

Homeless Profiles

By Stacey Frank

Author's Note: Andrew Miller, from the VA, wanted this spotlight article to be produced as a way to give others a better idea about the homeless. Miller and I literally went under Interstate 35 and Garden Terrace to speak with Terrance Ryan and Gregory Walker to discuss the different aspects of homelessness. There are many myths and stereotypes about homeless people and the goal of these profiles is to show that not every story is the same. To be honest, I believed some of these myths until I met Ryan and Walker. If one ever has the opportunity to talk to a real homeless person and find out their story, their thoughts might change also.

Terrance Ryan

Terrance Ryan, a homeless man that lives under I-35 and Airport, stated that being homeless does not mean we are non-persons. He feels that the homeless and the non-homeless are very similar. The only difference is that the homeless just made one major bad decision, but in the end we all have parents and are children to someone. Recently, I visited with Ryan and discovered interesting information about the homeless, such as Ryan's background, the job market, challenges, myths, and much more.

Terrance Ryan was born in Pittsburgh with his two brothers and sister. His Mother, a homemaker, and Father, a plant manager, gave him a wonderful childhood. Many years later, he married and was working in the furniture industry. After a few years, the business he was working for began to lose money and as a result, he later found himself without a job. From this point, he began to have financial problems, but continued to work many various jobs to try and survive monetarily. Although he was working hard, the businesses that he was working for were never able to keep him on the employee list, so many laid Ryan off. To add to his job problems, he also had to find a way to support his wife and himself while going through his cancer treatments. Fortunately, he survived the cancer, but incurred \$35,000 of debt. Subsequently, he and his wife decided to get divorced and he was later evicted from his apartment. All of these tribulations resulted in Ryan and his best friend (his dog) becoming homeless.

There are many challenges that the homeless face such as finding a job, dealing with drug and alcohol abuse, and the myths and superstitions that non-homeless people believe. One of the main concerns that the homeless have is locating employment. In today's economy, the job market for anyone, especially the homeless, is tight. Ryan mentioned that many homeless services direct him toward day labor places and construction sites. He tries very hard to find a job at these locations, but finds it very difficult to work while having to drag a basket with his possessions, having no place to leave his dog, and having a bad credit history. Many people have suggested that if his dog is a large problem, then he should get rid of him. But Ryan says there is no possible way he would ever part with his dog because he is his best friend, companion, and a gift.

The dog also helps him receive more money, and even kept Ryan from committing suicide at one point. Although Ryan is not working, he does attend St. Paul Church every Sunday and is present at the pastor's classes and helps in any way that he can.

Another challenge that Ryan feels the homeless face is drug and alcohol abuse as well as the myths about the homeless. He stated that many homeless people do have problems with drugs and alcohol, but made it very clear that not all of them have this problem. Ryan is a perfect example of this. He finds it very frustrating that all non-homeless people believe that all of the homeless just want money for drugs and alcohol. An additional myth many non-homeless people accept is that all homeless people are lazy, dirty bums. From Ryan's experiences, he finds that many of his friends are doing whatever they can with the few materials they have to find work. Ryan is the ideal model of someone that works everyday on the street solely to help feed his dog and survive.

While sitting under the freeway, Ryan also discussed the positive and negative ways that non-homeless people treat him. He has found that many smile, wave, give food, clothing and money, and many of the stores in his area allow him to clean up in their building. On the other hand, there are many people that are very rude and go out of their way to crush Ryan's and his friends esteem. Ryan stated that many people roll down their windows, and yell curse words, and the statement "Get a job!" When asked about how he handled those people, his response was that when someone yells, "Get a job!" he tells them that he would love one, and to take him with them. When that answer is given to the remark, Ryan said that the only thing the non-homeless person usually does is roll his or her window back up and drive off.

When asked why can't he ask his family for help, he said that he does not feel right at this time to ask his family for money for various reasons. Both parents are deceased and his brothers have financial problems of their own. One of his brothers, as far as he knows, may be in jail. The other brother is married with kids, and was forced to retire early. Ryan does not feel it is right to ask his brother for money when it is already hard enough to support his own family on a fixed income. When Ryan was going through his cancer treatments, he was able to request some money from his sister. Why can't he ask now? Because all of his brothers have financial problems, they constantly were asking their sister for money. As many people would, she became frustrated and told all of her brothers never to ask for money again. This has left him with absolutely no other family to which he can turn.

Ryan's goal at this point in time is to eat, sleep, and pray for something wonderful to come along so that he no longer will have to live under Interstate 35. I asked Ryan if there was one thing he could tell people about homelessness what would it be. He answered with great emphasis, ignoring the problem will not make it disappear. People yelling, cursing, making up myths about what all homeless people are supposedly like is not going to help the homeless situations.