

Sharing Our Stories
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The Greenville we see today appears on many lists praising it for the revitalized downtown as desirable place to visit. Downtown Greenville is, of course, a great place to enjoy whether you live in Greenville or you are visiting from out of town. However, the Greenville that makes it on these lists is only one side of the reality of the city. One of the other realities is the homeless population that lives here and remains largely invisible to most of Greenville's residents and visitors. Many of the homeless population in Greenville receives food and other forms of assistance from the many organizations in town, but their individual stories are rarely heard. I wanted their stories to be known, even if only a few voices. Even one strong voice and one compelling story might help to us to see what is often unseen. As "Pop" said, "We all the same people....I'm human, as human as you."

Having served food before at Project Host, a local soup kitchen, I decided to return and to interview those in the Project Host community who wished to have their stories heard. Here are the highlights from the stories I collected:

Carolyn Wakefield:

Tell me about your childhood, did you go to school here?

"I had sisters and brothers. Well, one sister and four brothers. As far back as I can remember, I only went to school to the seventh grade. After that I had to drop out of school, you know I had to take care of my sisters and brothers. It was tough, but we were tough."

So tell me about your current living situation.

"Well to do that, I have to tell you about my past living situation when I was homeless and living on the street, strung out on crack and just messed up, you know. Pretty much all my life I've been addicted to some kind of substance; mind altering substance, alcohol, marijuana. But, for the past three years, I've been clean, I have a place to stay, I have a job, and basically, coming here helped me want to change. Because Ms. Sally is a nice lady she always do stuff for the holidays and encourage us to try to at least try. Cause I remember when I didn't want to try. I didn't want to do nothing, I just wanted to keep getting high and keep being miserable cause that's what I was used to. And then my church, they're wonderful. I think it's because of my pastor, he never gave up on me. Every time I fell back into my old habits, he always came wherever I was and you know, 'God forgives you and we love you and we want you to try and get you life back together and' ... it was hard, but it's wonderful now. I mean I don't live on the

street no more; I don't live in fear of people doing things to me because a lot of bad stuff did happen to me."

Can you tell me about your hardships? Anything that you're willing to talk about?

"I knew this was going to make me cry. I survived a lot. I survived being beat up, being raped, I was beat to death by a guy who thought I had drugs, and he left me for dead. I survived a lot. I survived seeing my best friend kill herself. It's been a lot."

"Everybody says I should have my story, I should do a recording and put it out there because it might help somebody. But I just didn't know how. And we've been praying about how, you know, and then here you come. So, everything always works out! And it's gonna help, my story has already helped several people, but I know it can help more. I know more and more people need to hear about people who made it from where I was to where I am."

Simply put, Carolyn Wakefield is an inspiration. When I first approached her, asking if she would be open to a narrative interview, she looked up, praised God, and told me this must be her lucky day. Apparently, she had recently been talking with her pastor about her journey to recovery, and they were trying to come up with a way to publicize her story. She wanted to motivate others and let them know it is possible to overcome drug addiction as long as you set your mind to it. I was so grateful to be the platform on which Carolyn Wakefield was able to deliver her message.

John Williams:

So, did you grow up in the area?

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Did you go to school here?

"Nah, I ain't go to school here."

Tell me a little bit about your current living situation.

"Pillar to post, friend to friend, sleep where I can. If it weren't for the soup kitchen, I'd be homeless."

Is there anything you want world to know about you?

"I feel like all the stuff I done done, like ain't nobody wanna give me a second chance. I done paid time and gone in and out of jail, but my record still up. And any time they look at that, they still see the same person. But I done know I changed a whole lot, I'm better than what I used to

be. I'd just been robbing stealing, I don't do that no more, I just wait 'til it come to me. Like I said, I'm scared to go back to jail. I ain't got nobody there for me no more, you know all that. I just wish I could get a second chance, and don't judge me for my first experience, you know what I'm saying?

John Williams' story outlines the path of a person who needs to be given a second chance. He has spent a third of his life in jail, nonconsecutively, and is frustrated that people do not respect his desire to change his old habits. It is unfortunate that people are unable to see the change in him even though he feels it in himself. John Williams has had the realization that his past way of living is not a way to live for the rest of his life, he just needs support from others for a positive future.

Floyd "Pop" Mattison:

"And the main thing about it is this: life ain't never been what it's supposed to be, like I try to teach everybody. Life has never been what it's supposed to be. But that's the way it is. In order to deal with life, you just got to learn how to cope with the different parts of it, and that's all. That's all there is to it. And I've been happy all my life!"

"We all the same people. I don't know why they got this color thing wrong. They come up with a color thing. 'I'm this, I'm that', they gave it so many names. And I told them they only have but one name. I'm human, as human as you. And my blood the same way as yours, alright? Yeah I think we need to leave all of that alone. It's getting better now. Patience, because it's better than a long time ago."

"But anyway, I'll tell you something. There's one way to live your life: keep a positive attitude. That's all I ever had. Negative, I'm not going around that no more. I weave around it."

"I want you to have one of the best days of your life. And I want you to think about what I said cause I'm just the only person that I been in that. I've never had a bad day in my life, never thinking I was sad! For what? I know that being ugly in my day wasn't going to be good."

They call him Pop for a reason. As soon as he walked in the door Pop was greeting, hugging, high-fiving, and complimenting nearly everyone in the room. As people walked by him, they would hand him their cupcakes and brownies they had just received in line from the soup kitchen. Seeing all of this occur, I knew I needed to document the spirit of this man who was so full of life. He thought of himself as an honorary father to anyone who needed one, and as he spoke, his love of life lifted the spirits of all those around him.