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SEEING THE INVISIBLE | A yearlong look at N.C. poverty

Seeing the Invisible: 'What are we doing for the least of these?'

By Gene Nichol

February 23, 2013

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Fayetteville police officer Stacy Sanders, 39, offers James Smith, 59, a donated jacket underneath the Person Street Bridge spanning the Cape Fear River. "I'm not surprised by the numbers. I'm not surprised by the children and the families that are homeless but I am surprised by the lack of resources," said Sanders, the department's homeless specialist. "The thing that bothers me the most is that my hands are limited." TRAVIS LONG — tlong@newsobserver.com | [Buy Photo](#)



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- TO HELP

Send donations to:

• New Beginnings Emergency Shelter, PO Box 1952, Elizabeth City, NC 27909 • Open Door Homeless Relief Program, PO Box 51, Conover, NC 28613 • Operation Inasmuch, 531 Hillsboro St.,

Fayetteville, NC 28301

- THE SERIES

On the last Sunday of each month this year, UNC Professor Gene Nichol will examine the faces and issues behind the rising poverty numbers in North Carolina.

New Beginnings Emergency Shelter in Elizabeth City is nothing if not inconspicuous. A modest, two-story house on Herrington Road, it disappears into the ragged neighborhood. A small sign out front – “On The Solid Foundation” – hints at its purpose.

Only a few hundred yards from the massive Museum of the Albemarle and the merchants of Water Street, New Beginnings houses eight homeless men 365 days a year. It is the only men’s shelter in Pasquotank County. With 200 homeless women and men occupying the streets and buildings in and around Elizabeth City, it swims against a potent tide.

Pastor Tony Rice founded New Beginnings. An imposing figure, Rice is a veteran of the 82nd Airborne and a former N.C. Department of Corrections officer. When he returned to Elizabeth City, he said he realized the real war was here.

Rice’s first encounter with homelessness came when police told him someone was sleeping in cars at the small automobile dealership he owned. Rice refused to press charges, offering instead friendship and support to the “trespasser,” Arthur Bonds. Learning that Bonds lived mainly in nearby abandoned buildings, Rice regularly took him food and clothing.

As winter took hold, Rice was unable to find Bonds for several days. Searching in earnest, he pushed at the door of a windowless room in a vacant building – hitting Bonds’ legs, heavy and hard as a rock. His face had deteriorated. He’d been dead for days.

Crushed, Rice had an epiphany. “I kept thinking, ‘What are we doing for the least of these?’ ”

He and his wife, Tammy, converted rental property they owned into the shelter. “Even if I can’t fix everything, I can make sure some people don’t die in the cold,” he thought.

New Beginnings turns away dozens of homeless souls every week. Rice would like to expand his focus, but talking to the city is a dead end, he says.

Officials think a “larger shelter would draw more homeless to Elizabeth City, and it’s not the image they want for tourism,” Rice says. “I feel like I can’t ignore them and still be a decent man.”

Shelters beyond capacity

In Hickory, on the other side of the state, perhaps it’s unsurprising that the homelessness problems are acute. The federal government reports the Morganton-Hickory-Lenoir metropolitan district, over the past five years, has seen one of the steepest unemployment increases in the nation.

The Salvation Army Shelter of Hope is pressed beyond capacity. As a result, about 150 homeless people live in the woods surrounding the town. Roughly 20 percent of them are women. Roger Cornett and the 10 volunteers of the Open Door Homeless Relief Project spend much of their days and nights, and almost all of their resources, trying to keep them whole, and alive.

It’s hard not to take Cornett for a saint. A retired 59-year-old executive, suffering from the debilitating neuromuscular disorder myasthenia gravis, he and his colleagues venture into often-dangerous campgrounds distributing tents, tarps, clothing, cook stoves and portable heaters.

“I never took well to retirement,” Cornett explains. “I couldn’t believe people were being left to live like animals in my own county.”

Dave Evans, who has been living outside in Hickory for months, says “if it weren’t for Roger, a lot of us would be at the real short end.”

Their stories are tough to hear. A pregnant woman living in camp until her baby is delivered. A young man who lost his parents, his home, job and car, all in 10 months. A couple in their early 30s, jobless, no longer able to afford the cheapest motel – the wife in tears pleading, “I know I have to get used to it. But I’ve never even camped before.”

Open Door operates on a shoestring: \$5,000 to \$8,000 a year in scattered contributions. According to Pastor Jack McConnell of Grace House, a Hickory day shelter, “The need is great, but we get little help, even from the big churches. They spend a fortune on landscaping and foreign missions, but don’t want to hear about poverty in their own backyard.”

Taking blinders off

Still, none of this prepares one for Fayetteville – homelessness on steroids. Cumberland County, by last year’s official count, had 1,606 homeless residents – almost all in Fayetteville. Almost 400 of them were women and over 500 were children and unaccompanied youth. About 1,300 were “unsheltered” or living in places not meant for human habitation.

Those are the people agencies could find, and count, on a single winter night. Local officials concede the actual number is likely much higher.

Some live under the bridge, downtown, at Person and Water streets. But Fayetteville Police Officer Stacy Sanders reports they’re found across the city – in empty buildings, in cars, in storage rooms, under bridges, in wood lines.

“I was shocked,” she says, “when I first came across families with kids. Mom, dad, baby. I thought it would be neglect but was told it wasn’t. We need to take the blinders off.”

In Fayetteville particularly, many are veterans, some fresh from our nation’s battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sanders can’t forget the first dead body she discovered in the woods around Fort Bragg.

“An Army vet, like I am,” she says. “I thought, ‘This is no way for a veteran to die, on his Army cot, in a wood line.’”

For Sanders, it’s a bad trajectory: “It’s much worse than when I started eight years ago. We have a lot of working homeless. Working at McDonald’s or Taco Bell, doing landscaping on the side. They can’t afford rent.”

Sanders lauds the efforts of volunteers, but says the government should do more.

“How can we build a \$4.5 million animal shelter and not be willing to build a shelter for humans?” she asks.

Gene Nichol is Boyd Tinsley distinguished professor at the UNC School of Law and director of the school’s Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity.

[Taking blinders off](#) from [Travis Long](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Ride along with Fayetteville Police Department’s homeless specialist Stacy Sanders on a routine patrol as she checks in with some of Cumberland County’s estimated 1,600 homeless residents living in shelters, woods and under bridges.

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