

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.

Gregory Walker

Gregory Walker is a former homeless man who is now living at Garden Terrace striving to stay off of the streets. He had many hardships while living nomadically, but has received a great amount of help and has now surpassed those tough times. Walker agreed to sit down and discuss with me about his background, how he became homeless, and the help he was given to get off of the streets.

Walker was born and raised in Seguin, Texas with both of his parents and his three brothers. His childhood was very normal; he had family dinners and other good quality activities with his family. When the 1980s came around, Walker decided that he wanted to move to Austin, and begin a new life in one of the music capitals of the world.

Walker never had problems finding a job. He worked as a truck driver, an employee in the assembly lines at different plants, and held many various other jobs. Most people assume that the reason people become homeless is because they cannot hold or find a job, but this was not the case for Walker. Although he worked every day for many years, he began to have many psychological problems that began to interfere with his ability to work successfully. He started to have nervous breakdowns, fell into depression, and was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder. With all of these unfortunate problems, Walker was no longer able to continue working. This, in turn, resulted in Walker becoming homeless.

When he was homeless, Walker stated that he "mainly lived in the alleys around Sixth Street, but moved around from place to place." While he was homeless, the problems he had with people were minimal. For the most part, he

had positive experiences while trying to gain money from people driving by. One of the only negative events that happened to him while trying to get money was when someone decided that they needed to throw a beer can at him. However, there were problems. When sleeping in a public park one night, he awoke the next morning to discover his only backpack, full of his valued items, had been stolen. He also expressed concern with how the Austin police treated the homeless. Walker said “they treated us with disrespect and gave us no dignity.” As Walker described it, the police basically went on power trips and would agitate the homeless even when they were doing nothing illegal. He also faced problems with drug and alcohol abuse. As he stated, “Ignorance is bliss while being homeless, but I regret what I did.” Walker was homeless for about one year, and luckily only went hungry a few times.

Andrew Miller from the VA discovered Walker at the ARCH building through their outreach program. Miller realized that he was mentally unstable and had many psychiatric issues that needed to be treated. He also said that Walker was no longer having any alcohol or drug abuse problems because he decided that he needed to stop on his own. Miller explained that many times, homeless people do not drink alcohol or take part in drugs because they want to, but because it is “their way of self-medicating.” With that in mind, Miller was able to give Walker the chance to work with some psychiatric services. While working on his mental disabilities, he stayed at the ARCH. As time went on, Walker was then able to move to the VA domiciliary where he continued to stabilize through their maintenance program. This program allows people to stay there because they are not able to work because of some disability. Walker then applied for a pension through the VA. While waiting for a response about the pension, Walker decided to stay at a shelter for approximately a month in the Temple, Texas area. After that month, he returned to Austin and stayed in the VA’s residential program. Finally, he received the pension and now lives at Garden Terrace, which has single resident occupancy rooms.

According to Miller, Walker was willing to come to terms with the fact that he had a disability. Because of this, Miller explained that he has been working very hard to stay off of the streets. He has been fully compliant with the professionals that have been working with him on his psychiatric problems. He has been following all the rules and regulations at Garden Terrace, while at the same time, always trying to make himself productive and part of a society by working around his home.

Miller stated “it takes other people intervening to get the homeless to see that there is hope and a positive future.” Walker saw this vision and decided that it was worth his time to work with the VA. He was given the opportunity to have a brighter future and has excelled at the tasks given to him despite the hardships.