**00:24:27**Speaker 3

The Merlot nights right and uh, you know the girls Taylor Marley and Anna.

And Trina are are just my hearts delight. You graciously allowed your home, and we had wine the other night I gave him XXXX XOXO earrings. And we started with Taylor, but she's finicky about what can go in. So each one of them can wear them from one birthday to another. That was my gift to them.

**00:24:56**Speaker 2

Oh, that's cute. Yeah, yeah.

**00:25:00**Speaker 2

Well, you've had a very interesting life. If I could write down all the stories that you'd have it be an encyclopedia Britannica volume of of stories. But over your entire life, what's kind of the one thing that you've learned. That you would like to share with our audience that speaks into a Helen Hopkins life live.

**00:25:27**Speaker 3

Don't judge people. You know - you never know what someone's heartache is. You know about the time I get mad about something someone will come up just like that person and just be as sweet as pie so you know you never know what somebody else's heartache is.

**00:25:44**Speaker 2

So don't judge, assume the best.

**00:25:45**Speaker 3

Oh I. Yeah, just just don't judge other people until you've walked in their shoes.

**00:25:51**Speaker 2

Well look, I appreciate you coming in the studio today and allowing us to have this wonderful conversation. We should have had a glass of Merlot while we were doing this.

**00:25:59**Speaker 3

I know it.

**00:26:00**Speaker 2

Who knows where that conversation?

**00:26:02**Speaker 3

Would have gone then.

**00:26:03**Speaker 2

Is gone, ladies and gentlemen, my good friend, my neighbor and the most swellest lady in this community, man - Helen Hopkins.

**00:26:15**Speaker 2

Thank you. Everyone go out and be the goodness in your community. God bless.

**00:26:25**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Gospel Con Carne with Alan Graham.

**00:26:28**Speaker 1

When he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Allen at the helm of mobile loaves and fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless music for today's podcast has been provided by Community First neighbor and musician John 'JR' Rogers. Learn more and how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

## APPENDIX F

### Leatha\_Floyd\_06012021.mp3

June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021

00:29:09

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Leatha Floyd

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/9/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

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**00:00:47**Speaker 1

Here's your host, Alan Graham.

**00:00:52**Speaker 2

Hello everyone, welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast.

**00:00:56**Speaker 2

We are excited to have in the studio today, one of my neighbors and the daughter of another one of my neighbors, Letha Floyd, welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast Leatha.

**00:01:15**Speaker 3

Hello everyone.

**00:01:17**Speaker 2

Um - you know, I remember, what it took finally to get you in here after your dad had moved into the Community, but if you don't mind, go back to the beginning where you come from.

**00:01:29**Speaker 2

Tell me about your mom and dad. What was like growing up, your brothers and sisters - you know all of that?

**00:01:36**Speaker 3

Well, I'm the only child, so I don't have any brothers and sisters. I grew up in a little town called Dayton in East Texas. Um - my mother and father were in and out of my life, all my life. I mean my dad - and the only time I really seen him was when I was going to the prison to see him with my grandmother. My mom would drop me off with my grandmothers every now and then.

**00:02:10**Speaker 3

Sometimes I live with her, sometimes I live with my grandmother. Most of the time I think I lived with my grandmothers. My mom, she is in...she was in drugs way before her and my dad. They had to.. that's their... that was their thing until they got pregnant with me.

**00:02:37**Speaker 3

My grandmothers were my strength. My grandmothers. They were my, my rocks. I knew I was stable as long as I had had them. But shortly after I had gotten married, I had my son, and uh - got divorced and moved in with my grandmother and found out that my dad's, my dad's mom had passed away, which was really hard. My dad got out, they let him out early to bury her and everything and - Oh God.

**00:03:16**Speaker 2

Which which was the grandmother that was your rock, your your dad's mom? Or your mom's?

**00:03:21**Speaker 2

Both of them, both of them, both of them.

**00:03:24**Speaker 3

I had anything and everything I wanted from because of them. I mean they made because um...My parents were...my parents. They were just...How they were. They took care of everything. I mean I didn't...they bought me school clothes. They made sure I was in school. They did my - they sure I tried to stay as straight as possible. Gave me a roof over my head. But I've lost - when I lost, my grandmother and my dad's mom. That was really, really hard. And and then I found out, uh, my dad disappeared.

**00:04:08**Speaker 3

I didn't know where he was anymore. And I was told by a family member that he'd passed away and so I was like. That was kind of hard. Uh - while though I wasn't really used to him being in my life, you know. Off and on.

**00:04:27**Speaker 2

Did you have grandfathers as well? I lost him way early in life. I was one of them. I lost when I was three years old. My dad's father, I lost when I was three years old.

**00:04:39**Speaker 3

And then when I was six years old, I lost my mother's father. And for years and years and years, I thought he died of a heart attack. And we went back up to Fort Davis, TX, where we had put - they had sprinkled his ashes and I read this newspaper article that was by the hotel room where he where he had died. And I had found out that he killed himself and um..

**00:05:11**Speaker 3

I tried to question, I tried to question my mom and about it and stuff and they, oh they're like Oh no, that's not what happened. And I told him I saw that article and they finally came out and told me that that's what happened which was...Oh my God, that this it blew my mind. Because I just didn't understand. And my grandmother finally sat down and told me she said. Well, we had left we - I left him and I had....She said she had a dream from God that the night before she left. That he was chasing her through the hotel room and he killed her and he killed himself.

**00:05:48**Speaker 3

And she said that God was telling her to leave, so she said the next morning and she got up, she grabbed her purse and she got in her car and she came to her brother's house in Anawak. And then shortly after that, me and my mom left and our grandmother said that when he called her, he said that he had lost everything that meant the world to him and he just didn't want to live anymore and... so...uh...

**00:06:19**Speaker 2

Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Did you know him very well?

**00:06:24**Speaker 3

I I I still remember him. I mean we, we had horses, we had the we had a fair every year there. And he would buy me ducks and we would race them and I got a a blue ribbon for my ducks winning the races and stuff. And they were all over the wall.

He was very active with me and I am...My mom said that he was a horrible man.

**00:06:52**Speaker 3

But what I got from him was totally different than what my mom had got from him I guess. Because I didn't see him as a horrible man. And then he was great with me, he was never abusive with me or anything, but my mom says that he was a horrible man.

**00:07:09**Speaker 3

He was a...She said it comes from him being a police officer in Baytown. That he just was a hard hard man. But when I when I came around. He was a - the world to me, and to find out later on that I've been lied to this the whole time. You know about him that...It was is very difficult to come to grasp with, believing that somebody so strong in my life could have done something so weak and...I just I never...I still don't understand that to this day.

**00:07:47**Speaker 2

And I don't think we ever will. You know, while you were growing up, there was probably a point in time in your life where you realized that you were in a pretty dysfunctional environment and that your grandmothers were the rock. Do you remember what age you were when that awareness?

**00:08:13**Speaker 3

I still don't think I'm aware of it being a bad life and being a hard life. Because I just... it grew...It was natural to to me to be that, and when I tell...I was telling this my my story a little bit.

**00:08:27**Speaker 3

The Pops and Pops said I don't want to hear...That's just horrible. I just I didn't understand what he was talking about.. because I still...My mom, when she was in my life, the stuff she had to do to make money to keep roofs over our heads and everything wasn't as far as society is concerned and stuff, wasn't a healthy way of making money - dealing drugs, bartending you know. But I did...I looked at it and I still do is...I was proud of her for what she could do for me.

**00:08:59**Speaker 3

You know, I was proud that even though she had to go through those ways in life to support us, she tried her best and I'm proud that she tried her best, you know?

**00:09:13**Speaker 2

And then your dad being in prison.

**00:09:15**Speaker 3

Yeah, and then yeah...my dad that was...that was a whirlwind going every couple... We'd go two or three times a year to see him in prison. But it was natural. I mean it, I didn't - uh...It was...I had no other another no other life to look at to see how bad mine was, really. And I don't...I still don't feel...I guess I'm in denial or whatever about it, but I I still feel like I had pretty...I thought, I think I had a pretty great life, you know.

**00:09:52**Speaker 2

Or, or you're really strong and yeah so yeah.

**00:09:56**Speaker 3

I don't know. And then when I found out my dad's sister told me that he'd passed away in prison and then I lost my mom in 2010. I was like - I don't have any more parents. I don't know. I don't have any more parents. I'd already lost my grandmother, my dad's mother. And then I thought he was dead.

**00:10:19**Speaker 3

And I thought my mom, my mom had passed away and then my grandmother got ill. And my mother's mother got ill and so, I had quit my job as a security officer to stay home and be with her because she got...I had to be around Tom Claire.

**00:10:36**Speaker 3

And then when I lost her, I was like I'm all alone. I don't have anybody, I'm all I'm all alone. And then I was on Facebook one day. And, uh...

**00:10:52**Speaker 3

Some man...I was like some man is trying to tell me he's my father and he wants me to call him. And at the time I was delivering newspapers and I asked my boss about it. I said, what do you think? should I call? And she says, well, don't use your number call from another number and and see what it is. But Oh my God, when I heard his...when I heard it was him. You can't just see his voice, you just know it's him.

**00:11:23**Speaker 3

Oh my God, I just I was jumping I was jumping for joy because I was...I've gotten in trouble with the police and um...For shooting off a gun on on New Year's Eve and I was on probation. I had to give up my security license and all that and then he comes in my life. And I'm I was struggling with drugs myself at that time, real bad.

**00:11:50**Speaker 3

I had been on meth, I don't...13 years I had been on meth and then he come, he come down there and got me and brought me up here. And we, we lived out on the street. We slept in my car, lived down the street, took baths where else. And then luckily, he came on to me one day he said, you know what Miss Tricia's going to help me get back out there - Community First.

**00:12:17**Speaker 3

And I was like wow, great... he goes. It's...he told me I was still going to have to live in my car for a while, but at least I'd have a place to take a shower. And that was my God, the first good private shower I've had in over a year. Oh my God, I loved it. I just I loved it.

**00:12:47**Speaker 2

So he he he had moved into the village and then he he left with Pops. And then that's what you guys,

**00:12:49**Speaker 3

That's when he came and got me.

**00:12:50**Speaker 2

And and that y'all when y'all met again.

**00:12:53**Speaker 3

Uh yeah, the first time we've seen each other since uh - God, since right after my grandmother passed away.

**00:13:02**Speaker 2

What year was that roughly?

**00:13:04**Speaker 3

Let's see. 2007

**00:13:07**Speaker 2

Oh my goodness wow yeah, so 10 years plus. 10-13 years

**00:13:12**Speaker 3

Yeah, I thought he was dead for over 10 years.

**00:13:15**Speaker 3

Yeah, I thought he passed away for over 10 years, yeah.

**00:13:19**Speaker 2

And what was that like reconnecting with Gary?

**00:13:25**Speaker 3

Oh man, I just, I felt like it was God giving us a second chance and to be to get to know each other you know. And and for him...For me to actually have a dad and um...That was that was. I told him that was the hardest thing going through school, and you know, everybody's bringing their, their dads to school and everything for parent, teacher, parent day or whatever and not having not having a dad to bring. And so when we met back up, Oh my God - it was like a dream come true and he got me up here. He got me off the drugs. Um -

**00:14:10**Speaker 2

How how did he help get you off the drugs?

**00:14:14**Speaker 3

He just got me away from it. I feel you know, he brought me up here. And if I had somebody. I wouldn't be alone anymore. And I had something to live for you know and...

**00:14:27**Speaker 2

Drugs aren't hard to come by here. There must be something internal to you. A desire that really wanted out of that lifestyle.

**00:14:38**Speaker 3

Yeah, I didn't want to go to prison. I always say I'm not prison quality. They'd eat me alive in there, I think. But he helped me get my probation back on. I got lucky. I could have been locked up for violation of probation, but he got me up here. He helped me every step of the way to get set back up with my probation up here. We got it transferred up here and uh - He just, I don't know - uh -

**00:15:11**Speaker 3

Just him being by my side I think is what helped me, you know, and I know it helped him too, I think. And uh - he has trouble like you know, with alcohol and or he did have trouble with alcohol and drugs. So I think us being together....It's hard to....we wanted to be better for each other, you know and um...

**00:15:34**Speaker 2

Well, tell me about your little baby girl.

**00:15:35**Speaker 3

Oh God, now she's the real reason that I'm staying on the straight, straight and narrow. But if it weren't for this, if it wasn't for this place here, I couldn't have been the mom I am to her today.

**00:15:50**Speaker 3

This place I I I get to work in the garden and work with the animals which, which I which I absolutely love. And they're flexible with me. And so I'm able to be home with her. Like I didn't get...I got to see her first steps. I got to hear her first words.

**00:16:11**Speaker 3

And she's she's what really made my dad quit doing what he was doing too and that's when he went with - he got with...got with you all about that chip. Got that chip in his arm for her.

**00:16:27**Speaker 3

And she's she's been - Oh my God, a complete joy every day, just. She's been wonderful and and she's happy out here.

**00:16:40**Speaker 3

I can actually walk outside with her and we can walk in the road and not have to worry about a car flying by...trying you know... she can run around and have fun and...

**00:16:51**Speaker 2

How do you deal with the temptation that exists out here? Or is it just? Do you ignore it or?

**00:16:57**Speaker 3

I just I don't pay attention to it, really, I mean. I don't see what I don't...I mean, I see the good in this place I don't look for all the bad.

**00:17:09**Speaker 3

I don't look for what's going on with, you know with this neighbor or that neighbor, you know, I just see them on the...see them every day. I say hi to him and I don't, you know everybody has their faults. Everybody has their problems. None of us are perfect, you know, and that's...

**00:17:27**Speaker 3

This place out here I think is helping all these people be better people, you know.

I think that givin...I mean having a roof over your head, I never thought in a million years that you could take advantage of having a roof over your head, you know and...

**00:17:46**Speaker 3

Oh man, I just...When Robin opened up my door for the first time here, I just bawled and bawled. It was beautiful. It was home.

**00:17:57**Speaker 2

When you moved in.

**00:17:58**Speaker 3

Yeah, it was. It was home. But um...

**00:18:01**Speaker 2

How long ago was that Leatha?

**00:18:04**Speaker 3

January 2019 I moved in here okay. But a year before that Daddy brought me out for a house warming or house blessing.

**00:18:14**Speaker 2

For his house or another one?

**00:18:15**Speaker 3

No, no, it was just somebody else's yeah. And it was the first time I've ever seen this place. And Miss Suzanne was walking me around and she took me up there on the at the red roof and they were praying and stuff. And she held my hand and I was praying with everybody and I just, I started crying and I said God is here.

**00:18:42**Speaker 3

God is here, you know, and I...It just I hadn't felt him in so long that it was...It was crazy to actually be somewhere and feel God. And I told Ms. Suzanne,

**00:18:55**Speaker 3

And Ms. Suzanne was like - yes God is here. God is here and it was great and...

**00:19:01**Speaker 2

How, how long were you actually on the streets?

**00:19:05**Speaker 3

Let's see before Daddy came and got me I when I lost my grandmother in 2016. I couldn't pay. I, I was delivering newspapers, and so most of my money went back to feeding me and putting gas in my car so I could work. And uhm, so I lived out of my car after I couldn't pay the bills on her land anymore and stuff so. Let's see, probably a good...almost, almost four years. Almost four years.

**00:19:41**Speaker 2

Yeah, and that was pretty intolerable.

**00:19:46**Speaker 3

Yeah, I went from being able...My biggest thing was being able to shower. And, uh, being able to cook food instead of going through a drive thru. But my whole world has changed since I've been up here though. I'm almost done with probation. I've passed every drug test they've thrown at me in the last three years, so.

**00:20:19**Speaker 2

And what will that when will that be over?

**00:20:22**Speaker 3

January of next year 2022

**00:20:26**Speaker 2

Oh wow. Fantastic! Congratulations. We need to celebrate that when it happens.

**00:20:29**Speaker 3

Yeah, and I don't think, if I wouldn't have been up here, I I don't think, I I think I would have been in prison right now. So...

**00:20:39**Speaker 2

Yeah, well, I'm happy for you. You mentioned that you had a son, correct?

**00:20:43**Speaker 3

Yes, I do. I have a son.

**00:20:45**Speaker 2

How old?

**00:20:46**Speaker 3

16

**00:20:47**Speaker 2

Wow

**00:20:48**Speaker 3

Yeah, but...

**00:20:49**Speaker 2

Is he with his father or?

**00:20:50**Speaker 3

Yeah, he's with his father and his grandparents down there. He's been living with them since he's been 10 years old.

**00:20:58**Speaker 3

It got too much. I don't think he likes seeing his his grand his great-grandmother's ill and he wanted to move in with his dad at that time.

**00:21:11**Speaker 3

And so I thought it might have been best for him to to do that, if not have to see his great grandmother getting worse and worse and worse. So, he went and...

**0 0:21:22**Speaker 2

Do do you all communicate? Are you all in touch?

**00:21:24**Speaker 3

Oh yeah, I had... I pay for his cell phone bill every month.

**00:21:28**Speaker 2

I think I met him and he a big guy.

**00:21:29**Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah he don't look 16.

**00:21:31**Speaker 2

Yeah, OK. No, that's right, I have met.

**00:21:34**Speaker 3

Yeah, I think he was... Yeah he's... I just had him down at the end of April. He is down here for a couple of weeks at the end of April, yeah, yeah. But, uh... Yeah, he's a big boy. He's he's a 6-7 now and he's about 300lbs, but I've had to look up at him since he's been 10 years old, so that's not a new thing for me.

**00:21:53**Speaker 2

Yeah, OK. Well, is his daddy up tall and...

**00:22:08**Speaker 3

Yeah, his dad's 6.5

**00:22:09**Speaker 2

Yeah OK yeah, yeah, yeah. So what about tell me about Pops? Y'all hang out with Pops a lot and...

**00:22:20**Speaker 3

Oh - Pops is... Pops has become a grandfather that that I haven't had in a while and he absolutely loves my daughter absolutely. He had lost... you know y'all he had lost his daughter which It's got to be....

**00:22:38**Speaker 3

I know it's... I watched my grandmother lose my mother so I know that's an unbearable pain, you know. But I think with having me and my dad and Lola as his family now. He's, he's happier. Although it's still kind of hard to keep him out of trouble sometimes though. He's just a mean, onery man sometimes.

**00:23:04**Speaker 2

And A and a sweet man.

**00:23:06**Speaker 3

Yeah, he's yeah...I don't....We wouldn't....There's just something about him that you can't help but love. I don't know what, but he's...he's been since, I've been up here, he's been here, been there with me since day one too. And he's got a different perspective on life, but...

**00:23:27**Speaker 3

He's a great. He's a great guy. He's gotten me so much jewelry. I have a medicine cabinet full of jewelry that he that he's gotten me over the years and and spoiled me rotten. I guess he's spoiling me like that like he would have done his daughter if his daughter would have still been here.

**00:23:42**Speaker 2

Yeah, he's generous that way, isn't he?

**00:23:45**Speaker 3

Yeah he is he is. He's a great guy.

**00:23:49**Speaker 2

Yeah, no, that's beautiful.

**00:23:52**Speaker 3

Yeah, he helps me with Lola too. Sometimes when my dad's not well and I got to go put the chickens up at night for like that 30 to 45 minutes. He'll let Lola chill with him while I'm working and I'll come in and they'll be asleep on the chair together.

**00:24:10**Speaker 2

Yeah, that's beautiful. So you love working on the farm and...

**00:24:15**Speaker 3

Oh yeah, that I found that's what I love to do.

**00:24:19**Speaker 3

I found it brings me it....I guess it brings me closer to God and then me seeing people be able to eat and have eggs and have vegetables just given to them. You know, knowing that I helped provide that. I helped do that - and it's hard work. It's oh my God, it's just 3 1/2 hours a day, but it feels like 8 hours of work. It's hard work but you look back and you go. I did that. That was me.

**00:24:50**Speaker 3

You know I did that and then when you see the vegetables grow. And you see, oh, you're like wow - I can't believe I did that. I was helping. I'm helping a good cause for once in my life, you know.

**00:25:05**Speaker 2

You know, I've I've seen people pick up eggs at the farmers market and go to the kitchens and cook them all up like 1/2 a dozen eggs at a time and eat them.

**00:25:17**Speaker 3

We give Pablo quite a few eggs for his - uh - his Wednesday morning Taco with cheese Taco with?

**00:25:25**Speaker 2

Pablo's tacos

**00:25:25**Speaker 3

Yeah, Pablo's tacos, yeah.

**00:25:28**Speaker 2

Yeah, and do you get to eat a lot of eggs and Lola and...

**00:25:32**Speaker 3

Oh yeah, we get eggs too. I don't get them every every time though. But, yeah, we get them...Lola loves cheesy eggs.

**00:25:42**Speaker 2

That's beautiful. Well look, I appreciate you being here with us today. Like I said at the very beginning, over the course of your life and all of your wonderful experiences, what is it that you've learned that you would love to share with our audience?

**00:26:08**Speaker 3

That even if you think that you're down. And you can't...You're down and you can't get back up. There's always a door somewhere. God always has a door open somewhere and you can always pick yourself up. And you can always learn to live better. You can always turn your life around no matter how far down you think you are. There's always forgiveness somewhere, and someone's willing to help so...

**00:26:36**Speaker 2

Do you feel like you got about as low as you could get?

**00:26:43**Speaker 3

Yeah, I got it. I was low. Yeah, I got pretty pretty down to low. Yeah, right before my dad came and got me. But it's over with, you know.

**00:26:56**Speaker 2

Well, you look pretty high to me. No more low right now.

**00:27:01**Speaker 3

Yeah, no more low.

**00:27:02**Speaker 2

High in a good way.

**00:27:03**Speaker 3

Yeah, it's a good place here and then there's always even if you feel like you're going to screw up or whatever, there's always somebody that's there to help you know. And Ms Karen and her husband have been absolutely just wonderful. They take Lola for walks to give me a break, sometimes you know.

**00:27:25**Speaker 3

And if I'm, if I'm having a bad day and there's always somebody here that I can turn around and talk to and that will give me good advice or build me up. And make me just forget about all that negativity that was coming on me so.

**00:27:45**Speaker 2

Well, thank you for being with us today. It's been a blessing to have you here and learn more about your your story.

**00:27:52**Speaker 2

It's a beautiful story and I'm particularly grateful for your extraordinarily positive attitude and looking at what some people would look at as a real struggle in life, and no doubt their struggles. But you look at it from a very positive lens, and I think that's very powerful. So God bless you for that.

**00:28:15**Speaker 2

Ladies and gentlemen, Letha Floyd, so grateful that she got to spend time on the Gospel Con Carne. And as is usual, let's all end together, go out and be the goodness in our community. God bless.

**00:28:34**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the gospel con carne with Alan Graham.

**00:28:37**Speaker 1

Him when he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Allen at the helm of mobile loaves and fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless music for today's podcast has been provided by community, first neighbor and musician John 'JR' Rogers. Learn more and how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

## APPENDIX G

### Letty3.mp3

September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021

00:31:38

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Letty Davila

Speaker 3 – Alan Graham

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/7/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society through untold stories of homelessness.

**00:00:20**Speaker 1

Your host, Alan Graham is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades.

**00:00:34**Speaker 1

Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative Community First! Village, the country's only master plan community designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne,

**00:00:47**Speaker 1

Here's your host, Alan Graham.

**00:00:52**Speaker 3

Goodness day everyone. Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast. I am excited to have in the studio today, my friend and neighbor, Letty Davila, and how long have you been living here in the village, Letty?

**00:01:09**Speaker 2

This September, 1 year

**00:01:10**Speaker 3

All right, yeah, very good and yeah, so Letty you are living in phase two, is that correct?

**00:01:18**Speaker 2

Yes, Sir.

**00:01:19**Speaker 3

Yeah, fantastic. Letty tell us a little bit about where, where you grew up. Tell us about your mom and dad and brothers and sisters and kind of what it was like in your childhood, good or bad.

**00:01:33**Speaker 2

That was pretty good. I was born and raised here in Austin, TX. I live maybe 2 miles from downtown, off of South Congress and East Live Oak, which now is a very multi-million neighborhood. My father was a brace maker.

**00:01:53**Speaker 3

A what maker maker uh-huh?

**00:01:54**Speaker 2

A brace. He built braces for polio stricken patients.

**00:01:59**Speaker 3

Oh wow.

**00:02:02**Speaker 2

My father had third grade education, but he could speak medical terminology to with the doctors. And pronounce the words perfectly. And he and his boss Bruce, I don't remember the mans last name, but they had a shop right there off of Speedway close to Hancock shopping center. And they made braces for the polio stricken people, or anybody who had a club foot, or fallen arches or pigeon toe. He did all that stuff. My mother was an LVN for Lady McCarmond hospital. Our Carmond hospital. It was right there off of, close to St. Edwards University.

**00:02:53**Speaker 2

I have two older sisters and an older brother. Everybody's like 12, 10 and 8 years older than me. I was the youngest. I grew up in an all-white neighborhood on Brooklyn St. So I had a lot of friends. A little, you know the neighbors grandkids, played with them so. We we – uh, we were considered upper middle class. When people wonder, what's the upper middle class? It's extinct now.

**00:03:26**Speaker 2

So I pretty much went to school uh- Crockett High School, even though it was really far, Fulmore Junior High, Travis High and then my senior year, I graduated from Reagan High.

**00:03:40**Speaker 3

So how did you bounce from Crockett to Travis to Reagan?

**00:03:45**Speaker 2

Well, instead of going my freshman year, my sophomore year there at Travis, we had problems. I had problems with gang members, because South Congress anything east of South Congress was considered upper class and we were the only Hispanics in that whole neighborhood for like, uh- maybe 10-12 years. And anybody West of Congress was considered lower class. So a lot of kids from the lower class consider me a white Mexican.

**00:04:27**Speaker 2

And because I don't, I did speak Spanish and spoke Hebrew, my mom was part Jew, part Spanish. And since I couldn't pick up the Spanish language, I picked up the Jewish language. So I got beat up a lot. I was bullied a lot, so I learned to fight back.

**00:04:46**Speaker 3

Yeah, were your other siblings bullied a lot or why why was it you? What was it?

**00:04:53**Speaker 2

I guess because – uh, they spoke Spanish. And since I was eight years late. I never could pick up the language. Every time I try to speak Spanish, it came out wrong.

So I got chased with broomsticks and mops.

**00:05:10**Speaker 3

Wow.

**00:05:16**Speaker 2

I don't know. My siblings just seem to fit in perfectly.

**00:05:20**Speaker 3

So did you struggle in high school?

**00:05:24**Speaker 2

With the prejudice part.

**00:05:26**Speaker 3

Well, prejudice, drugs alcohol?

**00:05:32**Speaker 2

No – I was a tomboy. I was kind of like neutral. I hung up with, you know I didn't really hangout. I was more like a loner, but I spoke to everybody, joked around with everybody. They call me the peacemaker. Because whenever a fight would break out I would - I was always in the middle of it trying to talk everybody out of it and calm everybody down.

**00:05:52**Speaker 2

And I pretty much did. Not, you know, if the football players gave me any problems, I just beat them up. And so I didn't really have any problems. I just had problems with gangs trying to beat me up and. I was constantly bullied in junior high at Fulmore we had a gang called the Gillis Rags, which was silly stupid.

**00:06:19**Speaker 2

It was a bunch of Hispanic girls. They didn't like me or they were trying to get my niece, Veronica, to join their gangs.

**00:06:29**Speaker 2

I grew up with my nieces and nephews. That's how young I was and late, born late. So I grew up. Like it was Jean Veronica, then myself and and the other kids in between so. I grew up with my nieces and nephews and went to school with them which was not so great because they were popular with all the Hispanic people and I was more popular with the white people and African American people and and everybody else.

I had maybe like one or two Hispanic friends in junior high.

**00:07:09**Speaker 3

Tell me about your family now or are your mom and dad still alive or - and and then your siblings?

**00:07:13**Speaker 2

No, no

**00:07:16**Speaker 3

Are they still?

**00:07:18**Speaker 2

Yeah, they're still alive. When it got really ugly back in 2006. That's when I first became homeless because of my siblings.

**00:07:29**Speaker 3

So tell me about that what what got ugly?

**00:07:34**Speaker 2

When my father passed away in '95, he used to tell me Letty- please be patient and tolerant of your siblings. You know, I know, they get on your nerves sometimes and try to provoke you. And so I made a promise to him.

**00:07:48**Speaker 2

And so he said, and then also. Be patient with your mom because you know she never really was a mom growing up to you.

**00:07:58**Speaker 2

That part was also ugly. My mom was very abusive to me, even though I was a good kid. I didn't do drugs, I didn't drink, I didn't get in trouble.

**00:08:10**Speaker 3

What kind of abuse was that? Physical?

**00:08:13**Speaker 2

Physical, well mentally, emotionally.

**00:08:16**Speaker 2

Say the reason I say I was born late is because I was not supposed to be born. The doctors told my mom, you, you know you'll never get pregnant again. So that eight years later I got she got pregnant.

**00:08:29**Speaker 2

And from what I found out, through the years growing up. My mom had been married before so she had two children prior to my father's.

**00:08:40**Speaker 2

She had a daughter and a son. And her daughter Marilou and my mom apparently kept telling them growing up that they tried to abort me many times.

**00:08:51**Speaker 2

And that's what that's another thing that made me very strong. And persevere through life. And I told him, I said tell my mom.

**00:09:00**Speaker 2

Because my mom wouldn't let me know anything about the birds and bees. Every time I said, 'What's the birds and bees?' Pow, I got punched in the face.

**00:09:09**Speaker 2

My nieces knew, but me no so. I told my mom I said you're constantly telling me since, I guess since I was three years old, that should never been born. And I told her when I was a teenager, 'the thing is, is that you may not have wanted me. But Daddy wanted me and God wanted me. And no matter what you did to me and to your body.

God made me stronger. He made me more stubborn, more hard headed but more stronger.' And my dad used to call me his little Amazon because I was like a lawyer.

I mean, no matter what they did to me,uh- I tell them, I'm still here.

**00:10:03**Speaker 3

So you were close to your dad, yeah, but your mother not not so. So in '95 he passes away or.

**00:10:06**Speaker 2

Very close, my dad was my hero. He passes away.

**00:10:15**Speaker 3

And and I'll, I'll help you said, kind of all hell breaks loose and.

**00:10:19**Speaker 2

Yeah, Marilou goes.... You know she's you know she figures, you know he's gone so now she's going to be the matriarch. So she was over there brainwashing my brothers and sisters, my mom against me and and you know. I just pretty much kept to myself.

**00:10:36**Speaker 2

I had started my own business selling general merchandise and traveling to little cities, you know, around Texas and Louisiana and I was very successful at it.

**00:10:51**Speaker 2

And then mother started having problems with her mortgage because they bought the house through the VA. So a friend of mine and I did some research, found out mother could refinance

the house. Because her rent was like jumping from like 600 to 708 hundred, 1000 jumped down again. And nobody else would do anything about it. So we did something about it and found out she could refinance the house. We dropped the payments down to \$436.00 a month.

**00:11:28**Speaker 2

And they gave her back nineteen \$19,900. But mother has a way of twisting the truth. So everybody just got greedy like vultures.

**00:11:40**Speaker 2

And I had moved in in 2005 with my mom and I was trying to help her out with the bills and her being diabetic and her health and everything. And then um her medication started making her loopy and stuff like that. So I took her to the hospital. And every time I kept trying to get her to go upstairs and take a bath, she would attack me.

**00:12:06**Speaker 2

So I said, you know what? Let Marilou come over here and take care of you. So, apparently she got some type of infection. They try to blame me. She fell at the hospital, broke her hip. They blame me.

**00:12:17**Speaker 2

So pretty much what they did. Marilou, like I said. I didn't do drugs and things like that. But Marilyn was a coyote. She was into human trafficking, drug trafficking. All that horrible bad stuff. And what she did was she got a locksmith when I was out of town selling my merchandise and mom was in the hospital.

**00:12:43**Speaker 2

She got a locksmith, came in planted drugs, in my room. And then she calls the police, tells the police. Oh, guess what? This is what we found in the house, drugs. And she planted some other paperwork saying that I was trying to embezzle money from my mom and all this stuff. From there it's like a nightmare. Next thing I know Marilou draws up a fake, her and my brother Ellis, drew up a fake power of attorney, when actually I was the one that had the real power attorney. They stole the wheel and everything. And the only thing I remember was getting kicked out of the house.

**00:13:36**Speaker 2

A cop showed up. And DEA showed up. And back then, I didn't know anything about computers. So she told me you need to leave. Get away from your mom. She's not your mom no more. If you don't, we're going to stick something in the computer and you're going to jail. You know you they found drugs on you and all this stuff.

**00:13:56**Speaker 2

I was like what? I don't do drugs. And if I do drink, it's an occasional drink. You know, with friends or whatever holidays. And so.

**00:14:09**Speaker 2

I was trying to, you know, the neighbors were trying to come to my rescue. When some other cops showed up and she told them something then they left. They just looked at me and left. And then the two cops that were escorting her. They were going through the garage and looking at my merchandise and the guys were going - oh, these are nice leather jackets. And I said, oh, you would have to buy them. They're \$50 each. And they looked at me and they started laughing. They said, well, once you're out of here, we could take whatever you want. And there's nothing you can do about it. Which was true.

**00:14:42**Speaker 2

Because mother they took her out of the hospital. Put her in some nursing home temporarily. Next thing I knew when I got. I paid for -to go back to the house to get some more clothes or stuff, because they just made me take the clothes on my back, some money and the car's out of there. And then they were trying to say I stole my mom's car and I said - No mom's car is, you know, broken.

**00:15:12**Speaker 2

And then the next thing I knew, when I came back gave re-entry to the house 3 days later, everything was gone. There was not a stitch of furniture there was. Nothing in the house. All I found was a box with some old pictures of my son and nothing else. The neighbors told me that.

**00:15:35**Speaker 3

And what year? What year was that?

**00:15:37**Speaker 2

In 2006. And the neighbors told me that Marilou apparently went to the neighborhood in Santa Monica Park, because the house was on Santa Fe Drive. Forgot to mention that. She went and told those people, the Mexican people out there, that there was a free for all at her mother's house. Her mother was dead, I was dead.

**00:16:02**Speaker 2

So there was a free for all. And they said all these strangers just started pouring into the house. After Marilyn's friends and her and her children and my brothers and sisters and their children had already, you know, gone through the house and took whatever they wanted. And then the neighbors came and took whatever they want.

**00:16:25**Speaker 2

And then whatever furniture was left behind. Marilou call for a big old dumpster to have all the furniture thrown in the trash and take it to the city dump.

**00:16:34**Speaker 2

Then I get a letter. I get a call. Telling me I had to go to court because I was being sued. And so I went to court. And I took my younger son with me, you know, just for moral support. We sat in there and listened to all the lies. Marilou hired some attorney named Jesse Gladdiel.

**00:17:01**Speaker 2

And she's the one that made-up the brief and everything. And he was just reading the brief what she wrote down, Marilou wrote down. I just looked at them and I was trying to hold back the tears and keep from having an asthma attack.

**00:17:19**Speaker 2

And when I spoke to Judge Margaret, I told her I said those are lies. I said me and my friend did not have any type of sexual encounter with my mom. That's sick, that's disgusting. That's something Marilou would invent. I said we didn't have no drugs, I just embezzled no money from her. I said the money I made from my own business.

**00:17:41**Speaker 2

You know, I took her out to the casinos with me when we were in Louisiana or places. I paid for everything. I didn't get none of her money. But I don't know where y'all get these checks saying that I, you know, that's not my handwriting on those checks.

Those are forgeries.

**00:17:59**Speaker 2

And then my mom was crying. And then I told my mother, I told Marilou - I said yeah, what did you do with the rest of Mother's property.

**00:18:07**Speaker 2

I said from what I heard from the neighbors, you and everybody else in the family close to the neighborhood had a free for all. I said, Mama got no furniture to go back after she gets out of rehab or nursing home. I said all her properties gone. All her clothes are gone. Ya'll stole everything.

**00:18:27**Speaker 2

And when mother realized that, because they had her, they had her in a a bed and her arm bandaged up like she had broken her arm, like I did all that physical abuse. She was in a wheelchair. They were all dressed up to the tee.

**00:18:42**Speaker 2

I was like in a raggedy shirt and shorts and I told the judge I stood up. And I said see all these clothes. This is the only clothes they let me walk out of the house with.

Maybe another pair of shorts or pants. I said everything was gone. All my clothes are gone.

**00:19:00**Speaker 3

Are your siblings still around? Yeah, but you don't. I assume you don't talk to any of them?

**00:19:06**Speaker 2

You know the ironic thing is. After all these years. Because my son joined the Navy, Nick, the one that was with me in court, he joined the Navy he was living in Slidell, Louisiana. He was stationed at NASA. He became a meteorology oceanographic meteorologist. He calls me up and tells me. Mom, are you still in the streets? And I say yes baby. And this was like 2009. And he said, well, I'm lonely down here. Come. I've got an apartment and just bring the dogs and you come on down and come stay with me. So when I stayed in Louisiana with him. And then I went to Mississippi and stayed there, then I came back to Austin in 2017. Because I was a caregiver for a veteran who passed away. And he was also from Austin.

**00:20:02**Speaker 2

Came back down. And my siblings are the ones, that my sister Linda and my other sister Beth, got reached out to me. And you know, after all these years they have forgotten what they did to me.

**00:20:20**Speaker 2

But I still have all that paperwork of the lawsuits. Of the fake the forgeries. Of all the fake power attorneys. And the house that was on Santa Fe that should have been mine, my brother got. He rented it back in 2006. And he was renting it for like \$1800. And all that money he made from it, he's been spending it, left and right.

**00:20:50**Speaker 2

And when I came back like I said, all he told me was - he goes lady, I would give you \$50.00 but I don't have \$50.00 to spare.

**00:21:01**Speaker 2

And then I guess - Linda feels sorry for me or something and she helped me out financially. Beth helped me out financially and I stayed with her for like three or four months and then I just couldn't deal with it anymore.

**00:21:16**Speaker 2

And Linda was telling me she goes, you know what Letty? She goes - it's hard to believe you know that did you were homeless again in Louisiana and here in Austin. And it's hard to believe

that you have so much positive energy that you're you actually look like you're glowing. You're just like just constantly smiling and like happy.

**00:21:41**Speaker 3

So how long were you homeless?

**00:21:43**Speaker 2

Off and on about 7-8 years.

**00:21:46**Speaker 3

Yeah, and tell us what that was like.

**00:21:51**Speaker 2

Here in Austin wasn't too bad because my oldest son Jacob. He would tell me he said mom get off the streets come stay with me for a little while. You know, I don't know how long I'll be at this place, but you know, you can stay here for a little while and I did but. I just couldn't handle his ad. So I went back on the streets. Austin wasn't too bad back then.

**00:22:20**Speaker 2

And then when I became homeless in Mississippi after the veteran died. Because I was trying to pay the storage for my property. I had a lot of beautiful things, crystal and furniture and stuff like that.

**00:22:40**Speaker 2

You know, I was afraid of panhandle. And back there in Mississippi you have to have a panhandling permit. You have to go apply for the permit and they have to do a background check and everything. Then you get your picture taken and then you get a permit and then you can panhandle. And even then, that was scary to me.

**00:22:59**Speaker 2

I didn't like doing that, but I had to for my dogs. And I cried, and and then I lived in the streets for a little bit. And I went to a place called Lady Fatima Church in Biloxi.

And got hot showers, hot food, all kinds of services, free laundry and all that stuff.

And it was great. I moved into a homeless camp. Four other homeless people, took care of each other. Because I was having problems, even in my car, having problems with idiots telling me that I needed to a man with me.

**00:23:43**Speaker 2

In other words, and they tried to force themselves on me. I was like no, no, no, no.

I said I can protect myself. I can fight and my dogs would get up in their faces and they leave.

And I told the other homeless people, you know what happened. They said no, you need to come and move into this community with us. And I had a tent in there and everything. And it was alright for a while.

**00:24:05**Speaker 3

Well, here in Austin, where were you staying mostly before you moved in here to the village?

**00:24:13**Speaker 2

I was staying in a car. And then this elderly lady told me this before I found out she was psychotic. I stayed with her for three months and I worked at AARP. And my dog stated the apartment with her, and when I came back, I saw that my momma dog she -Navida - she was like walking. Kind of funny and flipping over and I was like Oh my God I said. Nancy was her name. She came into the my room one night. She was drunk and crying and fighting with her boyfriend. And she kicked Nico. He was on the floor and I said hey, you know Nico can't see you see better than me and Nico put together. And Navi growled, because that was her baby.

**00:25:01**Speaker 2

And I told ask you look, I pay you rent even if I'm staying here a few months. But you have no business in this room and she goes. I have every business. This is my house, I said, ma'am - this is a fourplex. When I came back and Navi was like flipping over at the time, I didn't have the car anymore.

**00:25:20**Speaker 2

I took Navi and they told me that Navi had been physically abused.

**00:25:25**Speaker 2

So I said no, they said I'm moving out. So we left it we I got another used car, stayed in there and I was just going place to place. And then that car was a lemon so I was blessed enough to find a lot across the street from Burleson Rd.

**00:25:46**Speaker 2

I stayed there for a year in a tent. This man named Mike Daly. He was very nice to me. He was this gentleman that owns some property. A lot over there off of Burleson and Stassney. I just kept his property clean and he let me and my dogs stay there in the tent.

**00:26:06**Speaker 2

And then I was working with Goodwill and Phoebe Rankins. She's a she was a BSS case manager and she was helping me try to get in here. And the time that I first came over here. I was working for Kendra Scott, uh - working in the warehouse. And I had an income. But over the months and everything. I stopped working for Kendra, because it was just temporary. And then Phoebe and I kept trying to get in here and then she left and then it was just... But eventually I got here and I love it. And every day I pray to God, you know, for being blessed and finding people like y'all, you know they cared somebody to fully. You know? Kind of like having an imaginary hand reaching out to me, you know. And I was blessed to finally connect with y'all and it's been a blessing every day.

**00:27:09**Speaker 3

Yeah, you like living here then yeah. Yeah, well that's great. Letty I – uh. How many children do you have? Two?

**00:27:21**Speaker 2

I have two.

**00:27:22**Speaker 3

Have two sons?

Yeah Jacob. He's 42 now.

**00:27:24**Speaker 3

The two boys

**00:27:27**Speaker 2

Hey Liz and Taylor, and he's an accountant.

**00:27:30**Speaker 2

And then Nick, he's in Picayune MS. And I'm praying that hurricane is not too bad going through there. His wife Jen, four years ago she recovered from breast cancer.

Now she's got it again. My only grandson, Dominique, he's 7.

**00:27:52**Speaker 3

Do you get to talk to him much?

**00:27:59**Speaker 2

Yeah, I we went up there the 1st of August. Because Ray, my fiance, that's another blessing I got. I got bestowed a lot of blessings this year. Getting this house becoming engaged, got a car - a used car but it's a nice car. Got to work here. Yeah, being receiving a lot of blessings.

**00:28:24**Speaker 3

Yeah, that's beautiful.

**00:28:25**Speaker 2

Nick, he's a - He's still an oceanographic meteorologist at NASA. He's still, and he's got his engineer license at last. And Dominique is so funny. He's smart. He's so smart he scares me.

**00:28:41**Speaker 3

Yeah, well, that's great. Well before we end our conversation here. Is there one thing that you've learned over your life that you would like to share with our audience?

**00:28:55**Speaker 2

Yes, I've learned, despite all the obstacles that I have endured, all the hardships. I've had my adventures and misadventures over the years. I've learned to no matter how bad things get. I've learned to persevere through all of that. And when things look the worse and look the gloomiest. I've learned like - people can give you ugly looks and persecute you and put, you know? Put you in a in a group where you feel like a lepper. I learned that the best thing is the best defense for me - is to smile. And I'll smile, when I'm feeling my worst? I keep smiling. I don't care people give me ugly looks, dirty looks. It's funny because when you look at them again, you keep smiling. They smile back at you. And it's like it breaks a barrier. It's like it just, whatever it's like, if you're like in a glass cube, a glass cube and you smile. It's like it's got so much power, it breaks it. And it's like I keep telling people a smile is contagious. You know, so I just learned to be be persevere and to smile.

**00:30:25**Speaker 3

Well, there you have it. Ladies and gentlemen, Letty Davila, who persevered and continues to have a beautiful smile and so thank you for being in the studio today.

Letty, beautiful.

**00:30:41**Speaker 2

Thank you.

**00:30:43**Speaker 3

Ladies and gentlemen, that's it for this session. And as is usual, let's all together go out and be the Goodness in our community. But let's do it with perseverance and a giant smile on our face.

**00:30:58**Speaker 1

God bless you've been listening to the gospel con carne with Alan Graham when he's not busy serving up his Tex Mex theology, you'll find Alan at the helm of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless.

**00:31:19**Speaker 1

Music for today's podcast has been provided by community first neighbor and musician John 'JR' Rogers. Learn more and how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

## APPENDIX H

### GCC\_Season2\_PennyHunt\_SoundMix.1\_1.mp3

Aug 14, 2019

00:32:43

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Penny Hunt

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/22/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society through untold stories of homelessness.

**00:00:20**Speaker 1

Your host, Alan Graham, is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry, that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades.

**00:00:34**Speaker 1

Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative community, first village, the country's only master plan community designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne, here's your host Alan Graham.

**00:00:54**Speaker 2

Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast. Beyond excited to have in the studio this morning, a really a great friend of mine, somebody that I cared deeply about. One of my neighbors, Penny Hunt, who has lived in the community almost three years, is about to sign another agreement for her 4th year of living in this community.

**00:01:21**Speaker 2

Often, Penny calls me Papa. And she also calls Tricia, my wife, Mama. And so I think that gives you a sense of what our relationship is. Penny welcome to the Gospel Con Carne.

**00:01:31**Speaker 3

Hi Papa.

**00:01:34**Speaker 2

There we go. Why don't we? Talk a little bit. I mean, first of all you spent over 40 years really on the streets.

**00:01:47**Speaker 2

And I know there were moments during that period of time that you were off the streets, but you've spent an awful lot of time homeless, but take me kind of back to your childhood. Tell me about your mother and father, brother and sisters. Where you were born? And all of that, let's hit on that stuff first.

**00:02:02**Speaker 3

Well, I'm from Salt Lake City, Utah originally on the east side of Salt Lake City in a little subdivision called Holiday Utah.

**00:02:12**Speaker 3

Ah, it sits right at the foot of the Cottonwood Canyon and Wasatch mountains up there. And my mom and dad- they met when they were eighteen. Had me when they were 18.

**00:02:25**Speaker 3

My dad was a ironworker at that time. But I was always a daddy's girl. He died nine years ago. My mom's still living. She's real sick, but she was my abuser growing up. She really did a number on me, but uh... (big breath out)

**00:02:47**Speaker 2

Tell me tell me about that, that piece of your relationship, what kind of abuse are we talking?

**00:02:51**Speaker 3

With her? Oh Lord, have mercy. It was physical and mental abuse. Both, uh, more physical than the mental. But she, uh, did things that were just, you know like, uh, with humiliation and stuff like that or getting rid of my pets, you know that kind of messing with your mind stuff always tell me.

**00:03:21**Speaker 3

I don't know what my father did to her, but whatever he did I paid for it cause I looked like him. You know, because every time she'd go off, she'd be like you look just like your father. You act like your father. That's all I ever heard.

**00:03:35**Speaker 2

Now, did you have any brothers and sisters?

**00:03:37**Speaker 3

Have one sister. I'm the oldest. There's 4 1/2 years between us. We're both messed up. My sister is a paranoid schizophrenic. Which runs on my father's side of the family. And then I'm bipolar. And have post-traumatic stress and panic attacks real bad.

**00:04:03**Speaker 2

Now you basically left home at a, at an early, early age you know it's hard for most of us to fathom that age - so really take us deep into that.

**00:04:16**Speaker 3

Well. I know. Well, the reason why I started running away at six years old is because I was getting beat on a regular basis, being locked in closets, not being let out for hours on end, not being fed, not let go to the bathroom. Sometimes she'd welt me up so bad that I'd be bleeding, so sometimes I have a hard time with blood. The smell the iron content in your blood if it's too strong. I kind of trip out a little. I try not to, but it's not controllable. That's my post dramatic stress.

**00:04:50**Speaker 2

It's it's a, it's a smell that takes you back to a time that wasn't....

**00:04:52**Speaker 3

Smells, smells and sounds. Certain sounds will trigger my post-traumatic stress.

**00:05:01**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so how old were you when?

**00:05:02**Speaker 3

This she started abusing me. I I can only remember from 6 on who knows what she did to me from between birth and then. But, at 6 she had started, uh, my sister had come along by then and I was six and had my sister. Tina was what? about three, I guess when she started drugging us.

**00:05:31**Speaker 2

Yeah, and drugging you?

**00:05:33**Speaker 3

With her she had she, she had a lot of health problems besides being mentally screwed up. She was on like Percodan, Somas, Percocet you know. Percocet and Percodan their pain relievers and Somas is a very strong muscle relaxer.

**00:06:00**Speaker 3

My mom and dad were what they called swingers back in the day. Okay and my mom was bisexual. So, that's another story, but...Exactly. So she decided she was going to start drugging me and my sister so we wouldn't know what was going on, but we already knew what the hell was going on and.

**00:06:12**Speaker 2

Yeah, so they put you out in order to have parties, yeah?

**00:06:23**Speaker 3

I I never did understand that, so I didn't have a snowballs chance in hell of not being a drug addict on my whole life off and on. I still struggle with my addiction off and on to this day. But right now, the reason why I'm hurting and doing things that I shouldn't off and on is because I lost John.

**00:06:45**Speaker 2

Well, one of the things that I like to tell people all the time is that you know I've I've been around a lot of drug addicts and I've never met one that really wanted to be a drug addict and and, you know, from your heart. What's it? Let our audience know what a burden, what a burden that is, but at the same time.

**00:07:03**Speaker 3

I tell you. It's, uh, I'll tell you what I can't speak for anybody else but myself, you know, because I'm not in anybody else's shoes but my own. And for me. I use off and on because of the pain.

**00:07:22**Speaker 3

To mask the pain. To stop the pain that I feel. And I don't want to feel it cause it hurts so damn bad I just don't want to feel it I don't want to think about it. I just want to be numb. And that's just how it is. It ain't got nothing to do with because of this or that or or you know.

**00:07:41**Speaker 3

I've stopped off and on for years, but I don't stay stopped is the problem? I can't seem to stay that way. I'll go for a while. I can even go maybe a year or so. Or may might only be four months or six months and then I fall on my face again for a little while, and then I stop again for a little while. And and it's just been like that all my whole life ever since she started drugging me at 6.

**00:08:04**Speaker 2

When you look. When you look at your drug use from the streets compared to your drug use here in the community.

**00:08:11**Speaker 3

Ohh - it's way less way less, because. And it's not that I don't want to stop, it's just that I don't know how to cope in any other way because that's all I've done for my whole life. That's all I know what to do.

**00:08:25**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:08:27**Speaker 3

Yeah, you know. I I um, I don't know, Papa it's it's it's not. It's not that easy to explain.

There's a lot of things that factor into it besides just not besides wanting not to feel the pain, and that's why you drink or or drug. But it's psychological stuff that goes on in my brain all the time. That messes with me.

**00:08:57**Speaker 2

Yeah. But living in the communities brought you a lot of a lot of relief.

**00:09:00**Speaker 3

Oh yes, I love living here. It's changed my whole life. I I didn't think I'd ever have a home I thought I was gonna be homeless my whole life and be a bag lady die on the side of the road somewhere and being a poppers grave. Yeah, I really did. Yeah, I didn't think I'd ever have a home.

**00:09:16**Speaker 2

Now, one of the interesting things to me about your life that you've told me about is you started riding the rails at about 12 years old.

**00:09:23**Speaker 3

Oh yeah, I love hopping my freight trains.

**00:09:27**Speaker 2

And you know one of my kind of weird fantasies is I wouldn't mind spending a week on the trains.

**00:09:35**Speaker 3

Man, it's so cool. Papa you...

**00:09:36**Speaker 2

So tell me, kind of, I mean, you're 12 years old, I can't fathom that you're 12 and you're jumping trains and riding around the country.

**00:09:42**Speaker 3

I had to. Yeah, but I was adventurous like that. Though I if I got something in my craw and I wanted to do. It I went and did it. Yeah so.

**00:09:51**Speaker 2

So tell me about that journey. How long that whole journey lasted, because ultimately you got married and had children and?

**00:09:56**Speaker 3

I was off and on the street there for a little while between my late 20s and probably about mid-30s maybe later, late 30s. I started hopping the freight trains at 12 and the reason why I started hopping freight trains is because every time - I there was a few times when I tried to hitch hike, I got messed with by the men. Yeah, uh, I'd been raped, beat up and stuff and I was just like I was sick of it so.

**00:10:26**Speaker 2

You've been raped. You had that experience one time? Yeah.

**00:10:31**Speaker 3

Oh no, many throughout my whole life because I was out on the street at a young age and men are the worst predator out there that you got to face. There's that nothing else beats the men. The men are awful to women. Women, young girls – it doesn't matter, if you're female. It's over, yeah.

**00:10:54**Speaker 2

Yeah, so that produces.

**00:10:55**Speaker 3

Well, I mean I, it wasn't just the rapes, I mean. I I was brutally raped and beat beyond recognition. One time like I looked like Quasimodo when they got done. Yeah, and I was in the hospital for over a month.

**00:11:15**Speaker 3

And at 14, I was raped by three men in San in San San Francisco. I had wandered into the wrong side of town and didn't know it, late in the night, trying to find somewhere to lay down and I got pulled into an alley.

**00:11:30**Speaker 3

And I was raped and sodomized until I was just passing in and out of consciousness. Yeah, and when they finally got done and they had robbed me of all my jewelry and so that's why I don't learn all the jewelry anymore. I've never worked jewelry since that happened very seldom do I wear it.

**00:11:48**Speaker 3

And they also one of them had given me an infection. I had 104 temperature. I was in the hospital for a month. IV's in me and everything. They had to stitch me up because they had ripped me. I don't even remember how I got out of the alley. They said they found me laying in the... You know how the alley comes out and it's in between the two sidewalks like it's a little dip thing?

**00:12:18**Speaker 3

I guess I must have crawled out there or something after they were done and just passed out and somebody called an ambulance and the police and they took me to the hospital.

**00:12:28**Speaker 2

Well, sister it it pains my heart that you had to experience that. You know, I want you to know, I'd do anything in the world to be able to get those memories out.

**00:12:43**Speaker 3

Yeah, it's it's not a good thing, and you know after something like that happens to you, anybody that's been through that, you don't feel clean ever again. It's like you just feel defiled violated in some kind of way of for the rest of your life. You just don't never get over that, completely.

**00:13:05**Speaker 2

Yeah, now at at some point in time you ended up falling in love and getting married and - or at least getting married.

**00:13:16**Speaker 3

I I um, yeah, I my first my my first love messed me around pretty bad I I had was seventeen I was 17 when I met my first old man he was 32. And I had my first child by him when I was 18. And so I was always fighting him and the women constantly, you know. And I was with him for five years, and two kids later and I finally had had enough. And told him see ya.

**00:13:54**Speaker 3

And then, uh, and I met Roy, which was my second old man I was with for a little while. That was my first black man I'd ever been with. And, uh, I was with him for about five years. Then I moved around and, uh, and then, uh then, I met Paul, the kids is dad. My boys's father and I was married to him for 10 years. Every man - I haven't had a man be faithful to me yet. Every man I ever had was unfaithful to me.

**00:14:28**Speaker 2

But out of that, you had four children.

**00:14:30**Speaker 3

Uh, I got five. I have I have one daughter and four sons and I'm a grandma. I have 4 grandbabies.

**00:14:38**Speaker 2

But now you've reconnected with...

**00:14:41**Speaker 3

Family since I've been here. Yeah. God.

**00:14:43**Speaker 2

All of them?

**00:14:44**Speaker 3

Not all of them, but my my couple of my aunts, my cousins, my first cousins, my sister there for a little while but she's quit talking to me. But Tina's got problems. She's, like I said, she's a paranoid schizophrenic so they had discharged her for that from the Air Force. She was in the Air Force. She was a computer geek in in Colorado Springs, Co inside that mountain that they have a base in, yeah, and so because of her mental illness like she couldn'tit.

**00:15:17**Speaker 2

So how did you end up in Austin, TX?

**00:15:21**Speaker 3

Well, I ended up in here. I ended up here because I was in I was in Chattanooga TN.

A circus came to town, and one of my homeless friends, because I was homeless there too.

Told me about this circus that was hiring people. You know to work for them. And they paid every week and give you a place to stay.

**00:15:47**Speaker 2

And now you've had a lot of what I would call manly jobs.

**00:15:51**Speaker 3

Ohh yeah I I've worked hard all my whole life and I was growing up in the mountains. We chopped wood and shoveled coal and all that but I've mostly done construction work. A lot of demolition work, warehouse work, landscaping. I've I've even worked in a wrecking yard, pulling parts and stuff and uh.

**00:16:15**Speaker 2

Now, did you work in the circus, did you get that job?

**00:16:17**Speaker 3

Yes, they got. They hired me. And me and my me and my friend went down there and he come and got me.

**00:16:20**Speaker 2

Tell me about that job, how long that?

**00:16:24**Speaker 3

He was on his 10-speed he said - Penny, come on I got us a job. I was like what are you talking about? So I followed him down here and they needed a couple people to go with them. They needed one for for for concessions and then they needed somebody to take down and put up the big top tent - well that was me. I got that job putting up the big top tent and taking it down. Now that's some work. That's a lot of heavy work. Them tarps are big and heavy. You got to lace them together and then you got this spool. They come off of that looks like a a sewing spool, but it's huge, just gigantic on the back of this big old truck that you roll the tarps off of and then you got

these bales that are on towers that you have to after you hook them to the bales. You gotta get up under there and roll them, roll them back up to the top.

Crank them up with all those heavy tarp. That's not an easy job to do and put the poles up and everything. Take them down.

**00:17:18**Speaker 2

How long did all that was that just like a a one contract gig or did you travel with your circus?

**00:17:22**Speaker 3

No, I we traveled everywhere. We were gone every 2-3 days. We had to pull up stakes and everything get gone. Take care of the animals.

**00:17:29**Speaker 2

And how long did that gig last.

**00:17:33**Speaker 3

How long was I with them there? Until they I got stranded here in Austin. About, I think I was with them for about 5-6 months.

**00:17:41**Speaker 2

So that's what brought you to Austin, was the circus, so you...

**00:17:44**Speaker 3

Yes, the circus has had disbanded and disbanded, which means they fell apart, went separate ways. And my boss, that I was working for, asked me where I wanted to go.

They would drop me off of my - I had a mountain bike and two backpacks full of stuff, and my pay. Had like about \$80.00 in my pocket when I got here that was it. Mountain bike, 2 backpacks, and 80dollars in my pocket.

**00:18:12**Speaker 2

What year that was? okay

**00:18:15**Speaker 3

That was, okay, I've been here three years and I was on the street for 15. About 18 years ago.

**00:18:22**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah now you're in another. You're you're in our documentary that we just recently did that did another documentary 10 or 12 years.

**00:18:28**Speaker 3

Yeah, but I'm in another one too.

**00:18:33**Speaker 2

And you're in there and it's got some great footage of you.

**00:18:36**Speaker 3

Yeah, my camps and me and he followed me around for a whole year.

**00:18:38**Speaker 2

Your your camp was awesome.

**00:18:40**Speaker 3

Yeah, well I rebuilt everything I I recycled everything that I built. It was recyclable material and, uh, I built my own places myself. Sometimes they take me 2-3 days to build them.

**00:18:53**Speaker 2

Now, uh.

**00:18:53**Speaker 3

And gather up all the stuff.

**00:18:54**Speaker 2

What's your natural gifting?

**00:18:57**Speaker 2

Art. Art, yeah, so right behind your head right now.

**00:18:59**Speaker 3

Art and and art and animals.

**00:19:02**Speaker 2

Yeah, well right behind your head is one of my Saint Francis's that you did and also one up on the wall.

**00:19:05**Speaker 3

I know.

**00:19:09**Speaker 2

She's actually - Penny, has done quite well. When she gets focuses on her art. So you're on the streets 15-18 years here in Austin, TX.

**00:19:20**Speaker 2

And that's that's not easy all by itself. Certainly you're in and out of the drug deal, and you battle your PTSD and your bipolar thing. At some point in time, you you meet this guy. Tell me about this guy that you met this loud, boisterous, hustling...

**00:19:33**Speaker 3

Oh my God ohh. He was something that he was something else. I never met nobody like that in my whole life, but I had to wait seven years to meet this man by myself. And asking God for - I wanted a black mountain man.

**00:19:58**Speaker 3

You know? And somebody that believed in God. And somebody that was homeless like me you know, and so I had to wait seven years, but I met John. John Vincent. And it was the weirdest thing because I, you know, I really wasn't looking for a man. I really wasn't.

**00:20:24**Speaker 2

Yeah, because you didn't trust yeah.

**00:20:26**Speaker 3

No, uh, that men had broken the trust so much that and it took John two years to really get my trust. And then he betrayed it by cheating on me.

**00:20:37**Speaker 2

But you forgave him.

**00:20:39**Speaker 3

Yeah, after four years of putting him through hell and knocking his teeth out of his face. Yeah, I was pretty pissed off when I caught him in my own room with with a crack head in my bed. And it was more of an emotional thing than it was that I really wanted to hurt him.

**00:20:55**Speaker 3

Before I even knew what I was doing. I was crying. The next thing I know, my fist came up and I just popped his ass, you know and almost knocked him on his butt. Yeah, cracked his plate in half. I hit him so hard. He called the police on me. I didn't go to jail, though they didn't catch me so.

**00:21:15**Speaker 2

We'll come back to John in a second, but speaking of jail, you you've been in the Crowbar Hotel a few times.

**00:21:21**Speaker 3

Oh my God. Yeah - I've been in and out of jail since I was ten years old. I was a warded the state by the time I was ten. Went through four case workers. And in and out of a couple. Quite a few mental hospitals and juvenile places and juvenile detention. Baby jail is what I called. It was my second home. And then as I got older, I started doing more things that I shouldn't. Because of the drug, drugs that I was on at that time. I ended up going to prison three times except for the last time I wasn't. I was not in an addiction when I went this last time.

**00:22:05**Speaker 3

This last time here in in Austin, I was being stalked by another homeless man for three months and the police wouldn't do anything. Downtown Rangers wouldn't do nothing. And I finally just got sick and tired of this guy messing with me. I mean he was coming to my camp tearing my camp up, taking stuff from me, trying to force himself on me, taking and wearing my clothes because I'm a tomboy so.

**00:22:34**Speaker 3

You know he would take my stuff, but what made me snap finally on him and go off and lose it and take a baseball bat to him was him stealing my cat and his food and water. And, uh, I'd already been into it earlier with him that day on the railroad tracks, throwing rocks at each other, going down the railroad middle of the railroad tracks so.

**00:22:59**Speaker 2

But you went and spent quite a bit of time in the...

**00:23:02**Speaker 3

Yeah, I they gave me 7 years for taking a baseball bat to this man for him messing with me because nobody would do anything about it because they didn't care. It was two homeless people. They didn't give a shit. They didn't care. They didn't care what was going on until I hit him in the head with a baseball bat to make him stop what he was doing to me. And so they gave him. They got me for an assault with a deadly weapon. Slash bat. And that carries 2 to 20 years and they were trying to give me 15 years. I said you're crazy and hell I ain't taking that, not for self-defense. You got one messed up and so I fought them. For a while I tried to get him to go down as low as five, but they wouldn't go down lower than 7.

**00:23:49**Speaker 3

They said either I could take the seven or they would take me to trial and give me 25 years. Try to give me 25 years. Because I have numerous assaults in my past record from yeah, because I'm a fighter. Yeah so.

**00:24:03**Speaker 2

So back to to John. Part of his story was being outcast from his family at 8 years old for being the blackest of his family. Do you believe that was true?

**00:24:18**Speaker 3

I do. John had a really hard time with the with that and how prejudice people were towards him his whole life. And, um, John had never really had anything.

**00:24:34**Speaker 2

John is a, is a beautiful man and.

**00:24:37**Speaker 3

Oh yeah, he was. He was wonderful. He was one-of-a-kind. He's the only man that and person besides my grandmother who loved me unconditionally in my whole life. Besides you and Mama now, but.

**00:24:48**Speaker 2

Now now John had some health problems, so obviously he had some heart problems.

**00:24:51**Speaker 3

He did, he had a bad heart. He had had numerous heart attacks even before we were together for the 10 years we were together and he had three stints in his heart. I don't know how many times I slept by him and in ICU and whatnot. but John died not just because of his heart, but because he wasn't taking care of himself. He was fighting an addiction.

**00:25:16**Speaker 2

Yeah, he was still battling, yeah?

**00:25:18**Speaker 3

And drinking and so between him not taking his medications for his heart and his heart already being bad and the crack. It killed him.

**00:25:31**Speaker 2

What what date was that in August? Have you had that heart attack was? It, like the 7th 17th.

**00:25:35**Speaker 3

The 7th.

**00:25:37**Speaker 2

Well, he died on the 17th. Right? But the heart attack, which was was at 10 days earlier.

**00:25:44**Speaker 3

No, he well he he had been having mini ones. But - that day and we were all out here.

**00:25:57**Speaker 3

He kept telling me he wasn't feeling good and I said well, don't keep wandering off. Stay here at the house so I can keep an eye on you. Because he kept leaving. He kept getting up and walking around and coming back. And I was in the house and I was washing dishes. And I heard somebody say my name. So I went outside and here comes John and he doesn't look good.

**00:26:24**Speaker 3

He's breathing hard. He walks up into the driveway and I got my phone in my hand and he goes baby, I can't see. I can't see and that was it. He was gone. He died right there in my arms while I was trying to call for an ambulance.

**00:26:38**Speaker 2

That was a a difficult day. And...obviously...I was there with you.

**00:26:44**Speaker 3

Yeah, you had to take me away from there, yeah?

**00:26:48**Speaker 2

Yeah, there was a lot of beauty. And what was a struggle?

**00:26:56**Speaker 3

Yeah, but I ain't been the same since that happened. It messed me up really bad. It's like. I got a big hole now. Thou know how to feel? I don't know what to do with myself sometimes. And I've been messing up, I've been drinking and stuff. But I had, you know. I haven't smoked any K2 or nothing since I went to rehab and and I'm not really a drinker. I just don't. I'm in a lot of pain, Papa. I miss him.

**00:27:44**Speaker 2

Yeah, I know you do.

**00:27:50**Speaker 2

And, um, he's supposed to be here. I believe he is right sitting on your the arm of your chair right now.

**00:27:59**Speaker 3

It's not the same Papa.

**00:28:01**Speaker 2

That I know.

**00:28:04**Speaker 3

It's not the same. I miss him. I miss his energy. I miss his singing. I miss his dancing round and just.

**00:28:19**Speaker 2

Good morning, good morning, good morning. I miss him hustling me.

**00:28:24**Speaker 3

Him singing to me, everybody told him he was a silver tongue devil.

**00:28:32**Speaker 2

The he had that he had that gift, yeah.

**00:28:34**Speaker 3

Yeah, he had that he had that charm and then he was good looking too so. Lord and uh. But you know, like like I've told everybody else, that asks me how I'm doing and I'm not doing very well. I haven't since he died.

**00:28:56**Speaker 3

It's one thing to watch somebody get old and die in a bath that you've seen all your life, like your grandparents or something. But it's another thing when somebody you. Care about being with your significant other dies right in your arms and then you gotta hold the plug 2 weeks later.

**00:29:15**Speaker 2

And relatively young.

**00:29:18**Speaker 3

His affairs weren't in order. I had to fight with the corner to get him back back here because they were trying to send him to Houston to his family instead of letting me have him. Which I had power of attorney over his stuff but.

**00:29:33**Speaker 2

But we got him.

**00:29:34**Speaker 3

Here yeah, we got him here with your help. Yours and mama's help. And and me talking to him and his brother, saying no, he wanted me to take care of, since you know. We got him but it just it's just not the same and I'm not either.

**00:29:55**Speaker 2

Well, we're going to continue to love on you in an extraordinary way, and I'm grateful that you love on us.

**00:30:03**Speaker 3

I know that.

**00:30:04**Speaker 2

Before we close this podcast, first of all, I'm really grateful that you came in and shared everything that you shared, but. You're in your 50's.

**00:30:14**Speaker 3

Yeah, I'm 53.

**00:30:22**Speaker 2

You've had a a very long, interesting, challenging life. If there was one thing that you could communicate to the audience about that life, what would it be? What would be a nugget that you could share about your experiences over the past 53 years?

**00:30:42**Speaker 3

I think my most the most thing that sticks out for me is that people just need to not be so judgmental and critical to the homeless.

**00:30:51**Speaker 3

You don't know where somebody's came from or what they've been through and why they're out there. You can't just assume that, this or that is why they're out there. You know?

**00:31:04**Speaker 3

Like with my story and there's a lot of us that are out there that come from the same kind of background or worse than mine. Although mine was pretty damn bad, you know? And that's why we're the way we are. And a lot of us have mental problems too and health issues. It's not just the economic situation or losing your family.

**00:31:25**Speaker 3

It's it's all of it combined it and anybody could be in my shoes. Anybody you could lose your job and be homeless. You know I could be your mother, daughter, sister cousin that's out there. And how would you feel if you treated your family like you treat me when I'm out was out there?

**00:31:48**Speaker 2

Ladies and gentlemen, my good friend, my neighbor, Penny Hunt. Thank you, Penny for coming in today.

**00:31:57**Speaker 2

Thank you for being a part of the Gospel Con Carne, ladies and gentlemen, go out and be the goodness in your community. God bless.

**00:32:09**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the gospel con carne with Alan Graham when he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Alan at the helm of mobile loaves and fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless.

**00:32:26**Speaker 1

Music for today's podcast has been provided by community first neighbor and musician John 'JR'. Rogers learn more and how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

## APPENDIX I

### GCC\_Season2\_RobinDraper\_SoundMix.1\_1.mp3

April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

00:37:56

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Robin

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/26/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society through untold stories of homelessness.

**00:00:20**Speaker 1

Your host, Alan Graham, is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades.

**00:00:34**Speaker 1

Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative Community First Village, the country's only master planned community designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne, here's your host Alan Graham.

**00:00:54**Speaker 2

Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast.

**00:00:58**Speaker 2

This today is an interview that I've been looking forward to for a long, long, long time and in the studio and, hell, I may start crying now because I feel it is somebody that I actually love very deeply and her name is Robin Draper.

**00:01:15**Speaker 2

And I've known Robin for about 12 years and I met her and her husband's air quote, Bruk Keener on the streets of Austin, TX. This is one of the most beautiful human beings that I've ever ever met.

**00:01:36**Speaker 2

She's in there now, late 40s. I think she's 47 years old and has just really a rock star story of forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and redemption, Robin. Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne podcast.

**00:01:51**Speaker 3

Thank you.

**00:01:54**Speaker 2

She and I like I say, go back about 12 years when we met on the streets. Can you recount for me what your memory of that first meet? Was where we were, what we were doing.

**00:02:10**Speaker 3

Well, the first time I met you I, I didn't know it was you. So we were at a camp on 360 across from Rudy's BBQ and there were some people on a street retreat who came in and stuck around

for the night at our camp and we were new to the camp. And didn't have a lot of the camping gear.

**00:02:30**Speaker 3

And so we we, I remember thinking like these Christian people are doing this just to, like I don't know. Whatever make themselves feel better, they're doing their little Sunday adventure trying to help people in need and this gentleman asked what we needed and my my boyfriend Bruk.

**00:02:50**Speaker 3

Listed everything from a Coleman stove to probably high-end camping equipment of whatever sort it was. And the guy told us to meet him by the fence, which was about a mile hike into the camp the next day at noon and he would have some of the stuff.

**00:03:09**Speaker 3

So we did that, and sure enough, the guy showed up and was tossing over all of the gear that we had requested. Everything that we had requested. Stoves, propane, tents, sleeping bags, you name it. It was there and it turned out to be Alan Graham. So that's that's when we first met.

**00:03:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, and you, now you're about 47 years old right now. Bruk is how old?

**00:03:37**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so this would have been 12 years ago, and so in terms of street

**00:03:39**Speaker 3

44. This isn't yeah.

**00:03:41**Speaker 2

life, I would say that y'all were for the most part, extraordinarily young.

**00:03:47**Speaker 2

Given the broader age of the population that's out on the street.

**00:03:53**Speaker 3

Yeah, I would say I became homeless mid-30s. Mid-30s. 29-30.

**00:03:58**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so take me back to your childhood where you grew up. Talk to me about your mother and father, your siblings.

**00:04:08**Speaker 3

Oh, I was born in Buffalo, NY. It was me and my parents and my sister and we moved down to Houston, TX. My parents got a divorce when I was eight. That was my first real memory of my childhood. They separated pretty quickly thereafter.

**00:04:27**Speaker 3

My mom became an alcoholic overnight, got into a very abusive relationship. And my dad remarried so I had a step mom who brought along two children with.

**00:04:37**Speaker 2

Er - your father is in a long term recovery as well isn't that right, yeah?

**00:04:42**Speaker 3

He is yes. He's been sober, for God, I want to say 31-32 years and my mom wasn't a big drinker. But the divorce, I mean, it was literally an overnight deal. So that was a very difficult thing.

**00:04:57**Speaker 3

I remember being very close with my mother and then all of a sudden she was gone. And having all these problems that I didn't know what any of it meant. So it was a real struggle for me trying to make sure she was okay. And she wasn't living with us and then balancing the new mom in the house.

**00:05:14**Speaker 3

Who pretty much I would say, favored her her children. And my sister and I kind of went by the wayside.

**00:05:21**Speaker 2

That's typical, it was that same thing in my family. Same thing happened and we we, me and my brothers felt the same.

**00:05:29**Speaker 3

Yeah, so I felt like my dad was there but I couldn't. I could see him but I I didn't feel his presence. I wasn't close with him and I just wanted to live with my mom. And they wouldn't allow that.

**00:05:41**Speaker 2

So profound, catastrophic loss of family, even in the simplicity of a divorce. Yeah, the was discombobulating for you and your sister are you? Are you the older?

**00:05:51**Speaker 3

I am the youngest of two Tori is, she is 14 months older than myself and I.

**00:05:59**Speaker 3

It's kind of interesting that my mom was picking us up every other weekend. And then the other kids, my step sisters, father picking them up every weekend. He was a healthy person. And we were with the alcoholic and just the constant friction. And they turned out to graduate college. And Tori and I are both alcoholics and addicts. I think it's an interesting twist on what actually happens.

**00:06:27**Speaker 2

Yeah, and the yeah on the in the addict side of the deal. Yeah, very interesting. So you graduated from high school in Houston?

**00:06:36**Speaker 3

Then from high school I went on to I I worked. I started waiting tables. That's when I started drinking pretty heavily. Kind of comes with the job in the restaurant business and that leads to cocaine, just part of the deal. yeah, So that was probably about 17, but I had experimented with drugs way earlier than that. Probably about 13. Had my first drink when I was 13. Blacked out the whole 9 yards.

**00:07:06**Speaker 2

Yeah, so kind of following in both your mom and Dad's footsteps. And no, no real discipline or leadership on top of that.

**00:07:09**Speaker 3

Yeah, but steps. Yeah, as far as addiction.

**00:07:16**Speaker 2

Now during that period of time you you ended up pregnant. Tell me about that.

**00:07:23**Speaker 3

I became pregnant for the first time when I was gosh I was 20. I was going to move out. We moved out to Kansas. I was with my boyfriend of three years and found out when I was eight months pregnant, he was cheating on me.

**00:07:37**Speaker 3

And my mom taught me to come talk me into coming back to Houston and giving the baby up for adoption. Well, so I did that.

**00:07:45**Speaker 2

Yeah, and I find nothing extraordinarily brave thing to do. How difficult was that for you and?

**00:07:53**Speaker 3

It was heartbreaking. It wasn't difficult at the time. I thought that I was doing what was best for my son. And so I didn't find it difficult until years later when I had children in my backyard and I was watching them play that there was something missing. That's when it that's when the struggle became real around the adoption.

**00:08:12**Speaker 2

Now you were able to reconnect with him some years later and today, or you'll still just.

**00:08:13**Speaker 3

Yes I was. We yes, we talk all the time. I just thought he actually just just joined the army. He's he's on to the military so.

**00:08:25**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah, and then your life is starting to take an interesting direction. Tell me about that journey from the that time that you're into the drugs and the alcohol you have your son, you give your son up and.

**00:08:42**Speaker 3

Give my son up. But just one toxic relationship after another. I think I was in one non abusive relationship in my entire life and everything else has been mostly physical abuse. There's been emotional, mental, all kinds of abuse. I mean any any way that you can get it. I was getting it so.

**00:09:04**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:09:06**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so and then you ended up with someone else and that beautiful daughter Keeley of yours was was born tell tell me about that time frame.

**00:09:17**Speaker 3

I was in a relationship for five years with my with Keeley's dad and he was physically abusive and it was it's interesting that I stuck around through the whole thing. When I got pregnant he stopped beating me me. And ended up having Keeley and about 10 months old he started yelling at me again and I got so scared that he was going to take out his anger on her. And finally asked him to leave and that's when we broke up. I was a single mom for a couple of years.

**00:09:49**Speaker 2

But he ended up.

**00:09:50**Speaker 3

Ended up moving on and and getting himself together and going to school and welding and he had a good career and bought a house in Kingwood and.

**00:10:01**Speaker 2

Yeah, but he ended up raising her mostly or kind of what?

**00:10:04**Speaker 3

Well he he he came into the picture. He wasn't really on and off visiting her for the first couple of years. And then I had gotten married and had two more sons with Keith Draper. And he

started doing his every other weekend visit. And when Keith and I separate, we're going to separate, is when he kind of swooped down by custody of Avery of Keeley, rather.

**00:10:30**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah and then the two boys ended up?

**00:10:33**Speaker 3

Around that time he had, we were going to break up, and my husband and I were breaking up and Keeley went to her dad's for a couple of weeks. She was supposed to be there for a couple weeks and come back and then he filed for for custody of her. And in the meantime, my husband had picked up our boys, our two sons and just disappeared.

**00:10:54**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, and obviously drugs and alcohol were in that.

**00:10:59**Speaker 3

Drugs and alcohol were...had that a part of my world since I was since I started.

**00:11:03**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so how did you you know, at what point in time did the homeless thing kind of manifest? You were in Colorado, if I remember at the time, with the boys.

**00:11:14**Speaker 3

Yeah, I found my boys years later and that all took place and then I he physically abused me there. I ended up back in Texas and I ended up at the Salvation Army downtown. I thought I just need to get downtown Houston.

**00:11:27**Speaker 2

Downtown Houston?

**00:11:29**Speaker 3

I just need to get off and get on the right foot, get my apartment, get stabilized so I can get my boys and ended up.

**00:11:40**Speaker 3

Before I had left there, I had met Bruk, uh, when I got back to Houston, I just wanted to find my friend Bruk, and so I I did the Salvation Army thing for like 10 months and ended up relapsing month 9. I'd saved like 5 grand. I had all my ducks in a row. Had a great job. I was ready to move out and relapsed and ended up at my mom's house.

**00:12:03**Speaker 2

Again, relapse to alcohol or or does it just one the all of it, yeah?

**00:12:06**Speaker 3

All of that. Anything that I mean anything crack and crack was my thing. Crack was my drug and alcohol is just always kind of been its sidekick.

**00:12:17**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so ended up at your mom's house wasn't necessarily a great thing, she's, uh.

**00:12:21**Speaker 3

Yeah, ended up at my mom's house. She lived in assisted living and she was just - uh My mom and I, she's my best friend, but we're just not compatible as far as living together. I ended up finding Bruk and I moved out of my mom's house and went to...

He was living with this friend of his in Montrose, and he was paying. He's been living there for a couple of years and paying the bills through dope.

**00:12:46**Speaker 3

He was a dope dealer and I just moved in. And his roommate kind of had a a breakdown, a mental breakdown and his parents sold the condo and Bruk and I just became homeless.

**00:13:02**Speaker 2

And then what? Was that straight life it it starts.

**00:13:06**Speaker 3

Yeah, it's.

**00:13:07**Speaker 2

Are you freaked out about that? Or are you or is it an adventure or you are yeah.

**00:13:12**Speaker 3

I all of it I loved. I actually am one of the weirdest that enjoyed the street life. I think because of the freedom I had been bound to. I was a stay at home Mom for many years and I kind of lost my identity and just having lost the child. I just felt like I had nothing to live for. Bruk and I ran the streets. We did lots of crazy shit. It was just a a certain freedom in.

**00:13:37**Speaker 2

It yeah, yeah and some not good things happened to you during that period of time.

**00:13:41**Speaker 3

Yeah, I mean some not. I've seen it all man, I have seen it all. I've I've been raped out there by knifepoint. I've watched people get strangled with wire coat hangers. It it's a it's a really rough atmosphere, especially Houston. You have to you have to fight for everything, socks, shoes, anything that you want. You have to beg, borrow, steal for.

**00:14:03**Speaker 2

Yeah, and then as a you know young woman what was that like?

**00:14:11**Speaker 3

Um, it was tough. You just have to find out what you're what you're thing is. I actually, one guy pulled up to me one time. I was walking down the street and he said how much and it just pissed me off so bad that I just threw a number out there and hopped in and took the money and burned off.

**00:14:26**Speaker 3

So I thought, well, hell there's my...that this is what I need to be doing - just robbing John's. So that was my MO for a minute.

**00:14:34**Speaker 2

Yeah. They're not going to call the police on you.

**00:14:35**Speaker 3

They're gonna call the police on, yeah, I mean, it's illegal to pick up a prostitute.

**00:14:42**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, yeah and and so the the drug use was just accelerating and that became the life.

**00:14:49**Speaker 3

Yes, well, I was that actually did it. I would I worked. I worked the whole time and supported my habit, but then the money runs out and when the money runs out you just go get more. So when I discovered this robbing the Johns that you do that until someone chases you with a gun. And then you know, you realize that if you're going to do this, you have to... You have to do it.

**00:15:11**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:15:13**Speaker 3

So I've I've been through that situation as well.

**00:15:16**Speaker 2

So how did you and Bruk end up leaving the Montrose area and ending up in the Austin, TX area?

**00:15:22**Speaker 3

We used to go to this street church and Pastor Joe said if we wanted to do something different that they'd be willing to send us to a rehab and we ended up in Kyle. Which is like 15 minutes outside of Austin and I was in a women's. They separated us, which was like really difficult to do because we were very codependent.

**00:15:46**Speaker 3

I stayed in a women's and mine was pretty decent. And Bruk went to his and there was stuff right off right out of the gate and he left there very quickly.

**00:15:54**Speaker 2

So to kind of tell that story, he didn't really know where you were, but he had this Robin radar.

**00:15:54**Speaker 3

Yeah - Bruk is a different kind of creature. He when I first, like was when I first reconnected with him, I was talking to some of the people in Montrose that knew him for years and they were telling me what a badass he was. And I was like and they said you just have to wait and see he was just.

**00:16:19**Speaker 3

If you ever are homeless you have got to have that kid with you. He he just knows how to do things he is...he knows how to he uses his resources well and he, I don't know. Now he would find me everywhere I went. I could be in a different state and he would find me. So they told me at the rehab when he had left, they said Bruk is going to come find you and I said or Bruk doesn't know where you are.

**00:16:45**Speaker 3

He's leaving the rehab and I was like, well I need to pack my shit because he's on his way here right now. I know he is like. Well, he doesn't know where here is and I'm like. You know, I don't know where there is, but I've got probably within five hours to get my shit together because he'll be here to pick me.

**00:16:59**Speaker 2

Up and he was yeah, and so he came there and then y'all ended up out there on the highway and I remember a a grocery cart full of your stuff and y'all are at a truck stop and kind of recount that little story.

**00:17:12**Speaker 3

Yeah, we we got a 6 pack of Old English and we're pushing the buggy down the highway with all our crap. We got to this gas station and this truck driver we asked for a ride and he said no. And he went inside and he came back out and said you know I just called my wife and she said it's okay. I'm gonna give you guys a ride into Austin. Austin was 15 minutes up the road and he dumped us off at 35 at like 7th St., between 6th and 7<sup>th</sup>. Right there in the heart of downtown Austin.

**00:17:44**Speaker 2

Yeah, and the homeless population.

**00:17:45**Speaker 3

And the homeless population. We made 13 bucks on the first block and we were smoking crack behind the dumpster.

**00:17:53**Speaker 2

Pretty quick, yeah. And so how long does it take for anybody to find crack when they want crack in any city that they go to?

**00:18:03**Speaker 3

Oh - as as long as they you know if they want crack, they're going to find it, it's.

**00:18:06**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:18:07**Speaker 3

Not yeah, wherever you go there you are.

**00:18:08**Speaker 2

It's not like hours or days.

**00:18:09**Speaker 3

It's not about the drug, it's about the person.

**00:18:13**Speaker 2

Now what year was that?

**00:18:15**Speaker 3

We got to Austin in 2007.

**00:18:18**Speaker 2

And I must have met you all in 2008 or something like that.

**00:18:23**Speaker 3

We were actually we were on. We were at church under the bridge. We are on top of the roof at 9th and Trinity for five months. And then we were church under the bridge when one of the other campers that was at the Rudy's camp had approached me and asked it was the day before my birthday October 24th.

**00:18:38**Speaker 3

I'll never forget I had broken ribs. Bruk and I used to get into it and broken ribs and busted cheekbones and black eyes and yeah. We went through all the physical, crack and no sleep and bottles of vodka.

**00:18:55**Speaker 2

You know, I.

**00:18:55**Speaker 3

Starts to wear on you.

**00:18:55**Speaker 2

Would I would attempt to try to explore that side of you because you're pretty tough.

**00:19:04**Speaker 2

I mean I but there's that side of you that endures. That piece of it, and I'm not, equipped to even explore that because I don't even understand that piece of it.

**00:19:18**Speaker 2

But I've known Robin for a long time and I'm just telling you this is a - this is one tough cookie. And she she could fight her way out as well, but to endure that level of abuse over a number of different men. Is is a mystery.

**00:19:36**Speaker 3

I I don't know that any battered woman can explain that. I just don't know. I think going in I'm a helper so I always see the good in people. And so it's like, well, if I could just tweak that and twist this, they'll come out okay. And it just never works out and I will tell you that. Alcohol plays a huge part of it. Also, I I don't take shit from anybody, so a lot of times I was the first...I was the one to go in with the first punch. And I really got to the point where and, I don't condone physical violence.

**00:20:10**Speaker 3

I don't think it's okay for a man to hit a woman, but when for me, I got to the point where I was in acceptance of if I'm going to throw the first punch then. Whoever it is, they have the right to defend themselves.

**00:20:23**Speaker 2

Yeah, I'm glad that you've never thrown a punch at me. Although you and I have had a couple of ring dang doos, haven't we verbal?

**00:20:29**Speaker 3

Yeah, we have.

**00:20:31**Speaker 3

Yes we have.

**00:20:33**Speaker 2

We've \*\*\*\*\* each other off pretty pretty good over the over the time, and so you know, walk me through, you know our personal relationship and how that evolved over that roughly 12 year period of time getting you guys up off the streets and.

**00:20:52**Speaker 3

Well, let's see. We worked for Mobile Loaves and Fishes when we were out there still. We used to detail the trailers for the Community First program which is really cool that we're all on the same property.

**00:21:02**Speaker 3

Finally, that was kind of a neat thing to see you know, finally, come.

**00:21:05**Speaker 2

Y'all, y'all were both workers you yeah yeah.

**00:21:06**Speaker 3

Together, we've always been. We were workers.

**00:21:12**Speaker 3

We got off the streets in 2009 from you guys. Got us off the streets in 2009?

**00:21:16**Speaker 3

We got our first trailer out in Lake Travis and Bruk had been arrested that that that New Year's Eve for bullshit. And so I ended up getting off the streets into that trailer with the - by myself, for the first six months until he got out.

**00:21:35**Speaker 3

We got evicted from the first trailer park and the 2nd and then we ended up with the 3rd and by that time I was six months pregnant with Avery I think, and still heavily in my addiction. Both of us were. It was pretty rough. I was working at Denny's. I was doing the night graveyard shift. And I just couldn't stop. I remember asking whoever's watching out for me to please not take my addiction out on my child. I just couldn't. I couldn't stop and I remember the our our real connection started whenever we got into it and CPS got involved and Tricia called and asked what was going on?

**00:22:17**Speaker 2

Well, she was born July 8, 2010

**00:22:25**Speaker 3

July 8th. Which is shocking that she even came home from the hospital. Quite frankly, I was shocked that she came home. They should have, I thought they would be involved already. but Bruk and I got into a fight.

**00: 22:35**Speaker 2

5 days yeah 8 days

**00:22:37**Speaker 3

And the cops. 8 days, 8 days into her life cops the whole 9 yards and we get a call from Tricia Graham and she she asked me what was going on. I said CPS is here they want to take the baby and I said I don't know anybody that's not a drug addict or a homeless person. And she said well, I'll come get the baby and so she ended up with you guys for the next 5 months where you cared for her. It was amazing that we got to see her all the time. We got to go to the commissary.

**00:23:02**Speaker 2

I was really, you know, pretty concerned when she brought her home. Ah, because I felt like I felt like that y'all didn't stand a chance in that recovery deal. And because my lifetime of experience with addicts is, you know what our lifetime experience yours as well. There's not a lot of hope in that deal.

**00:23:29**Speaker 2

And I remember kind of looking at Tricia, going, uh, you know, we're we're we're too old we're too old. I mean I'm gonna be 70 something years old, 71, when she's graduating from high school. And then, uh, you know she'd sleep with us and we'd wake up the next morning and and she looks.

**00:23:55**Speaker 3

Sold!

**00:23:56**Speaker 2

Sold. And the next morning I go well, you know she's pretty cute and you know I think I could cut up Girl Scouts. And you know, T-ball and all that stuff again, if if this is what we have to do. But praise God, that's not what we had to do because you guys jumped in and did everything that CPS required. Talk about that five or six month period while we had her and.

**00:24:24**Speaker 3

OK, at first you know I I had this real drive cause Bruk was we were both still out there. But I knew as soon as that happened I said I'm just gonna do whatever it takes to get her back. I'm I meant I felt like I was meant to be a mom. I begged for this child I can't believe I it's looking back it's like. I can't believe I used the entire pregnancy. But I did. I said Bruk if you want to jump on board and do this with me, and if not then I'm I'm getting Avery back. And I was shocked that he jumped on board and and first we thought, thought, thought about hiding this aspect of our lives and hiding.

**00:24:57**Speaker 3

And then I thought, you know what? This is our opportunity to get the help that we need and uh take advantage of it so. Anything that we need, we have the services available to us.

**00:25:07**Speaker 2

But we're all liars, manipulators and deceivers. He's one of the greatest.

**00:25:11**Speaker 3

Yes he is.

**00:25:12**Speaker 2

You're one of the weakest. Every time I would bust you all. You know he'd be lying while you're over there telling the truth.

**00:25:18**Speaker 3

Yeah, I'm like give it up, Bruk.

**00:25:19**Speaker 2

Man yeah yeah yeah.

**00:25:22**Speaker 3

Yeah, and so we we got through the process and so glad we did. You guys you guys's love and support throughout that was the difference between us sinking or swimming.

**00:25:34**Speaker 2

Yeah, and that she's 8 1/2 years old now and.

**00:25:38**Speaker 3

And we've had our shit, still struggles, man.

**00:25:40**Speaker 2

Yeah, been a hell of a roller coaster in that.

**00:25:43**Speaker 3

It has.

**00:25:44**Speaker 2

In that period of time, both of y'all have fallen off the wagon a couple of times. In that period of time and.

**00:25:51**Speaker 3

We just haven't figured it. We're from incredibly dysfunctional families and just all the emotional stuff that we carry. We just haven't figured it out yet. You know we'll get to a happy place and then something happens and one of us will relapse. It's been a struggle for sure.

**00:26:10**Speaker 2

Yeah – uh. But living here in the Community First Village, which you do and you work here.

**00:26:16**Speaker 2

Loves the fishes and you actually work for Tricia and you 2 can have some nice ring, ding doos.

**00:26:21**Speaker 2

I mean, it's really and truly is one of the most beautiful relationships I've ever. And so kind of talk about that, that it it's almost. I mean I don't want to call it a love hate relationship, but it's a love relationship that's got. You know side salad of tension to it?

**00:26:45**Speaker 3

It's weird because I hear everybody talk about Trisha at the village like their mom.

And I think that is so special because there's so many people that are formerly homeless people that really just didn't have a great connection with their mom.

**00:26:58**Speaker 3

I did and so Tricia Graham is - she's my best friend. She's been like whether I wanted it or not.

That's just the way that things were going to happen. And, you know, I'm

I'm an addict and that's how we think, so I want things my way and and I think I know what's best and I'll present that to Tricia.

**00:27:16**Speaker 3

And she is probably, not probably, is the most loving and kind person and has taught me so much about patience and how to be tolerant of other people and and that they're not perfect, and how to use that to benefit you and to strengthen your character. She's taught me like how to be a better woman. I admire her. I admire her so much. You're a very lucky person. You know that.

**00:27:48**Speaker 2

Oh God, well behind every great woman there's just a man. So we we all we all know that, um.

**00:27:56**Speaker 3

You guys have been my biggest supporters. I mean I I.

**00:28:01**Speaker 2

But there was a long time. Even though we've been your biggest supporters there, there was really quite a long time that I, I, I'm I'm not sure that you wanted us to be your biggest supporters. I don't know how to describe that either. Disbelief on your part or.

**00:28:16**Speaker 3

I feel I feel. Like there was a there was a eight-year time frame that went by before I trusted either one of you and it's crazy looking back because I had all the reasons to trust you. Yeah, but just when you have such a damaged history, it just takes so long.

**00:28:36**Speaker 2

And listen, people that are listening to this. You need to pay attention to exactly what she's saying right now, and this is. It's I mean, this hits the nail on the head as to how hard this work can be. For people that have experienced some unbelievable trauma in their lives and trying to restore people. And we we have folks that live in the village that have experienced far deeper, more hurtful trauma than than even Robin went through and it just takes a long time to build that trust. But anyway, continue on to that.

**00:29:14**Speaker 3

Yeah, it's a it's a major factor. So it took us eight years. Which is crazy. And it it and that was through my life, falling apart and I've lived with you guys and really knowing it took you guys like driving the nail into my head for me to go - Okay, I can actually trust these people. I can trust them yeah, well it wasn't that long ago that you relapsed a again and it was a.

**00:29:46**Speaker 2

It was a struggle and there's a lot going on in your life. You lost your mom. You know Bruk is now in prison for his fourth DWI, and he's had his problems. And that was piling up. On top of you and then you you did the the slip and and then made a pretty profound decision after that week or 10 days or whatever that period was.

**00:30:04**Speaker 3

Okay. Yeah I have I have had quite a few relapses. This one was different. I don't think, I think the difference for me this time was you guys had had Avery. And I remember talking to her on the phone and she just sounded so empty. And I just something clicked. I remember hearing the the emptiness just that her spirit has cause she's so excited about life and she loves to chase butterflies and just a happy go lucky kid. And to hear the emptiness in her voice. And she was turning 8 and I thought, man, this is when this is when my mom had become an alcoholic and I I was so isolated and trapped inside myself.

**00:31:02**Speaker 3

That this is going to be the the road where I can take for Avery to where she can, because I don't think that there's any damage in the past has been done that can't be undone, but if I keep on with

this lifestyle this is going to. This is going to fuck her up and I'm going to be responsible for that. It was a very critical moment. For me and my drinking history.

**00:31:26**Speaker 2

Well, and I told I've got, you know. Obviously 10-12 years history and pretty deep Robin has lived with us and we've cared for her child a lot. And we've been, we've been in her business man, get out of my business.

**00:31:40**Speaker 3

You're in my kool-aid.

**00:31:40**Speaker 2

No, we're not. Yeah, we we are not getting out of your business man. She even drove in from Houston one time and went and knocked on her door one night when they were living on the other side of town and kind of surprised her and said look, give us the kid, ma'am. We're taking her right now and and then you.

**00:32:01**Speaker 2

But that's how much we cared. Really, for both of them was through that. But something happened the other night. We've got a town hall meeting here. And in the town hall meeting, the members of the Community Council were getting up and introducing themselves before everybody and and one of the Community Council members Shorty got up there and started crying and confessing that he had fallen off the wagon and really emotionally engaging with the 150 people that were in that room. And and you know people were applauding him and encouraging him and then suddenly man like a lightning bolt. That little 8 year old Avery Keener ran up to him and hugged him.

**00:33:00**Speaker 2

And let me tell you, uh, brothers and sisters, we live in a culture where if your 8 year old little blonde cute little girl was to go up and hug on a chronically homeless or formerly chronically homeless. Much less an addict, you would reach out there and pull that person away. Say, but this actually turned out to be one of the most beautiful moments that's ever happened out here. But why did that happen?

**00:33:24**Speaker 3

I, since I got off the streets we when we got house in South Austin. I was drawn to the back end of the bridge at Manchaca and Westgate. Those were my that was my group of homeless people and I would park the truck and take Avery under the bridge and I'd make her get in there and give them love.

**00:33:49**Speaker 3

I say go, you gotta give everybody love and we that everybody has to eat and we need someone to talk to and so from a very young age Avery has been taken to the under the bridges where the chronically homeless in South Austin live and just encouraged to be a a nice person to them because everybody needs someone to talk to.

**00:34:13**Speaker 3

And uh she just has a special I I think everyday Angel. I think a lot of people give me a lot of the credit but I think a lot of the credit should just be - It's just who she is as a human being. It's who it's who she is inside, but I think it's important because I remember when people would walk right past you in the streets and not even look you in the eye.

**00:34:33**Speaker 3

You almost felt like you weren't a human being or you weren't worthy. That she knows that everybody's worth worth love loving on. Everybody needs it. Whether they are an alcoholic, a drug addict, if they have one arm. If they don't smell good, I mean that we all are worthy of love.

**00:34:50**Speaker 2

You know, that's a that's a beautiful way to raise a child and and then she came back to the table. And what did she yell out to the entire audience in the middle of all that?

**00:35:05**Speaker 3

She said it's okay Shorty, my mom relapsed like four times and now she's fine.

**00:35:13**Speaker 2

So give me a kind of a 30 second commercial on community first and your feelings about this before we close.

**00:35:18**Speaker

Oh gosh.

**00:35:21**Speaker 3

Community First is my safe place, it's a feeling of belonging. I've got my friends here. My family is here. It's a place to restore your dignity. It's a place to make friends and grow together. How we do so much out here? It's hard to sum up for me.

**00:35:49**Speaker 2

Yeah, it's a phenomenal community. We live here.

**00:35:53**Speaker 3

I'll tell you one thing that everybody focuses in on that moment when Shorty and and Avery ran up there. And I think that if you really want to know what the beauty of community is is that he feels like he's in a safe enough place to release that kind of darkness that he's going through to the entire community and feel loved and accepted. And know that he can do that. That's what kind of community we live in.

**00:36:22**Speaker 2

That's it, that's an incredible statement. So look, we're about to close, but from your amazing, awesome, unbelievable journey, what do you want to share with our audience that you have learned along the way.

**00:36:37**Speaker 3

I think everybody. I'm not a Christian, but I feel like I should look for the Jesus and everybody it has taught me to do that.

**00:36:47**Speaker 2

Wow, that's beautiful. Ladies and gentlemen, my good friend, somebody that I care deeply about somebody that I hope is at my bedside when I'm going and transitioning to the other side, when she's sending me to Jesus. I hope she's standing right there next to me, so she gets to see who the real Jesus is.

**00:37:09**Speaker 2

Ladies and gentlemen, Robin Draper. God bless you and look, go out and be the goodness in your community. God bless.

**00:37:22**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Gospel Con Carne with Alan Graham. When he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Alan at the helm of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless.

**00:37:38**Speaker 1

Music for today's podcast has been provided by community first neighbor and musician John, JR Rogers learn more and how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

## APPENDIX J

### Shea\_Meissner\_Final.mp3

Sept. 28, 2022

00:43:23

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3 – Shea Meisner

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/2>

**00:00:08**Speaker 1

Welcome to the Gospel Con Carne and meandering journey of gritty conversations that explore the significance of community through untold stories of homelessness and hopefulness. Your host, Alan Graham is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX.

**00:00:24**Speaker 1

Based mobile loaves and fishes. A social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the home.

**00:00:32**Speaker 1

Unless for more than two decades, Allen is also the lead visionary behind the innovative community, first village, the country's first and largest master planned community. Designed specifically for men and women who are coming out of chronic homelessness now serving today's gospel, can carne. Here's your host, Alan Graham.

**00:00:55**Speaker 2

All right, welcome everyone to another version of the Gospel Con Carne podcast and I'm excited to have in.

**00:01:03**Speaker 2

The recording studio, which happens to be my office as well. Shea Meisner - did I pronounce your last name correctly?

**00:01:10**Speaker 3

Yes, yes. You did.

**00:01:11**Speaker 2

Yeah, and one of my neighbors and has been out here - gosh, maybe four or five years now?

**00:01:17**Speaker 3

Little over three years, so I think it's 3 1/2 as of this month.

**00:01:18**Speaker 2

A little over three years, yeah.

**00:01:21**Speaker 2

Next month, yeah, and honestly, one of my very favorite people out here and enjoy always seeing you around and the.

**00:01:32**Speaker 2

Level of commitment that you have to the Community, I think has been very very very powerful. But welcome to the Gospel Con Carne.

**00:01:40**Speaker 3

Yeah, glad to be down here.

**00:01:41**Speaker 2

Yeah, super tell me a little bit about Shea and where you're from, what your last name. What is that? What's the heritage?

**00:01:48**Speaker 3

Meisner is a German that's after my father's heritage.

**00:01:52**Speaker 2

OK.

**00:01:53**Speaker 3

And she is Irish, which was after my mother's heritage.

**00:01:56**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so would you have any idea what percent German you are?

**00:02:01**Speaker 3

Never got that. I didn't really think it really mattered all that.

**00:02:04**Speaker 3

Much we didn't really follow any of the celebrations from either side of the family, except for someone like some of the older Protestant traditions from my mother's side of the family. Her side of the family originally came over from Ireland right before the potato famine because they were Protestants in a mostly Catholic area. And that was their heritage.

**00:02:34**Speaker 2

As well, my my grandmother on my father's side was, I think they pronounced it in German, draughts, DRVS, but they spelled it DREVES, dreves, but I have a an absolutely beautiful in German old family Bible Lutheran Bible that that got passed down that to me. That's one of my treasures. So yeah, and I'm also on time all the time and that's kind of a German.

**00:03:05**Speaker 2

Saying I don't know. Are you weird like?

**00:03:07**Speaker 3

My mother was on time all the time, but that was more of a her thing than a family trait.

**00:03:13**Speaker 2

That's great.

**00:03:14**Speaker 3

We had to not only be on time, we had to be like 20 to 30 minutes early.

**00:03:17**Speaker 2

Yeah, well.

**00:03:17**Speaker 3

And then we would sit on the street for 15 minutes, waiting till it wasn't too awkward to go inside and visit people.

**00:03:25**Speaker 2

I might have liked your mom a lot. So well, tell me where you from where you grew up. Tell me about your mom and Dad, brothers and sisters and all that.

**00:03:30**Speaker 3

Oh my goodness.

**00:03:32**Speaker 3

Technically I was born in Michigan, but we moved down here because my father wanted work and he wanted to get away from some of the more toxic elements of his family.

**00:03:47**Speaker 3

So Texas was fairly cheap at the time and they had lots of semi-skilled labor jobs so they picked us all up me and my older sister and moved down to Texas. I think I was about two or three years old. I have some vague memories of Michigan. Not a whole lot though.

**00:04:10**Speaker 2

And where was it in Texas that you guys moved to?

**00:04:12**Speaker 3

I don't remember the first city we moved to. I think it was in the suburbs of Houston.

It was an apartment on the outskirts of Houston. Eventually we got a house.

Uh, in the in like a suburb development outside of the the Houston city limits. That's where my first major memories are at. I believe I I was five or six when we moved out there. The neighborhood kind of went downhill overtime. I think we lived out there for like 4 years. So my parents decided they wanted to move somewhere without less nosy neighbors.

**00:04:53**Speaker 3

And they bought a property, it literally in the middle of nowhere. I can't even tell you the name of the closest town in west Texas and moved us all out there. That only lasted about a year.

**00:05:09**Speaker 3

And then my parents marital problems kind of reached a boiling point. They've been getting into some serious fights for actually, as long as I can remember.

**00:05:22**Speaker 3

And my my dad was not treating me or my my sisters very well. Uh, he kind of had kids and then just decided later that he didn't really want kids. And he didn't want to pay for kids.

**00:05:37**Speaker 3

And my mother was a stay at home Mom and he had agreed to that at the time.

And then got frustrated with it later.

**00:05:48**Speaker 2

So did he leave you guys?

**00:05:49**Speaker 3

No, we left my mother. My mother decided she had had enough. This wasn't good for me or the kids you he was emotionally and physically abusive parent and she decided it was time she had some friends in College Station/Bryan, they said that she would they would help her.

**00:06:07**Speaker 3

They would help support her. They they wouldn't look for an apartment for her and they kind of. They also put their and they also vouched for her on the lease so we could move out and move in. And she had some savings separate from my dad that she's been saving it for a while, so she moved us out there to College Station/Bryan. Which at the time was a small town that's that's sort of come a bit of a larger town these days, although I think outside of Texas A&M most people have never even heard of it. Um...

**00:06:40**Speaker 2

And is that where you did most of your growing up high school and stuff like that or?

**00:06:43**Speaker 3

I was homeschooled, which is actually probably not the greatest idea in our living situation. I kind of understand the reasonings for it. I I am on the autism spectrum.

**00:07:02**Speaker 3

And the one of the downsides to not being in school is if you don't know what to look for your family is not necessarily understand what's going on, and that's kind of what happened with me.

**00:07:16**Speaker 3

They just thought I had behavioral problems. And when I actually had was a comprehension problem.

**00:07:22**Speaker 3

Like you get a lot of noise that comes in, they think you're misbehaving. You're just covering your ears like this and you're trying to ignore them. But reality is, you're getting bombarded with like lights and sounds and it's messy and eventually you get overloaded and you start freaking out.

**00:07:38**Speaker 2

Yeah no, that's great. No, this is perfect actually.

**00:07:41**Speaker 3

Sorry, Yet meandering. I'm also, I'm also ADHD.

**00:07:46**Speaker 2

Well, I would probably be close into that category. But I never, uhm, I never thought of you as being on the spectrum even high on the spectrum, but if but you would be very high on that on that spectrum.

**00:08:04**Speaker 3

I don't think they usually. I don't think they usually do it as a scale anymore. It's usually seen like when they say spectrum, they mean like you, you can be like it's like a globe with like a web in it and you can be anywhere in that globe. You can have any combination of symptoms.

**00:08:19**Speaker 3

And one of the things they also discovered, and one of the reasons actually maybe if I had been in school, I wouldn't have been diagnosed until I was adult anyways, is uh... Boys and girls present with different symptoms. Boys, you get the more classic symptoms that you're used to. Girls, usually you learn...you're usually forced to be more socially.

**00:08:43**Speaker 3

How to put this? You you you can't get away with being as socially awkward and not get in trouble for it.

**00:08:49**Speaker 2

Awkward? Girls?

**00:08:51**Speaker 3

Yeah yeah girls you learn more. You're you're you're you gain the ability to mask yourself a lot more than boys do. So you've got what's going on your head. But you eventually figure out how to act out the social graces that normal people do without thinking about. Like you learn your social skills when you're a kid, you don't have to consciously think about what what you're doing when you're having a conversation with them when you're interacting with people. I had to consciously think about how to convey.

**00:09:29**Speaker 3

What I want to convey it's and it feels very artificial to some people, even if it's a an, even though it's a, it's a natural expression of what I'm trying to express it, or I should say an honest expression.

**00:09:41**Speaker 2

Yeah, and so how did you? How did you learn how to manage those things the the noise, the lights the....

**00:09:51**Speaker 3

Some of it. Again, I didn't know I was autistic, so most of this was just things that I eventually ran into and I found it worked mostly.

**00:10:04**Speaker 3

I usually preferred to be around quieter people, and I eventually learned not to be around large groups of people. Because that's usually like the absolute worst is being like a large crowd of people with all having conversations at the same time.

**00:10:17**Speaker 3

So even if you're trying to talk to somebody, you're getting bombarded with all these conversations that are trying to take equal place in your head as the conversation you're having with the person in front of you and...

**00:10:29**Speaker 2

So, here we are in this community, Community first village, that's got a lot of people, a lot of noise, you know, a lot of activity, yet you. Isn't it?

**00:10:43**Speaker 3

Lots of practice.

**00:10:43**Speaker 2

I mean my yeah OK.

**00:10:45**Speaker 3

Also an anti-anxiety medication that helps keep me calm even when I'm starting to get a little bit overloaded.

**00:10:48**Speaker 2

Okay.

**00:10:53**Speaker 3

Also, now I know what the problem is. I know if I'm starting to over that OK, it's time to walk away, wrap this up and go find somewhere where I can destress for at least a couple of minutes. Also, I've got my headphones.

**00:11:07**Speaker 3

I put those on. I've also got ones that are noise cancelling and I can actually press this little button on it and then it'll actually has a little outside mic pickup that will transmit the sound outside.

**00:11:19**Speaker 3

It'll clear out a lot of the random background noises, so I actually get. I can actually hear better. It actually filters a lot of the random noise out for me.

**00:11:29**Speaker 3

We're going to just leave it on blank and then and just having those headphones on will muffle out some of that random background noise. Also, I kind of read lips.

**00:11:38**Speaker 2

And so.

**00:11:40**Speaker 3

When I'm so when I'm like talking with somebody, I can look at their lips and there's other conversations going on around me and I didn't realize this is what I was doing at first. I'm looking at that person. I'm reading their lips.

**00:11:51**Speaker 3

I can't actually understand what they're saying, but by reading their lips I can focus on that particular line of conversation.

**00:11:57**Speaker 2

Well, that's a that's a skill that I would like to have.

**00:12:01**Speaker 3

Well, I can't look out this window and tell what people are thinking.

**00:12:03**Speaker 2

Read lips.

**00:12:04**Speaker 3

I'm not that good, but like in in a in a conversation with somebody, I can use the information from reading their lips to fill in what my brain is not necessarily picking up.

**00:12:12**Speaker 2

Yeah, have you? I mean, I don't know people's diagnosis around here, I mean, I can guess you know on certain areas, but when when it comes to the the spectrum, it's to me it's almost impossible unless you know they manifest in a profound way, you know. But there's have you met others out here that are on the spectrum that you're able to communicate with and bond with.

**00:12:47**Speaker 3

Yes, one of one of one of the best bosses I had out here was on the spectrum. Working for her was the best because she's like roughly around the same spot on the spectrum I was so.

**00:12:58**Speaker 2

On the web.

**00:12:59**Speaker 3

Yes, very similar symptoms, and actually we're still best friends. Very very. We're both very low maintenance socially. That's that's another thing you tend to tend to be if you're on the spectrum is you get used to being kind of low maintenance. To the point where it can actually make you really like other relationships suffer, but because if you're you're you're low maintenance and you assume other people are low maintenance and that can get messy. But, it's that level of understanding they like they like that other person understands. You don't have to fake extra social graces and you can just be blunt, straight to the point. The other person's blunt and straight to the point and very direct about what they want from you, what they need you to get done. That was the best.

**00:13:53**Speaker 3

I don't know. I don't know. There's a couple people I I kind of suspect are also on the spectrum. But I don't know for certain. And that's kind of their business and not mine so.

**00:14:05**Speaker 2

Yeah, well I can. Yeah I can guess but I'm not. I'm not skilled at that deal. Unless you have told me that that.

**00:14:14**Speaker 3

Yeah, not everybody guesses with me and it is... It's not as bad as it used to be. People talk to me for long if they know that something's back there. They know something is off, but they can't

figure out what it is. And usually by the point they figure it out, they've been around me long enough that they don't really care.

**00:14:31**Speaker 2

You know, the only thing that I would tried to surmise is - had you been homeless, why were you homeless and there's things out there that I could line up in the spectrum of homelessness. You know to try to make a guess, but

**00:14:52**Speaker 3

Oh yeah. Well, yeah.

**00:14:55**Speaker 2

You know, oftentimes I'm not accurate.

**00:14:58**Speaker 3

Kind of a combination of things. Mostly, I think it probably comes back to being on the spectrum and not being diagnosed, until after I was homeless. Trying to interact in a normal social memory takes up a lot of mental and emotional energy.

**00:15:20**Speaker 3

To the point where doing anything around people, uh - it it costs me a lot more interesting doing things physical I can. You can hand me a shovel and I can go shovel dirt all day and just keep going and going, especially if I got some music going on sticking over in a social gathering I can manage maybe an hour before I needed to have a break.

**00:15:44**Speaker 3

And uh - that does not mesh well with the real world. Almost all jobs out there, almost all education out there. You need to be able to socialize for like 5 hours a day at least and then maybe like 3 hours. But you're by yourself on a computer. And it kind of translates to me I can't really work full time. And when I got into adulthood and I got into like tried tried to get in like the real world I managed to get into college.

**00:16:22**Speaker 3

I was very, I did not expect I was going to be able to get into college because up until that point I had struggled a lot with my education because I was homeschooled. My mother didn't acknowledge I was having learning problems. So I took the ACT and I that was like the first exam I had ever taken. And there was so much I didn't know I had to take it several times to get the composite 21 to get into school.

**00:16:52**Speaker 3

But the funny part is, once I got into college and once I realized I could I I started learning how to make my brain work and learn. I uh - realized I was actually fairly good at it, but.

**00:17:05**Speaker 2

Well, in that traditional sense, I would suspect that there were things that you were really good at and things that you weren't good at. What were those things that you were you were really good at, and the things that you struggled?

**00:17:24**Speaker 3

Punctuation some some more elusive concepts that that they're less like solid, like punctuation. I have heard English professors argue about grammar and punctuation till the sky turns blue, or I should say till their faces turn blue. Sorry.

**00:17:26**Speaker 2

OK.

**00:17:44**Speaker 3

And there's uh - very little educational information on punctuation. You get a book on English the like the punctuation section is usually like one page. That was like one of the topics that I had trouble with.

**00:17:58**Speaker 3

Certain social interactions that are more elusive. Things that I was fairly decent at, though I was actually didn't translate very well in school, but I was very good with. Particular stuff like animal behavior. I really loved observing plants and animals.

**00:18:24**Speaker 3

And like trying to document their changes and doing like little experiments to figure out what was going on with them.

**00:18:32**Speaker 3

Things and anything involving reading was good, Oh yeah, I I I it took it took it, took me a little bit longer to learn how to read than would be considered normal in school.

**00:18:38**Speaker 2

Because you're a, you're a heck of a communicator.

**00:18:45**Speaker 3

But once I did, I was like straight on to chapter books. My mother had to put more forbidden books on the top shelf because I kept reading anything I could get a hold of, like full on. Novel length stuff. And once I got access to a library. Got my first library card. I used to get these huge stacks of books every week. The first time I did that like like the like I I came out of the the the shelves with like this huge stack I could barely see over. I heard my mother quietly laughing and kind of look around and all the librarians are like eyes are like this.

**00:19:24**Speaker 2

Yeah, well beautiful. Discovering my oldest son is profoundly dyslexic and we didn't discover that until he was in college because he had all the other skills to mask that deal, but I go back and when he was a kid. And needed to, you know, write or type out a paper. He had extraordinary difficulty doing that, but if he sat on my lap and dictated that to me, we could crank out story after story after story. And you know, that's interesting that that almost sounds like part of your deal because you were so articulate.

**00:20:09**Speaker 3

Yeah so, when high school was done, whatever that was, did you leave home right away, what, what?

**00:20:17**Speaker 3

Yeah yeah, the only way I could afford college was to stay with my mother. Entry honest, I still needed some help because I wasn't really adapting all that well.

**00:20:30**Speaker 3

That stage between 16 and 18 was very rough because I wasn't doing very well with my class work and my mother was stressed out trying to get me into college and was probably worried that I wasn't going to be able to get in.

**00:20:43**Speaker 3

I was worried that I was actually going to manage to get in and I wasn't going to do well.

**00:20:49**Speaker 3

Well, see that that's same thing that happened with my my sister too and she also stayed with her all the way through the for four years of college.

**00:20:58**Speaker 3

That was the deal that my mother made with both of us is we could stay with her rent free rent free through college because she couldn't financially pay for our classes. But we had to actually find the find the money to pay for our tuition ourselves. Because she couldn't afford to do it.

**00:21:18**Speaker 2

Yeah, we're still in the College Station/Bryan area.

**00:21:22**Speaker 3

My sister spent two years in Blinn Community College because it's cheaper. Generally, community colleges you can get in regardless of what your ACT score is.

**00:21:36**Speaker 3

If if you live in the area with of the Community College, usually you can get in, they'll just make you take some remedial classes if your scores weren't right. But she spent two years at Blinn and then she – uh filled up some applications to actual universities.

**00:21:52**Speaker 3

She actually had the score to get into those universities in the first place. It was just financial reasons we had to start with community – um...

**00:22:02**Speaker 3

And she got into UT and A&M, but A&M offered her actually a truly pathetic amount in financial aid and UT was way better.

**00:22:13**Speaker 3

And Mom decided she didn't really like... she wasn't real...she was very unfulfilled in her current job and she kind of wanted to move somewhere. With less... She kind of want to move somewhere with with more with more people that she knew.

**00:22:31**Speaker 3

And we pulled up sticks and we moved to Austin. And that was my first time living in Austin. I think I was, I want to say 14 or 15. Long time ago for me, so it's a little bit hard to remember the exact dates.

**00:22:50**Speaker 3

And we lived there for like lived here for like 4 years. So my sister could finish out school and I could get enough old enough to go to school myself and then we moved back to Bryan College Station because she had scored a job up there and she wanted to go back to school and Blinn was...It was a cheaper cost of living in Bryan College station even in that time. Even in the 2000s. And she had a job lined up at a computer repair center in A&M. So she could work and go to school. And we spent my whole college years back in College Station/Bryan.

**00:23:35**Speaker 2

Tell me about when you became homeless and what was that? What? What precipitated the?

**00:23:41**Speaker 3

Oh boy, that's messy. Again, mostly my undiagnosed and unacknowledged mental health problems like I had...I'm on the autism spectrum. I'm ADHD. And I was working. I was doing a lot of hours in school. It took a lot of hours for me to get good grades in my class I got.

**00:24:06**Speaker 3

For the first three years I got really good grades in classes like I was on the Dean's list, and my first year in college I got all of... I got all A's through, I think first three years I only got only had one B for a class and that entire time. But it was taking a lot of work hours to manage that like.

**00:24:36**Speaker 3

Just some of my classmates. They seemed to think it was effortless for me, but I was having to spend like twice the time of anybody else trying to learn stuff and trying to learn how to how to learn to work for me.

**00:24:47**Speaker 3

And then figure out how to translate that into like written tests and multiple-choice test. And trying to socialize with my classmates. That last bit didn't work out all that great, but at that point I'd been in school for like 3 years. I had not made any friends. I was very isolated socially.

**00:25:11**Speaker 3

And my mother was trying to convince me to take on even more classes and get like a side job. Which I ended up doing and I ended up taking a summer course at the same time. It was like an intensive math class. Which is a subject I enjoy, but I actually don't usually get great grades in. And I worked really hard that semester and I still.

**00:25:34**Speaker 3

Probably gonna sound petty to other people, but I gotta B out of that class and I just went from slightly depressed to extremely depressed and I ended up going into that fall semester at Texas A&M, just like completely and utterly demoralized with everything. And I ended up flunking out that semester and going back to Blinn.

**00:25:59**Speaker 3

My mother did not particularly take that well. And it ended with that end of that year – uh, with me ending up on the streets of Austin.

**00:26:13**Speaker 2

And how how?

**00:26:13**Speaker 3

Because my my mother. My mother had decided she was she was done. Yeah, she didn't really understand what's going on.

**00:26:16**Speaker 2

With yeah and how long?

**00:26:23**Speaker 3

There wasn't really anything she knew to do. And I wasn't sure what to do either, so I just ended up homeless in Austin.

**00:26:33**Speaker 2

Yeah, and and how long did that period last before you got in?

**00:26:37**Speaker 3

Four years.

**00:26:38**Speaker 2

Four years on the streets and um...Shea, it seems like you and the streets would be oil and water. They don't mix. How did that? How did that, uh?

**00:26:57**Speaker 3

This is mean, but I actually, for like that first year, I was happier. It was had gotten so bad with my mother at that point that I was actually for like that first six months. And I still I where I still have a little savings. I found a little portion I was. I was actually slightly happier living in the woods by myself than with my mother. But at that point I still had hope that I was going to be able to figure out a way out of that and I didn't.

**00:27:28**Speaker 3

My solution too, is I couldn't really figure out a way out of homelessness. So I just did my best to stay out of trouble, so to speak. So I spent most of my time at one at one or one of the other branches of the Austin Public Library. I had this little laptop that I had with me for over a year before, for years before I was homeless and I just took that thing with me everywhere, wrapped in garbage bags so it wouldn't get wet.

**00:27:55**Speaker 2

From from your perspective and your your perspective only - What, what were the impediments to getting out of homelessness for you? I understand lots of impediments out there, but.

**00:28:09**Speaker 3

Let me think - finding resources of any kind, really. I was like especially like mental health resources. I desperately needed mental health resources and I didn't know how to get them. I didn't know how to access them. I was frankly too scared to even go and find them, even if I knew where to go.

**00:28:27**Speaker 3

I'd spent most of my life being told if you need services like that, you're crazy or you're stupid. It's it's - I didn't, I didn't know what to do and I probably would be too scared to do it.

**00:28:38**Speaker 2

A shame there was a shame factor when in reality.

**00:28:41**Speaker 3

Yes, yes. I I was afraid and I felt ashamed that I needed needed the assistance, and I was honestly scared that it would end up hurting me more than was going to help.

**00:28:52**Speaker 3

That was that was distinctly not true in the end. But that was like the main factor, because like my, my my depressed and ADHD brain did not deal well with the real world.

**00:29:08**Speaker 3

Then there's accessing other resources like, I to keep myself say I stay in the middle of the woods, but I didn't know how to access food pantries.

**00:29:16**Speaker 3

I didn't know how to get access. I couldn't get, didn't couldn't figure how to get food stamps because I didn't have an address and I didn't have a case manager for the first three years I was homeless. So I didn't know how to get access to food at all.

**00:29:32**Speaker 3

I can't work full time hours. I didn't know how to get a job or and I even if I could, I could can't really manage like full hour, full time hours of work so I could figure out how how to make that translate into actually getting housing. Or how to give in somebody to let me get housing because I was living on the streets and I didn't have any prior record of having an apartment. So I had no credit actually at all because I never had a credit card either.

**00:30:03**Speaker 3

Uh - but mental health I I, I think, was like the main impediment to getting off the streets getting.

**00:30:08**Speaker 3

Getting getting mental, getting mental health help and actually managing to get an affordable housing.

**00:30:16**Speaker 2

So tell me what happened that led, led you out here to the village. You must have gotten hooked up with a caseworker.

**00:30:23**Speaker 3

You're going to like this one. You remember Joel's work in construction always had the lime green shirt.

**00:30:29**Speaker 2

Yeah yeah yeah yeah.

**00:30:31**Speaker 3

He's the one that got me in here. Or should say he's the one that like pushed me in the right direction. I used to camp near an intersection, I think it was MLK and Springdale. It's like you go down the main road you actually pass by it there's like a laundry mat and a little Family Dollar.

**00:30:55**Speaker 3

Whenever I wouldn't go into, I wouldn't go in or out of my tent area because I didn't want like I was near a residential neighborhood. I didn't want them to know I was there, so I was like a little wooded lot that was had like disputed ownership. And but I didn't want anybody to see me and complain, so I would not if it was light out I would not go back and forth.

**00:31:15**Speaker 3

But if I had like free time between when I could be in the library and it it's still not dark out. I would hang out at that intersection at the bus stop. And apparently that used to be an intersection he used to go back and forth.

**00:31:30**Speaker 2

Would you Panhandle there?

**00:31:33**Speaker 3

No. I managed to get away without pan handling. I actually sold some sketches a couple of times and I used to do tech support for tips in the library and that's how I made just enough food to just enough money to like get like.

**00:31:48**Speaker 3

Bare minimum amount of food and I also dug around in some unsecured garbage cans for extras. Thankfully only got food poisoning once. Would not recommend that anyway. He pulled over one day like three years into homeless. (Joel) He pulled over one day and I freaked out because strange dude pulls over in his car. Usually means they trying to get you to get into the car.

**00:32:14**Speaker 3

He's like it's like it's like it's OK, I just want to talk to you. Yeah, and yeah.

**00:32:18**Speaker 2

He must have seen you.

**00:32:22**Speaker 3

Like he said, let's let's go over somewhere you're comfortable. Let's go over somewhere where it's more like there's a gas station across the street. When we sat over in the gas station area like there's cameras over here you're you're fine.

**00:32:35**Speaker 3

And he just told me about Community First. Hey, come out here and talk to and talk to the front office and see what would you would need to do to get in here and about a couple weeks after that, actually was right after like a major, major storm like where like one of the trailers tipped over.

**00:32:55**Speaker 3

I picked a great night to come over and visit. And I came and I talked to Tricia. And another person who worked in the office, I do not remember her name anymore. About what it would take to apply. And then he followed up with me a couple times a month.

**00:33:20**Speaker 3

For the year it took me to finish the process for you. It took me a while because I actually have a case manager for the first three years I was homeless so I was like.

**00:33:28**Speaker 2

Nor probably income too so.

**00:33:30**Speaker 3

Yeah, he pointed out. I think it was Tricia that pointed out integral care to me.

**00:33:36**Speaker 3

Because I was told her I had been struggling with depression. So she pointed out integral care to me and I told that to Joel and he pointed out where I could go.

**00:33:46**Speaker 3

And told me to get a case manager and to keep coming to the village off and on. So I actually started volunteering at the little mini-library we got down here. Met a wonderful woman there who actually started doing laundry for me every week. I would bring my dirty clothes and she would wash them so I could have clean clothes throughout the week. Absolutely wonderful.

**00:34:09**Speaker 2

One of our neighbors or a volunteer.

**00:34:11**Speaker 3

Miss Miss King. I think she was the person who actually got the little mini.

**00:34:12**Speaker 2

Oh, okay. Art house.

**00:34:17**Speaker 2

Oh no, that was her mom, I mean her mother-in-law.

**00:34:18**Speaker 3

I was interacting with both of them, because I used to work with Susan before Covid. But yeah, so she would like take my dirty laundry and she would bring it back the next week so I'd have clean clothes every week.

**00:34:38**Speaker 3

But it was mostly Joel's - like he every, every, every week. You'd usually run into me at least twice a month and ask me, hey, did you go to integral care yet? Have you gotten a case manager? Hey, you can also try the Trinity Centre has a women's only day. He pointed that out to me that was fantastic, but the only place in downtown that that I actually felt comfortable going to because they have the two women only days. And they're actually the group that got me a regular case manager and helped me finally get through all the paperwork. Uh, for getting in here.

**00:35:15**Speaker 3

It's like hey can, can you find somebody that - like the one part that held up my application for getting in here was getting the third-party verification because I didn't have a case manager.

**00:35:26**Speaker 3

And he suggested, Joel suggested asking somebody from the libraries I used go to. And one librarian I used to see a lot. I can't remember his name either cause I am terrible with names,

agreed to sign off, agreed to sign off on it. He actually still works there too. It's the Willie Mae Kirk Library, really nice dude. Uh - He knows that all the people who who are, they're homeless, and he tries to keep an eye on them, especially the girls.

**00:35:54**Speaker 2

Well, tell me about your life here in the village. For the past three years, and what that adjustment was like for.

**00:36:03**Speaker 3

Let's see, first month was actually kind of boring, which was great. Like like moving in the house.

**00:36:08**Speaker 3

Like it was fantastic, I just want like lay on this bed forever because I've got a bed now and my back's not hurting anymore from sleeping on the ground and I've got a door that's going to lock. And I can just ignore everything that if I want I can like get my computer out and I don't have to go anywhere, except like outside to go to the bathroom, of course. But still, like I have access to a shower anytime I want to have access to an actual bathroom anytime I want.

**00:36:37**Speaker 3

I can go cook something if I want. I've got a microwave. I've got a fridge. Oh my God, this is fantastic. Then there was trying to like trying to find work and trying to connect with different people in the community. During that time, it was actually a little bit boring because like people wanted to leave you alone right away. But like when you first moved in, especially like right then, the Wi-Fi wasn't all that great, so you were kind of really wanted something to do somewhere to start filling the time. Because like when you're homeless, you got all the problems of just like staying together to keep you occupied. But when you suddenly switched to that into housing, all of that stuff you used to do is just gone, for the most part.

**00:37:25**Speaker 2

But it's not. It doesn't necessarily make it easier, does it? I mean because the cultural change oftentimes. Yeah, to the cultural change here, we've seen people respond very differently and sometimes very difficult.

**00:37:43**Speaker 3

Yeah, I think part of it is depends on how far gone you were when you were homeless. I've seen some people who manage to keep themselves together. Uh.

**00:37:54**Speaker 2

But you weren't a drug addict or any of that kind of stuff, whereas some people come with some pretty serious disability.

**00:38:01**Speaker 3

I've seen some people who never touch drugs just slowly mentally degrade over time. That last year that I was homeless, I started accessing services in downtown and there was this one woman freshly out of jail which ended up straight straight to homelessness. Uh - went from being someone I like being around to just slowly mentally degrading. I don't know if she was like off her meds. Or what was going on, just slowly mentally degrading into almost completely incomprehension.

**00:38:36**Speaker 2

Now, yeah, so you've settled in here pretty good and got a great rhythm. And and actually you're kind of a vital... I mean, you're a vital life giving part of this community now. It's a joy to see you here.

**00:38:49**Speaker 3

I have bad weeks. I don't and again I've got like a social limit that I have to that I that once I hit, I know I need to stop, so sometimes people get frustrated with that but.

**00:38:59**Speaker 2

That's a beautiful awareness.

**00:39:01**Speaker 3

I I am happy with the fact that I've reached the point where I can say I'm done with this for the day.

**00:39:08**Speaker 2

Now are you in contact at all with your mom, dad, sister.

**00:39:14**Speaker 3

Uh, My dad no. He's never really acknowledged or apologized for anything he's done before and he kind of dropped off contact on his own when we were teenagers.

**00:39:28**Speaker 3

And and eventually we just decided we were done with him. I'd say, like the, he's kind of living his, uh? punishment for his sins right now. He is a lonely old man who no - none of his three wives, two daughters or any of his stepdaughters want to have anything to do with.

**00:39:51**Speaker 2

Yeah

**00:39:52**Speaker 3

My mother has acknowledged my mental health problems that I've had. And we've had conversations about what happened when I was growing.

**00:40:01**Speaker 3

Uh, It means to me it means a little bit less than if she had acknowledge those problems while I was still living with her, but we've reached a very comfortable point in our relationship and we've have a fairly decent dialogue to to, to the point where I call our relationship pretty good.

**00:40:21**Speaker 2

Has she been here?

**00:40:23**Speaker 3

No, she still won't come to the village. I think it's partly because I live in a tiny house and she doesn't want to go anywhere that doesn't have the bathroom. And she also doesn't like being around a lot of people either. I think they also kind of suspect my mother's on the spectrum too, but that's a different topic. My sister is still a little bit rocky. She actually lives in Round Rock. Um – It's okay.

**00:40:56**Speaker 2

Yeah - it is what it is.

**00:40:57**Speaker 3

My sister, she's four years older. She has...I think there's. I think there's almost like a mindset that sometimes older siblings get into, if they're younger siblings have problems. Because it kind of feels like they're getting more attention, even if that's negative attention and they end up resenting that because there supposed to be the more responsible sibling. I don't think my sisters ever fully gotten over that.

**00:41:22**Speaker 3

Or or or if she has it, she sees it more as my fault than just something that wasn't either of our faults.

**00:41:30**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, well this is this has been an awesome interview and like I said prior to starting this, my last question is coming in over the course of your life, your journey and it's been an extraordinary journey. A beautiful journey. What's the what one thing that comes to your mind?

**00:41:52**Speaker 2

That you've learned along the way that you would love to share with our audience.

**00:42:00**Speaker 3

Do your best to be kind to everyone. Like every every, not everybody's at the same level. Mentally speaking everybody has different problems, different life experiences. Do your best to meet them where they're at and be kind to them. Um - As best you can.

**00:42:26**Speaker 2

That's beautiful. Ladies and gentlemen, our guest today, Shea Meisner. And what a beautiful testimony this has been. And just like Shea, let's go out and be the kind goodness in our respective communities.

**00:42:44**Speaker 3

Here, here.

**00:42:45**Speaker 2

God bless.

**00:42:50**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the gospel can carne with Alan Graham. When he's not busy sharing stories from the streets of life, you'll find Alan at the helm of mobile loaves and fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless. Music for today's podcasts has been provided by Community, first neighbor and musician John "JR" Rogers. To learn more on how you can be a part of the revolution and goodness, visit us online at [mlf.org](http://mlf.org).

## APPENDIX K

### FINAL\_GCCpodcast\_Tracy\_04172018\_1.mp3

April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018

00:35:32

Speaker 1 – Narrator

Speaker 2 – Alan Graham

Speaker 3&4 – Tracy Krause

<https://mlf.org/gospel-con-carne-podcast/page/35/>

**00:00:11**Speaker 1

You're listening to the Gospel Con Carne, a gritty journey of Tex-Mex theology that explores the woundedness of society, through untold stories of homelessness. Your host, Alan Graham, is the founder and CEO of Austin, TX based Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry that has been empowering communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless for more than two decades.

**00:00:33**Speaker 1

Alan is also the lead visionary behind the innovative Community First!Village, the country's only master planned community designed specifically for men and women coming out of chronic homelessness. Now serving today's Gospel Con Carne, here's your host, Alan Graham.

**00:00:54**Speaker 2

Welcome everybody to the Gospel Con Carne podcast. I am super excited that we have in the studio today, my good friend and neighbor, Tracy Krause, who we have known for about a year now. And I want to welcome you into the studio, Tracy.

**00:01:08**Speaker 3

Yes, yeah.

**00:01:12**Speaker 2

How you doing?

**00:01:12**Speaker 4

Thank you, Alan. I'm doing great. Thank you for having me.

**00:01:16**Speaker 2

Sister, your story inspires me on a a number of different levels. But, particularly, I see inside of you one of the bravest people that I've ever met in my life. Because you share things about your life that most people would keep locked up inside their own skeleton closets. So I'd like to explore that part of who you are and and ultimately how you ended up here at the Community First Village and and what that means.

**00:01:50**Speaker 2

So why don't we go back to? You know when you were born where you were born.

Tell me a little bit about your parents and your siblings and anything related to your early childhood.

**00:02:00**Speaker 4

Sure, sure I was born in Dallas, TX and at three months old moved to Mesquite, TX. And uh...

**00:02:11**Speaker 2

What year was that?

**00:02:13**Speaker 4

That was 1965. OK and I have an older sister Renee and a younger brother Tom.

**00:02:22**Speaker 4

And so we we pretty much had a we were based as a lower income, you know, family.

**00:02:35**Speaker 4

We didn't, you know, have much, but you know, I think we had probably two or three sets of clothes a year for school. And you know, we we pretty much thought all families lived like we did. And there was some sexual abuse, you know, in our family. And my sister was brave at in the 6th grade and when she realized that that my dad was coming in my room, she told.

**00:03:07**Speaker 2

So this is an older sister.

**00:03:10**Speaker 4

Yeah, my older sister. And I was in the third grade that initially brought CPS in and I was so frightened I lied.

**00:03:10**Speaker 2

Yes, yes.

**00:03:21**Speaker 4

And you know, wanted to, I guess, initially protect and lie and say you know, no, it didn't happen. So they took both of us out of the home for - me for three weeks. My mother fought to get me back and my sister was gone for four to six years maybe.

**00:03:48**Speaker 2

Wow, how did you get back before your sister?

**00:03:54**Speaker 4

Well, because I lied and said nothing happened. And so, on that basis there was not a case filed showing that there was abuse with me. And my mother, her kept calling and calling and calling and she wanted me back and so.

**00:04:18**Speaker 2

Now your mom and dad were still together.

**00:04:19**Speaker 4

Yes, yes.

**00:04:20**Speaker 2

At this time and.

**00:04:22**Speaker 4

But my mother suffered from schizophrenia all my life and she was very very depressed. And I I didn't go to school a lot. In fact, you know, I left home at 14 years of age. And you know when my mother...When I was 14, in fact, she jumped out of a second story window at Saint Paul Hospital and broke her back out of the....She was in the psych ward because she saw clones of all of us. She said that we were dead and we wanted her to jump to come be with us. And that's just one of the things that we experienced, you know, with my mother because of her illness.

**00:05:15**Speaker 2

But your father & mother stayed together through all of this? Is your mother still alive?

**00:5:17**Speaker 3

Uh-huh. No, she passed in October 2011.

**00:05:20**Speaker 2

But they stayed married this entire time. There's almost a miracle inside of that equation.

**00:05:26**Speaker 4

Yeah yeah my father take care of her. The best city knew how he did work a job was a company for 30 some odd years. And was pretty high up and you know the staff there and

**00:05:57**Speaker 2

So did y'all. Were y'all rising out of the kind of the poverty level, the poor level or was was he just high up but still working working?

**00:06:05**Speaker 4

He was just high up and he was just a working we were barely getting by, I mean you, know they always had cigarettes but we had no food in the cabinets you know. My mother's prescriptions were outrageous.

**00:06:22**Speaker 2

Was your mom institutionalized ever?

**00:06:28**Speaker 4

Oh yea - all the time.

**00:06:29**Speaker 2

You know my mom.

**00:06:29**Speaker 4

All the time.

**00:06:31**Speaker 2

Was institutionalized a lot as well. Did you know about that about me?

**00:06:35**Speaker 4

No, no, I didn't know that.

**00:06:36**Speaker 2

Yeah, my mother suffered a lot from her mental health issues, but my father ended up leaving when I was four years old.

**00:06:45**Speaker 3

Oh, OK.

**00:06:46**Speaker 2

Yeah, and So what was your relationship like with your dad once you came back from that CPS event? Did the abuse continue or did?

**00:06:58**Speaker 4

No, no. It it wasn't, we weren't allowed to talk about it. Yeah, and of course we we're going to church. And there was a caseworker that was coming by – checking, you know. But I remember my mother saying that my dad, you know, was sick, had gotten sick, you know, but it was hush hush. You know, we just didn't discuss that.

**00:07:37**Speaker 4

But a miracle of all things was that. There was a family across the street called the Baldwins and this lady named Marsha Baldwin, who introduced me to Christ as a young child. Nurtured us when we were children. And took us in under her wing and would have baked cookies with us.

**00:08:01**Speaker 4

And we had a little club called the Good News Club as children and we would, you know, go over there and watch her on a felt board, do Bible stories and it just it was really incredible. The the things that I remember as a child. And I still talked to her today. She's in Colorado.

**00:08:29**Speaker 2

Where did your sister go to live? Was she in a foster family?

**00:08:34**Speaker 4

She was in foster care. I mean, not foster care. She was in children's homes.

**00:08:40**Speaker 2

Children's homes yeah for that six year period of time, does she ever come back home?

**00:08:46**Speaker 4

She did come back home. And then she immediately, I think, she got a part time job at a fast food restaurant. Got a boyfriend at an early age and moved out. And...

**00:09:08**Speaker 2

How early age?

**00:09:11**Speaker 4

14-15

**00:09:12**Speaker 2

Yeah, okay. And you were already gone by this time. And the age difference between y'all again?

**00:09:18**Speaker 3

03 Years. No.

**00:09:20**Speaker 2

Three years, so you so you're 17.

**00:09:20**Speaker 4

Yeah, no, she went first. Yeah, she went first and then then I then I left after after that. But you know. It's strange, but you look for a father, figure, somebody to save you when when you don't have the nurturing that you need as a child. And then you almost pick someone just like your dad.

**00:09:54**Speaker 2

So you left home were you 14 or were you 17? 14 when you left home and that was it? You never came back.

**00:09:58**Speaker 4

I was 14. Well, I came back several times. After you know, I I forgave early on, you know. And when I would get clean and sober, you know I would need a place to to go. And I would go back home to Mom.

**00:10:22**Speaker 4

And try to reestablish and get some structure and start over and I always had good intentions and I would do really well for a little bit and then I would slip up, you know, but if it hadn't have been for all Mom, I probably wouldn't have got to go there.

You know, but sure do miss her. You know...

**00:11:04**Speaker 2

Yeah - you know, I read a line one time because I struggled with my family and I was reading the line and the catechism of the Catholic Church. That was surrounding the the commandment, 'You shall honor your father and your mother,' which was a struggle for me because my father left and my mom was left alone with mental health problems to raise us. And I'm reading this about honoring your father and mother and at the end of it it said, 'Your your parents came

together and created you. What can you ever possibly do in Thanksgiving, in return' or something to that effect. And it really had a powerful impact because I'm grateful that I'm here.

**00:11:39**Speaker 4

Right.

**00:11:44**Speaker 2

And as I speak with you today and we hear about the trauma. I'm actually very grateful to your mom and dad for having created you.

**00:11:54**Speaker 4

Right.

**00:11:55**Speaker 2

It was a it was just a different perspective. No matter what our journeys took us down, I'm I'm I'm grateful for that.

**00:12:02**Speaker 4

Right. Well, so there's I had an epiphany the other day when I was coming home from the nursing home to see my dad because he gets a little foul sometimes. But when he had a break, a psychotic breakdown and they put him in the psych ward. He had a breakthrough because they changed his medicine and he talked to my sister. And he said, 'Oh, this is what I did to you and I'm sorry about the past, about the abuse.' And I kept waiting for him to talk to me about mine and apologize to me when I went to visit him the next day and it never came.

**00:12:49**Speaker 4

And so I sat there and I said, well, dad, I I said, you know, a long time ago I I told you that I forgave you, I said, but this is the last time that I'll say this. I said, 'What you did that day and I explained it and laid it out in detail what you did to me affected me.

And it scared me and when I looked up and you shut your eyes, it frightened me.

**00:13:27**Speaker 4

And this is what I've been tormented with all my life.' And so I confronted that that day. Not very long ago, a couple of weeks ago. And he said, 'I didn't do that.' And I said, well I remember that you did. He said, well, I don't remember that.

**00:13:57**Speaker 4

And if they had to come in there with the police, they probably would have thought I did that since I've done that to your sister and I said, well, you may be a little confused right now, and rather you think you did or didn't. It happened.

**00:14:14**Speaker 4

And I'm getting some closure today and I'm healing. And The thing is, is that I forgive you. I've got my dad's pictures all over my house. That's forgiveness.

**00:14:29**Speaker 2

Amen, that's beautiful.

**00:14:32**Speaker 4

I love who I am today. Because I've been through trauma therapy, skillful living, art therapy, different spiritual lessons. That have enabled me to get through the ideas of what kept pushing me out there to use drugs and alcohol.

**00:14:57**Speaker 2

That from 14 years old on until you're in your early 50s now. And up until you know your late 40s, what was what was going on in your life? Over that period of time, kind of take us over that 30 year period of time.

**00:15:18**Speaker 4

Well, I so desperately. I didn't know who I was. And all I wanted to do was have a baby. Some. A baby that I could love that nobody could ever take from me. That I could identify with, that could be a part of me. And I fell in love with this man early on, which is my son's daddy was so in love with him. But we use drugs together and things didn't work out. We were married for eight years. But when I lost my son in '92, things got catastrophic for me.

**00:16:20**Speaker 2

You lost your son how? custody?

**00:16:29**Speaker 4

Custody. Yea. And um...

**00:16:29**Speaker 2

And what year was your son born in?

**00:16:30**Speaker 4

'84

**00:16:31**Speaker 2

'84.

**00:16:33**Speaker 4

The thing is, is that you know you hear a blackout drinkers. I was a blackout user.

I would disappear for years. And then when I would go to jail, I would come to.

Because I would get clean and then I want to get back involved in people, in his life.

**00:16:57**Speaker 4

And he would be like Whoa -where have you been? That my I was so mentally ill too.

You know you. You end up burning bridges with family and friends after so long.

You know that. It's just the same thing over and over and over and so. You begin to look for love in all the wrong places.

**00:17:31**Speaker 4

The only thing that I could identify with was my friends on the street. They love me for who I was. If it came down to it, they really had my back. They would share their last with me. I'm talking about food. If I was sick they would go spend their money on, you know, some Nyquil or whatever I needed, or take me to the, you know, get me to the hospital, spend the money on the bus pass to get me to the hospital.

**00:18:12**Speaker 2

On the street. But the reality is, is our friends on the streets are all that compassionate human beings but locked in a place that's very difficult to climb out of.

**00:18:33**Speaker 4

I have met the most compassionate people with more morals than ethics then people with business suits and ties on on the streets.

**00:18:49**Speaker 2

Well, you were caught up in some pretty rough times for you. The addictions, prostitution, jail time kind of walk me through that period.

**00:19:00**Speaker

Right.

**00:19:04**Speaker 2

And I love one of the photos that you have that the before picture, yeah?

**00:19:09**Speaker 4

The before and after Mr. Grinch.

**00:19:13**Speaker 2

Well, it was. I guess it was one of your mug shots, yeah?

**00:19:17**Speaker 4

Yeah, it was my last mug shot in December 1st, 2015.

**00:19:23**Speaker 4

That was just three weeks of relapse. That took me down. This saying goes, it gets worse every time, and it's true. I was on a suicide mission because I was just had devastated. My my emotions were really out of whack because I had let myself down and so many other people about over the relapse, you know, and I was just like screw it now you know I I was like I may as well go full force.

**00:20:06**Speaker 4

You know when I do something I always go full speed ahead when when, when when I'm doing something I don't have step, you know.

**00:20:16**Speaker 2

And your drug of choice was?

**00:20:18**Speaker 4

It started out with methamphetamines and it ended up with crack cocaine.

**00:20:24**Speaker 4

So yeah, alcohol, I I never and alcohol I guess as well. Thought I I was an alcoholic until this last go round. When when I relapsed I, you know, I found myself drinking Schlitz malt liquor bull.

**00:20:46**Speaker 4

The best thing I could find for the quickest buzz and you know I was drinking constantly for the effect. And let me tell you when I am under the influence of drugs and alcohol I'm a complete different person.

**00:21:09**Speaker 4

It's not nice. I don't ever want to be that person again. I'm not going to be that person again. You know, I know what keeps me in my safe zone. And believe me the most I will take is ibuprofen.

**00:21:29**Speaker 4

I've set up resources, I won't take opiates. When I was in my car accident I would not take any narcotics or anything. Because, I'm not fixing to go down that road, you know? Morphine and Toradol and Vicodin at the hospital spun me into a drug relapse.

When I relapsed last time.

**00:21:55**Speaker 2

And so you're back in jail in 2015. What month was that?

**00:22:00**Speaker 4

December 1st, 2015.

**00:22:03**Speaker 2

And you were arrested for what?

**00:22:05**Speaker 4

Unauthorized use motor vehicle. I had went to the hospital for sciatic nerve pain.

And they gave me morphine toward all and Vicodin for pain. I didn't tell them I was in recovery. And next thing I know I'm at the dope house. In my friend's car. Which I ended up staying out in for three weeks. And when the cops found me, they said we've been looking for you.

**00:22:41**Speaker 4

And I was...when the I got in the cop car they pulled over. And I came to for just a minute and I said, what are you doing? And she said something's not right. She had called EMS because she thought I was fixing to die. She said you don't look good.

**00:23:04**Speaker 2

But there was something that happened this time while you were in jail that.

**00:23:10**Speaker 4

Yeah, well, the second day I was there, of course in my attic mind. You know they put you on, they take you through the nurses thing when you first get there. And they had me on. Taper me off of. What are those? There's some pills that they put you on so you won't have. What is it called – withdrawals. So they had me in the withdrawal tank. And I fell down the stairs the second day and broke my leg. And so I was in the hospital recovery in jail. And so when I got out there, they put me in a wheelchair in the aggravated tank.

**00:24:06**Speaker 4

And I was so depressed and I was just hadn't took a shower in a week. I could hear people talking about machine she hasn't showered in a week and all this, you know, like I said, oh, I just shook the bars. I said ooh, the devil's got a hold on me.

**00:24:25**Speaker 4

And I mustered up enough strength to get in the wheelchair and I went out to the day room and I saw this guard that had just a glow on her and I said rolled over there and she said miss crowds. It's good to see you out today and I said ma'am I need prayer.

**00:24:45**Speaker 4

And she said, Miss Krause, I can't touch you, but in the name of Jesus and she covered me with every prayer imaginable.

**00:24:56**Speaker 4

And the chains of depression begin to break and the love of Jesus just begin to come flow through me. And the tears begin to flow. And the Holy Spirit just just covered me. And I begin to speak in tongues and I begin to cry and I just begin to feel hope and love and want to do better. And I'll look to the right and I see a program next door called Resalana.

**00:25:31**Speaker 4

And I see the girl smiling and laughing next door and I told the guard I wanted to go over there. And yeah, that's when she told me that there was a Resalana program and she signed me up to go over there and they pulled me a week later and I was in that program for 4 1/2 months, and that's where I got my trauma therapy skillful, living art, Therapy, AA, church. Everything I needed – a parenting courses, every day for 4 1/2 months. You know that's a good group of people. They I'm still in touch with the directors today. They've came out here and done a a video of my success story and put it on media.

**00:26:18**Speaker 4

They're very supportive of my recovery. You know the people that you put around you. It just makes a difference if you if you surround your yourself with people that are uplifting. You and that support your recovery. You know great things just start happening. Good things continue to happen.

**00:26:40**Speaker 4

I mean, just I can't tell you so much has happened. I mean, even though I've had some dips and valleys, you know the car accident happened. But I mean still, I mean.

Good things keep happening.

**00:26:57**Speaker 2

We got just a few minutes left on this awesome time together, so tell me about that journey from jail to where you're living right now.

**00:27:08**Speaker 4

OK, so. I I knew this, I knew this guy and he came to jail and he said why don't you come, you know? Move in with me. And help me with my mom. And so I moved in with him when I got out. And started helping him with his mom. And he started abusing me. And he was. First, it was verbal. Then it started getting physical. Then it was very physical. And this was severe. So, he started telling me that that my family didn't want anything to do with me and things that they had said. I had reached out a couple of times and things.

**00:28:22**Speaker 4

Were kind of making sense to me, maybe seem like it, but my mind was playing tricks on me. So I just got in my car. And I went and stayed on my sister's property. Not far away and so I just tried to get my head together and thought you know he was challenging me to go back to the streets and back to jail and back to using drugs and I see.

**00:29:00**Speaker 4

I said, you know, Lord, I need your help you know I treaded water as long as I could and just kept my head above water. And I said, I know I'm not going to go back to my old ways. And so that's what I did.

**00:29:16**Speaker 4

I had reached out to some people that I knew in recovery and I didn't want to tell certain people because I didn't want certain people to know because I I don't know, I I kept it under cover about certain people know him because. I didn't want police involved. You know, because he was my payee. And then I didn't, you know, so it was kind of a touchy situation. But then when I came to grips and I called my sister.

**00:29:51**Speaker 4

She said what about that Mobile Loaves and Fishes place? And I was still on the Echo list from 2014. And I said, you know what, I'm glad you said that. So I just started making phone call after phone call after phone call. And came on the tour. And I started making filled out the application. And I started making phone calls and I couldn't ever get a hold of Tricia. And so I got in touch with Steve. And Steve says you're never going to get her on the phone. But come to the Easter Sunday service.

**00:30:35**Speaker 4

So I came out here and I ran into you and her. And she said, meet me after the breakfast and then she found me and I told her what I was going through. And she just gave me the biggest hug and she says you're the first woman that wants to live in a canvas side cottage. And I knew when she gave me that hug. It was the same hug that Marsha Baldwin used to give me as a child, (that Lady that introduced me to Jesus.)

**00:31:07**Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

**00:31:11**Speaker 3

That great hug. It was everything was going to be okay and I knew that I was home. Alan, I knew that I was truly home. I knew everything was going to be okay. She says I want to help you and I said really and she says give Me 2 weeks. In 10 days, I was in my house. This is the first time I've really ever had my own place. I have my own puppy.

**00:31:52**Speaker 3

I've lost everything tons of times. I'm so rich inside. You wouldn't believe how much strength I have from you guys just lifted me up and giving me so much strength as a human-being because you gave me a chance. Y'all loved me when I didn't love myself. I have dignity and integrity and morals now.

**00:32:25**Speaker 3

I have my own stuff to do. I have my own job. I have my own business. I have so much friends out here in the community. I have resources. I have my own therapist. I have, I mean, just the list goes on and on.

**00:32:48**Speaker 3

I mean it, it is not even like the it's - Staff here, there's no staff here, they're friends.

**00:32:55**Speaker 2

Neighbors and friends.

**00:32:57**Speaker 3

Neighbors, wouldn't you be my neighbors? Sorry, I get emotional.

**00:33:06**Speaker 2

Well, you we couldn't possibly end this any better than. And then this. It's a. It's a special place. We both live here. We're both neighbors. We both live in a 250 bedroom, \$18 million mansion out here, Amen.

**00:33:23**Speaker 3

But mine is the best mansion you could imagine. Yeah, yeah, I don't want to live in a RV. I don't wanna live in a micro home. I wanna live in that tent.

**00:33:35**Speaker 2

Yeah, that's beautiful.

**00:33:38**Speaker 3

People are like why would you? You know, this guy asked the other day, he said. Well, did you just pick the tent because you're used to being on the ground? And I said yeah. I'm used to being on the ledge of a bridge. And in the woods. And I feel better about being in the tent. Yeah, that's just me. And in my car. But you ought to see the inside of it.

**00:34:07**Speaker 2

It's beautiful.

**00:34:08**Speaker

But, I don't let men in my tent.

**00:34:09**Speaker 2

Well Tracy, I'm going to tell you it's been a a blessing having you on this podcast today and I.

**00:34:20**Speaker 4

Thank you for having me.

**00:34:21**Speaker 2

Appreciate how brave you are and and sharing some of these deep and painful.

**00:34:28**Speaker 4

I'm always going to be bold. I'm always going to share. It's always going to come raw with me, you know.

**00:34:36**Speaker 2

The ladies and gentlemen, we've been in conversation with my neighbor, Tracy Krause, a beautiful human being, a beautiful woman and everywhere in every way. So all I want to do is leave you with go out and be the goodness in your community. Amen, Amen, Amen.

**00:35:02**Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Gospel Con Carne with Alan Graham. When he's not busy serving up his Tex-Mex theology, you'll find Alan at the helm of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a social outreach ministry in Austin, TX that empowers communities into a lifestyle of service with the homeless music for today's podcast has been provided by community first neighbor and musician John, JR Rogers. Learn more and find out how you can be a part of the revolution in goodness at [www.mlf.org](http://www.mlf.org).

## APPENDIX L

### Definition of Chronic Homeless

In 2015, HUD published the *Defining Chronically Homeless Final Rule* clarifying the definition of chronic homelessness, which applies to all program participants admitted after January 2016.

HUD encourages CoCs to prioritize funding for projects serving households with the highest level of need, including those that may be chronically homeless. However, only projects that serve individuals and families defined as chronically homeless must document chronic status for HUD.

In order to be eligible for housing restricted to chronically homeless individuals or families under the CoC program, participants must meet the definition of chronically homeless. The definition of chronically homeless is:

- A homeless individual with a disability as defined in section 401(9) of the McKinney-Vento Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11360(9)), who:
  - Lives in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter, and
  - Has been homeless and living as described for at least 12 months\* or on at least 4 separate occasions in the last 3 years, as long as the combined occasions equal at least 12 months and each break in homelessness separating the occasions included at least 7 consecutive nights of not living as described.
- An individual who has been residing in an institutional care facility for less, including jail, substance abuse or mental health treatment facility, hospital, or other similar facility, for fewer than 90 days and met all of the criteria of this definition before entering that facility\*\*; or
- A family with an adult head of household (or, if there is no adult in the family, a minor head of household) who meets all of the criteria of this definition, including a family whose composition has fluctuated while the head of household has been homeless.

A. \*A “break” in homeless is considered to be 7 or more nights.

B. \*\*An individual residing in an institutional care facility does not constitute a break in homelessness.

Reference Directory: <https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/coc-esg-virtual-binders/coc-esg-homeless-eligibility/definition-of-chronic-homelessness/>

