

NC CROSSROADS

A Publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council—Weaving Cultures and Communities
Winner of the 1999 Helen & Martin Schwartz Prize for Excellence in Public Programming

ISSN 1094-2351

Volume 6, Issue 1

March 2002

A LIFE WORTH MENTIONING...

Interviews and Portraits of Homeless People by Edie Cohn

Maybe someone will know that I was a human being, that I did have a heart that pumped, that I did breathe air. Even though they may have rolled by me on the streets and said, "Roll this window up! We don't want to be around her, she's low life!" Someone could read my story and say, "This person actually lived a life."

Sharyn Jordan-Holland, 2001





I started this project in 1991. I was an artist looking for a cause that would help others as well as my career. For three years, one day a week, I drove downtown to the Durham Community Shelter for H.O.P.E., determined to render portraits of residents that captured not only their images, but their spirits as well. At the end of each session, I paid the resident five dollars. I kept the original drawings and gave each person a print of his or her finished portrait. Eventually I expanded the project to include families at Genesis Home, a transitional housing facility in Durham. Most of the people I drew were single African Americans, making the project a general reflection of Durham's homeless population. (For the record, the majority of homeless people in the United States are white.)

Early in the project, I consented to draw a young man who kept asking me, in whispered tones, to draw him. He said he had AIDS and wanted the portrait for his mother. I didn't know whether or not to believe him: everybody at the shelter wanted a drawing and everybody had stories. But he was persistent. As I drew him he told me he had tried to kill himself over the weekend.

Until that point I hadn't asked questions of the people I was sketching. I just wanted to draw them for an exhibit; their lives were their own business. But if someone tells you he tried to commit suicide recently, you have to respond. So as I scrutinized this man's face for shadows and highlights, I began to ask him questions about his life.

This man did send his picture home to his mom. I began to think about what it would be like to be dying and unable to go home to one's family. I wondered if my own son and I would ever be in this situation. I started to wonder about other stories, whispered or left untold. I decided to expand the scope of the project so that others could hear the voices of the people I was drawing. I bought the best tape recorder I could afford and began taping stories as I drew. I also discovered my own voice through writing as I tried to make sense of the turmoil the project had unleashed in me.

Eddie Cohn



What do I think of homelessness? Well, you see, it's like this right here. For years and years and years, people been homeless. People always been doing good, all right, and bad. But they just come up with this thing called "the homeless."

See now, me, myself, I believe there ain't no such thing as no "homeless." That's how I feel about it. I hear the word and I be seeing things, see what I'm saying? Ain't no such thing as homeless. But they done put a label on people. Say, "Hey, you the homeless." So now they treating you this way, they treating you that way. But before they came up with that, it was the same thing, and they didn't call it nothing. Just people who had and people who didn't.

Being called homeless, it's worse than being poor. I'd rather for a person to put the "poor" label on me than the "homeless" label. I'm poor anyways. I would rather be left like that than somebody say, "Hey, you're homeless." That's how people be judged. That's how people be looking at that. They say, "He's homeless, he ain't nothing!"

William McKiever, 1993 (b.1947–d.1994)



use that would help
e downtown to the
raits of residents
e end of each
s and gave each
l the project to
Durham. Most of
ject a general
majority of

pt asking me, in
the portrait for his
at the shelter
ent. As I drew him

sketching. I just
usiness. But if
to respond. So as I
to ask him

hink about what it
. I wondered if my
er about other
of the project so
bought the best
I also discovered
rmoil the project

Before my mom died, I could see the aging in her face. And I often said to myself, how much of that did I cause her to have to come through? The pain in her face and how gray she had gotten. It seems like overnight to me, because during my time of being in the streets and doing my thing, I never stopped once to really, really look at her! You know, just see how she was changing. I never looked 'til I got clean.



The blessing is that when she died, I was clean. They didn't have to find me. I wasn't living from pillar to post or they had to ask this person or that person if they'd seen me. I was there. And I got to make my amends to her.

Reneé Baker, 2001



1993

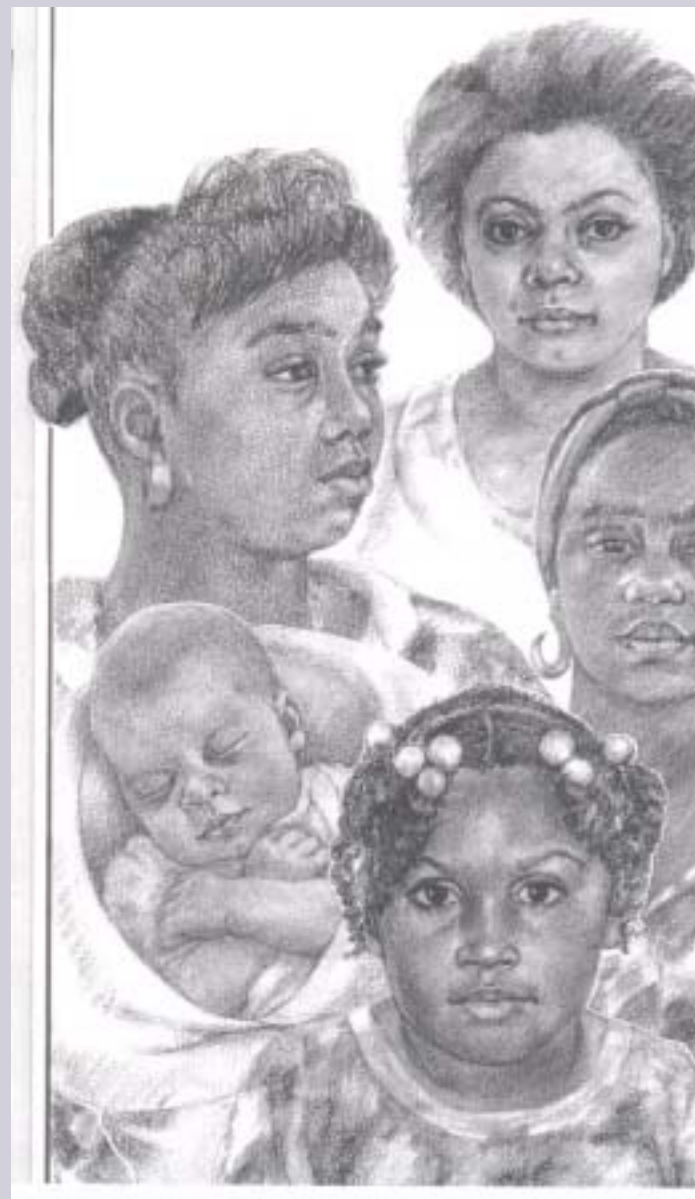
I have my own apartment. I pay my own bills. I put my own groceries in my house. People don't understand how good it feels to wake up and vacuum your rug, and sweep off the porch, or do your windows and look across and maybe just see a dumpster as your view, but, you know, it's yours!

I'll never forget the time I was sleeping in front of the Goodwill, and it was cold outside. Somebody had donated a couch and had put a whole lot of clothes out there. I covered myself up with clothes, and before I went to sleep, I said, "This is getting kind of rough!

I'm scared to go to sleep right here!" And I said, "Well, so what! I won't wake up. I won't have to worry about tomorrow." I just went on and went to sleep because I didn't care if I died.

I don't hide who I used to be, because I'm so proud of where I've come. If someone says, "Well, Sharyn, what were you doing ten years ago?" I say, "Oh, girl! I was messed up ten years ago! I was in and out of the shelter. I was on crack cocaine. Drinking. Homeless. Children gone." I don't have a problem with it. I'll tell anybody. Some people don't care to know, but I'm still talking about it!

Sharyn Jordan-Holland, 2001



Genesis Home with my three girls. They hated

I played the B-flat alto clarinet. And I loved to play the bass clarinet. I did well in school. I could've done better. They always told me, "You got a whole lot of potential," but I was courting, drinking, and I played in the band. That was everything.

I think about my old schoolmates and I feel bad. I don't like to go to class reunions. Seems like every time a class reunion comes up, either I don't have a job or something is always in the way. I would like to go there and have a decent car, something to show for all these years I've been out



The day my mother died was the last day that I worked for maybe five years. I just didn't handle her death. I started reaching out to people and places for comfort, trying to grab hold of something. And I ended up in Warrenton with an abusive relationship. I moved my children up there with me for thirty days and it took thirty days to realize that this is where we did not need to be. When I made the decision to come out of that relationship I ended up at Genesis Home. And I've always thanked God that Genesis Home was here for us. Thank God we didn't end up on the streets.

Now, when we ended up at Genesis Home, I was pregnant. That's what came out of that relationship in Warrenton! I've always preached abstinence and birth control to my girls and that there is no excuse for an unwanted pregnancy, and I would have rather died than to tell them that I was pregnant. I prayed every night that God would take my life, but every morning he blessed me with life—every morning!

So I ended up pregnant at the
initially for dragging them over there because

of there.

I don't know if you call it pride or what, but I'm not going to go in there broke if I can't contribute. So I just tend to shy away from it.

My brother, he sees me and he says, "Man, you had so much potential; your teachers said you got so much potential." He'll see me sober and tell me, "You're doing all right!"

I always tell my brother, "Don't brag on me, because I never know what tomorrow might bring."

James Williams, 1991

After an interview, the man with whom I had been talking said, "That tape is worth a million."

"Why?" I joked. "You think you'll be famous someday?"

"No, it's because it's been a long time since I've opened up like this to anyone."

NC CROSSROADS

is a publication of the

North Carolina Humanities

When I get older, I'm building a big, giant house, just the biggest house you ever saw—bigger than a mansion. And I'm going to have about four vans riding around, picking up homeless people, take them back, get them cleaned up, let them settle down. And downstairs I'm going to have social workers with their offices, and everyone who comes in is going to have a social worker who's going to help them find a job, help them find an apartment. I'm going to have a big auditorium, and we're going to be right in there talking to them, telling them our rules and stuff. Some people are on drugs, are drinking, we're not going to have that, and if that's their goal, they're going to have to leave.



Because if you're homeless, you should be worried about being unhomeless. Getting a job, have money, clothing, and a place where you can lay your head.

This is what I want to do. I can't wait to get older to be able to achieve my goal!

Benjamin Steele,
1994, age 14

genesis home with my three girls. They hated it, they have a very big pride also. They never want to they don't like to reflect back on it. But they want to struggle, the homelessness, the lights being out. They've struggled right along with me. So this is

Oh, I just draw lots of pictures, but most of the draw is women and they just got their mouth closed, show their teeth a lot. I like drawing pictures with crying, that's my favorite pictures to draw. I like sometimes when they're happy, but when they're especially when they're crying, that's my best time.

Basically, I like to draw when I see someone with a real bad attitude. I draw how I think they are, they look angrywise, stuff like that. I can draw how they feel in the inside, that's what I can do. I can look in their face.

Sometimes my sisters or my mama's sisters work with my mama, and I'll draw them. Later after I draw after they cool down, I show them how they work.

I've always liked drawing pictures, but now, since I'm about ten, I like to draw sad pictures, because that's most of the time.

A lot of times I'm just angry.

Yeah, see, when I draw, it's like I'm getting angry, just blocking myself out and I'm just drawing. V

initially for dragging them over there because
ted to consider themselves homeless. Even now
ent through this thing with me, through the
t, the heat being off, no food in the house.
sn't my story, but our story.

Cassie Johnson, 2001

he pictures I
osed. I don't
hen they're
e to draw
e sad, or mad, or
me to draw them.
e else having a
feeling, how
w people how
Not how they

ill be arguing
am finished and
s acting!
ince I've been
hat's how I feel



way from everybody and everything. It's like I'm
When you draw, there is nothing in your mind.

Nikki Johnson, age 12, 1994

like this to anyone.

Something about this
process does open people up,
myself included. Perhaps it
has something to do with the
attention I give to the
resident, or the finished
drawing which may show
them a window into
themselves. Or perhaps it is
the unfiltered answers I give
to their questions—unfiltered
because I am too deeply tuned
into my drawing to watch
what I say. Sometimes I don't
react at all to some pretty
troubling things they tell me.
Even that, I think, at times
can be a blessing for them.

I think there are times in
anyone's life when they would
like to be able to talk about a
serious matter without facing
a big emotional outpouring of
shock or support from the
listener. Sometimes people
just need someone to be
there, to listen, but not to
react.

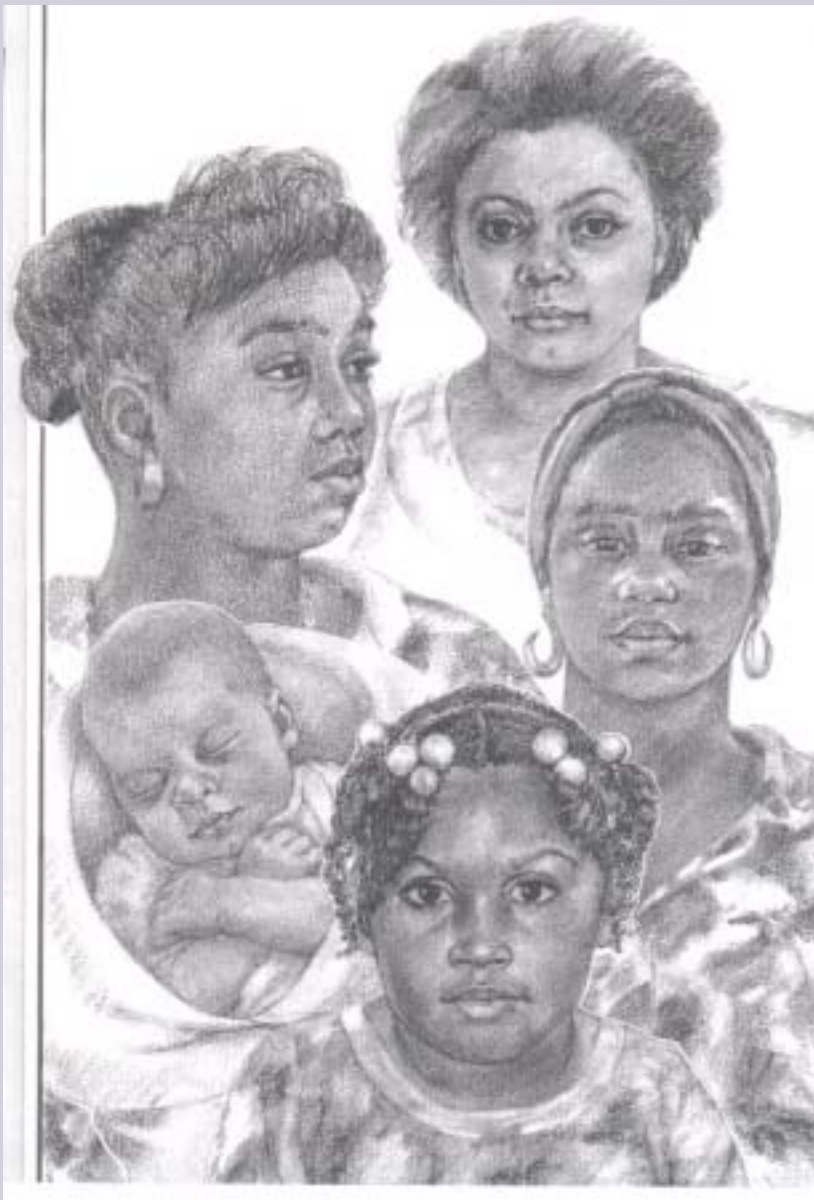
Edie Cohn, 1995

I think Edie's project provides us with an image of what we as a
community can do as we go about addressing homelessness. That image
is to take the time to notice the contours of a homeless person's face,
the shape of her lips, the sound of his voice. To take the time to
interact with that person's story without preconceived notions about
what brought them to homelessness or what's going to get them out of
there. To just bring an earnestness to learn.

I think as we work to try to create programs and policy and affordable
housing and all of the things that are a part of solutions, that image—
taking time to notice and to listen—will continue to be a guiding one.

Terry Allebaugh, 2001

Director, Housing for New Hope, Durham



The day my mother died was the last day that I worked for maybe five years. I just didn't handle her death. I started reaching out to people and places for comfort, trying to grab hold of something. And I ended up in Warrenton with an abusive relationship. I moved my children up there with me for thirty days and it took thirty days to realize that this is where we did not need to be. When I made the decision to come out of that relationship I ended up at Genesis Home. And I've always thanked God that Genesis Home was here for us. Thank God we didn't end up on the streets.

Now, when we ended up at Genesis Home, I was pregnant. That's what came out of that relationship in Warrenton! I've always preached abstinence and birth control to my girls and that there is no excuse for an unwanted pregnancy, and I would have rather died than to tell them that I was pregnant. I prayed every night that God would take my life, but every morning he blessed me with life—every morning!

So I ended up pregnant at the Genesis Home with my three girls. They hated me initially for dragging them over there because they have a very big pride also. They never wanted to consider themselves homeless. Even now they don't like to reflect back on it. But they went through this thing with me, through the struggle, the homelessness, the lights being out, the heat being off, no food in the house. They've struggled right along with me. So this isn't my story, but our story.

Tassie Johnson, 2001

Oh, I just draw lots of pictures, but most of the pictures I draw is women and they just got their mouth closed. I don't show their teeth a lot. I like drawing pictures when they're crying, that's my favorite pictures to draw. I like to draw sometimes when they're happy, but when they're sad, or mad, or especially when they're crying, that's my best time to draw them.

Basically, I like to draw when I see someone else having a real bad attitude. I draw how I think they are feeling, how they look angrywise, stuff like that. I can draw people how they feel in the inside, that's what I can do. Not how they look in their face.

Sometimes my sisters or my mama's sisters will be arguing with my mama, and I'll draw them. Later after I am finished and after they cool down, I show them how they was acting!

I've always liked drawing pictures, but now, since I've been about ten, I like to draw sad pictures, because that's how I feel most of the time.

A lot of times I'm just angry.

Yeah, see, when I draw, it's like I'm getting away from everybody and everything. It's like I'm just blocking myself out and I'm just drawing. When you draw, there is nothing in your mind.

Nikki Johnson, age 12, 1994





Edie Cohn

I grew up in the small German community of New Holstein, Wisconsin. The only dangers of which I was aware were the possibility of getting run over by a car or beat up by other kids. My father, Ted Steudel, was the town's insurance agent, and he also ran the Community Chest. If you were in need, he would use the community's meager resources as best he could to help you.

I, too, feel a responsibility to my community; to Durham, where I've lived for twenty-six years; and to the world. In my community chest are the talents of an artist and a writer. I use these tools to probe areas others may be wary of traversing and to bring back stories and images of people whose lives are indeed worth mentioning.

Currently I'm working on a book about this project. If you have suggestions or ideas for furthering the project's impact, please contact me at: www.homelessproject.org.

Further reading:

Burt, Martha et al. *Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing?* Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2001.

Cobb, Jodi et al. *The Way Home: Ending Homelessness in America*. New York: H. N. Abrams in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000.

Jencks, Christopher. *The Homeless*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Rowe, Michael. *Crossing the Border: Encounters Between Homeless People and Outreach Workers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Seager, Stephen B. *Street Crazy: America's Mental Health Tragedy*. Redondo Beach, CA: Westcom Press, 2000.



North Carolina Humanities Council

Weaving Cultures and Communities

NC CROSSROADS

Editor: Lisa Yarger

Copy Editor: Katherine M. Kubel

Design & Production: PRINT TO FIT

Publisher: Harlan Joel Gradin, Assistant Director, NCHC

Cover photo by Rob Amberg

Many thanks to the sixty-five homeless and formerly homeless people Edie Cohn interviewed and drew from 1991 to 2001, and to the staff at the Durham Community Shelter for H.O.P.E. and Genesis Home.

To comment on *NC CROSSROADS* or for more information about NCHC and public humanities programs, please contact us at:

North Carolina Humanities Council
200 South Elm Street, Suite 403
Greensboro, NC 27401
phone: 336-334-5325
email: NCHC@gborocollege.edu
www.nchumanities.org

NC CROSSROADS is a publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council (NCHC). Serving North Carolina for 30 years, NCHC is a non-profit foundation and state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. NCHC's mission is to support public programs that address fundamental questions about who we as human beings are and how we can live together in the world we share.

HOMELESSNESS IN NORTH CAROLINA

From July 1, 1998 to June 30, 1999, 121 Emergency Shelter Grant-funded facilities in 54 counties served more than 43,000 people. Facilities funded included 24-hour emergency shelters, day shelters, night shelters, domestic violence shelters, transitional housing facilities, youth facilities and interfaith hospitality networks.

Of these more than 43,000 people, approximately 37% were adult single males age 18 and over, 17% were adult single females age 18 and over, and 29% were children below 18 years of age.

SOME CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

Poverty is the single common bond among the homeless. Households living in poverty make up the communities that homeless individuals and families transition out of and back into. Some of the factors that contribute to individuals and families becoming homeless include:

- Drug or alcohol addictions*
- Mental illness*
- No place to live or lack of affordable housing*
- Community and society indifference*
- Personal issues and bad choices*
- Jobs not paying enough to meet expenses*

We hope this issue raises the following questions:

- Why are people homeless?*
- What can we do about homelessness?*
- What are our next steps?*

For more information, contact the North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness (NCCEH):

P. O. Box 27692

Raleigh, NC 27611

Email: ncceh@socialserve.com

Website: www.socialserve.com/ncceh

The NCCEH was incorporated in 2000 in response to the ever-increasing number of homeless people, especially homeless families, in the state of North Carolina.

NC

A Publication
Winn

ISSN 109