



HOMELESS

Have you ever passed a homeless person on the corner and wondered what it's like to be homeless? As the new global economy precipitates more joblessness in North America, more and more people will face this problem. In a culture where many live from paycheck to paycheck, with little savings for emergencies and staggering housing costs—homelessness is a very real threat. The plain truth is that too many of us are only a few short weeks from repossession, eviction and poverty. The following article is by one such person.

Many of the people whom Plain Truth Ministries serves are homeless. They receive our free resources by general delivery to post offices, or by delivery to friends and relatives. We are able to provide these resources without charge because of the generosity of our PTM Partners.

At first my children would ask if we could just go home. After a few weeks of being homeless, they started to beg and plead to *just go home*. They could not go to school. And they couldn't invite friends over because they would learn our secret.

Living in a car robs you of your dignity as you try to cope with people who see you existing in a car. They point their finger at you and many laugh, as if there was something funny about poverty. People would see us and pass by as if we were not there. Many would speed up to pass by more quickly.

After a couple of months of homelessness, everything seems to fall apart. You run out of things to do to try to escape poverty and inside you begin to give up. The stress is felt by everyone, and you no longer talk to each other, but you scream over and over again.

I fought with my husband of 13 years about every two hours. "We can't live this way," I yelled as tears rolled down my face. "What do you expect me to do," he answered as he hit his fist against the steering wheel.

Judy Eichstedt

I would get out of the car and walk around in circles, trying to get somewhere but ending up nowhere. Watching my children suffer was overwhelming.

My husband and I would stand out with a sign that read, "Will work for food." I would have done anything to get some money and rent a place to live. Nobody deserves to be homeless—nobody. As we stood there, a car filled with teenagers passed by us and then stopped. They backed up slowly, and I wondered if they wanted to help us. I did not see it coming. It happened so fast.

They rolled the window down and threw cups of Coke at us. They laughed and drove off quickly. The cups of Coke hit us in the face, and I thought for a moment I had been shot. Many people who passed us as we stood out with our sign gave us dirty looks and called us nasty names. But some, for whatever

reason, went out of their way to throw something

I would have done anything to get some money and rent a place to live. Nobody deserves to be homeless—nobody.

at us. I can't remember ever suffering such abuse. I could only wonder what would become of us—if we would live or die.

Something died inside of me as I lost all hope of anything ever getting better. I wanted to run away, but where would I go? I wanted to tell someone how angry I was, only who would listen to me? Yes, I wanted to die. What did we do that was so wrong that we were made to suffer now?

One day, after many months of homelessness, my husband found a job, and it was as if a little light started to shine upon us at long last. It took another six weeks, though, to save enough money for first and last months' rent. I read my Bible and thanked God because I don't believe we would have made it if God hadn't been watching over us. After all, we lived in a car, yet we were safe. We ate garbage, yet nobody got sick.

If I had to explain to someone what it's like to be poor and homeless, I would tell them it's like being on a train that is traveling very fast. You're sitting in your seat where you just assume you are safe when, without any warning whatsoever, somebody slams on the brakes. Violently, you are ripped from the seat that you believed was safe and secure and tossed into a nightmare of grief and sorrow.

There is no mystery to poverty. If you are not able to earn a decent wage on your job, then you will experience poverty. If you work for minimum wage and have no medical benefits, then you will suffer at the hands of poverty. If you are unemployed and unable to find work, it won't be long before you are homeless.

When my family—my husband, six children and myself—were first given an eviction notice to get out of our house in three days, we just sat there on the floor looking at each other. I could not believe that we were to become homeless in a matter of days. How does one prepare for something like this? We had done everything we could think of to try and avoid being homeless. We sold all that we had until there was nothing left except our blankets, some clothes and a few dishes. Yet, we were still going to become homeless. Our lives were changed forever.

Our car became our home because we had nowhere else to go. Eight human beings all piled into one car. The first two weeks of homelessness were by trial and error. We had to learn where we could and could not park in order

to sleep. Parking in the wrong places meant the police came tapping on your window and chased you off. We parked outside of Portland, Oregon, in a rest area in the back of buildings where we could not be seen from the streets. We discovered gas stations were good places to wash up every morning. We learned not to go to the same station too many times to avoid drawing attention to the fact that we were homeless.

I would get out of the car and walk around in circles, trying to get somewhere but ending up nowhere. Watching my children suffer was overwhelming.

Next, we were introduced to a garbage dump run. It's an experience that you won't soon forget. We drove to grocery stores and made our way to the back where the garbage dumpsters were kept.

Something died inside of me as I lost all hope of anything ever getting better. I wanted to run away, but where would I go? I wanted to tell someone how angry I was, only who would listen to me?

I dug around the garbage as flies flew around the food.

Some days I found green cheese and soggy bread. On a good day, there was fruit, like bananas and apples. I tried to choose the best the garbage had to offer and left the rest to the flies and bugs.

My husband looked for work daily and even offered to work below minimum wage in order to land a job. I walked around carrying a garbage sack with my children picking up cans to return for deposit. Sometimes I made enough to get some lunch meat and soda for our dinner. It was a treat for us and better than eating out of garbage cans.

We were tossed around and faced hardships that beat us down to nothing, yet we survived. There was a calm as our homelessness ended, and we rented a place to live. I will never forget what we experienced as captives of poverty. I go to sleep at night with the memories of homelessness and wake up with the fear that it could happen again. □

Judy Eichstedt and her family now live in Oklahoma.