

Reality for One: Spreading the Message

By Jordanna Chord



He sits in the Nashville Public Library; in front of him is a computer screen, which he uses to send the world his ideas, thoughts, and art. The man's name is Kevin Barbieux, and he has been homeless since 1982. Since August 2002, he has been using the popular new form of personal diaries called blogs to tell his story of homelessness in Nashville, Tennessee. One of the first of this kind, he experienced great success with over three hundred thousand hits as of January 2004. In addition to his own diary, he has a link to donate to his cause, to other homeless blogs, and to informational websites of interest to him. Education is essential for social reform, and Barbieux explains he would like to be part of the solution, not the problem. "There's so much the public doesn't know about us," said Kevin Barbieux, 41, who lives most of the time at the Nashville Rescue Mission. "It's just as much our fault as theirs. We want to show that we're not TV show characters. The homeless population is just as diverse as the rest of the population." His postings consist of a diverse array of diary like entries explaining every day experiences, to explanations and essays on the issues surrounding homelessness. He explains the difference between a panhandler and a beggar, and even tells you how to deal with them if they approach you. Barbieux used the free services in the public library to begin his blog, and he has taught himself everything he knows about computers from his library visits.

After a little over a year and a half he has decided to end posting new entries. "In the course of the past year I accomplished what I set out to do, to change people's perception of what a homeless person can be, can do, can accomplish - I proved that there is more to homeless people than being homeless. Now that there are more homeless people blogging, there's no longer a need for me to do it. I no longer feel it's my responsibility to continue with it. A year and a half is a long time to write about any one subject. There are other things I want to do with my time, and now is as good a time as any to start doing them." To recognize the work of Kevin Barbieux and to share his ideas with the communities of Spokane we will run a column excerpting some of his postings from the past year. To visit his blog yourself go to thehomelessguy.blogspot.com.

**Sources include thehomelessguy.blogspot.com; USA Today 10/10/02; Houston Chronicle 9/23/02;

There are many myths about homelessness. Hopefully, this blog will help dispel some of these. I will start with the myth about people living just a paycheck or two away from homelessness.

Let's take your average American - we'll call him James, and let's put him in a predicament. Our friend James is not living large, but decently, he's a nice enough guy, just trying to get by in this oppressive world. He has a very modest apartment, with few luxuries, perhaps a TV, a stereo, some books. He works full time, but by the time the bills are paid, and he returns from the grocery store there's not much money left. He looks forward to visits from his friend Kevin, because Kevin always springs for the beer.

Anyway, things go bad at work, and though she hates to do so, James's boss decides to let him go - he's laid off. ---This is the guy people define as being a paycheck or two away from homelessness, but let's see what happens next.

James's rent isn't due for two more weeks, and he has half the rent saved. The first thing he does is talk to his landlord and explains the situation. The landlord gives him a small extension (with penalty) but he's now got a couple extra weeks of leeway. The first of the month comes and James still hasn't found another job. The electric bill, water bill, phone bill, cable bill (which he just cancelled) has arrived in the mail. Though he isn't a member of a Church, James goes to the neighborhood Presbyterian, and explains the situation. He seems sincere enough, so the Church sends payments to the electric and phone company in James behalf. James is humbled and eternally grateful, renewing repentance for all his sins, known and unknown. The church also gives him a referral to the local food bank where he is given a box of groceries which will last him a couple weeks. Those two weeks blow by and he still hasn't found work. He now avoids his landlord, just like that guy in Crime and Punishment. James calls another Church explaining his situation of late rent. This Church cannot help him, but they refer him to a government agency. After a 3 hour wait in a waiting room, he gets to meet a case manager who works for city. The case manager is a big black lady who's seen and hears it all, yet wonders why a middle-class-looking white guy would ever need assistance. And James feels a little resentment, and guilt. But she doesn't expect to see James in her office again. She tells him that a government check will be made out to his landlord covering the rest of that months rent, including the imposed late fee. After a week the check arrives, written out to landlord. James goes down to pay the rent and his landlord asks if he's found a job yet. He hasn't, but he's been able to catch up on his soaps.

All of this has been a big hassle for James, and has worn on his soul. He's starting to feel depressed, making it harder for him to get out and look for work.

A few more weeks go by, and rent and bills are due again. Though there are hundreds of churches in James's city, he just can't get himself to ask God for that kind of help. He calls his buddy Kevin who is more than glad to help out. Kevin pays James electric bill, and throws him a few bucks for groceries. The Titans are playing the Seahawks that day, so Kevin is more than glad to also bring over a case of Portland to consume as they watch the game.

James calls the electric and phone company and explains his situation. They give him an extension. James hooks up with a temp agency and works enough to cover the minimums required to keep his utilities on. But times are bad and the temp agency has no more work for him. More time goes by and now rent is a month late. He receives a notice from his landlord saying that he'll be evicted if he doesn't pay up. James calls up his buddy Kevin and laments. Kevin, who has been in this situation himself, tells James that a landlord cannot kick him out without due process, and that process usually takes at least three months.

James has now become a regular at the food bank, and the local churches are all aware of James situation. And they worry because James has taken on a disheveled look. His situation has taken its toll. James is in bad shape. He's stopped looking for work altogether.

It's four months since James lost his job, and the sheriff has just now knocked on James's door. He's got 24 hours to vacate the premises. Swallowing what little pride he has left, James calls his buddy Kevin, and asks for his help. Kevin offers James a couch to sleep on, at least for a while, but Kevin warns him, that he better start paying his share.

Everyone has some community available to him/her which will delay actually homelessness for sometime, perhaps indefinitely. And for most people a job can be found again, even though their credit ratings, friendships, and self-esteem will be frazzled. The point to all this

being, homelessness can be delayed long after the paychecks have stopped coming. And there is plenty of time to recover from a job loss before homelessness is realized.

Still, it is the bullet, not the trigger that kills. In the case of job-loss, it is the lack of community that is the bullet - losing the job is the trigger. But we shouldn't stop our investigation there. We need to know how the bullet got into the gun in the first place. We need to ask why some people have no community. It is on this path we may get closer to the causes of homelessness.