

Breaking stereotypes of homelessness

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BALTIMORE - October a year ago, Shirlee's husband left the house to pay a bill and never came back.

The mortgage payments were about a thousand dollars a month.

They'd lived there for 15 years with their son, around Belvedere Avenue not far from the Senator Theater.

Once the husband left, there soon arrived the beginning of the end.

Shirlee fell behind on the mortgage payments. The husband, a prison guard, disappeared, later resurfaced, eventually made contact with the son. The bank began pressing on the mortgage.

Shirlee, 40, working as a practical nurse at a [Baltimore County](#) hospice, suffered a heart attack and couldn't go back to the strain of such work.

Within a year, the bank took over the house, and she and her son, Jaleel, 11, were on the streets.

They lived for a time in their car.

There was family, but the family was dying: First Shirlee's mother, then her sister.

Now they're staying at Sarah's Hope, the homeless shelter run by [St. Vincent de Paul](#) off [Franklin Square](#) Boulevard where staff members try to help residents find jobs, earn high school diplomas and break free of addictions.

But plenty of these residents have jobs, have diplomas and have no addictions.

They just don't have a home of their own, and they find themselves deep in the winter of their lives.

About 150 people, mostly women and children, share three large residential areas here and sleep on mats on the floor. Dozens of these residents are children.

On a late afternoon approaching dinner time, some of them help string holiday tinsel over a door.

In a nearby room, people from their 50s to their 70s sit on metal folding chairs, some napping, others simply sitting.

They are white and black.

A few of them read, and one or two works on crossword puzzles.

Tonight they'll share Christmas Eve here. In the morning, the children will open presents staff members have stored in a back room, and they'll tell themselves better days are coming, and they'll remind themselves of the ancient miracles that are celebrated in this season.

For now, though, Shirlee sits in a little office on a metal folding chair with the tears rolling down her face. It's a sweet, open face that says: For heaven's sake, can't someone tell me what's happened to my life?

"Used to be," she says, "I got up in the morning and fixed breakfast for my family. I'm coming from having my own home and car, to laying on a mat on the floor when I go to sleep."

For a while, she and her son stayed with people they knew.

But Shirlee says she discovered drugs were being sold there.

"I didn't want that for Jaleel," she says.

“He was never in an environment like that.”

She starts to say something else, chokes on the words, finally gets them out.

“I didn’t want him to hate me,” she says.

Jaleel hears this, and stares straight ahead.

His face is expressionless, his eyes glazed over, his mind taking him somewhere else.

He’s a sixth-grader.

He wears a sweat shirt over a skinny body and mutters into his chest.

His mother tries to bring him into the conversation.

“Tell him how you felt, living in the car,” she says.

He stays silent.

“Go ahead,” she says.

“Angry,” he says finally, staring at a wall straight ahead.

He coughs a couple of times. The voice is barely above a whisper.

“Did you want your friends to know?” “No.”

But now, even the friends are gone. Jaleel’s moved around too much, changed schools too much.

The kids at school don’t know he’s homeless, and don’t understand his sullen distance from them.

He and his mother have lived here for three months now.

All his classmates know is that Jaleel just showed up one day.

“It’s hard,” his mother says. “I don’t think his teachers know he’s living in a shelter.”

Sarah’s Hope defies the stereotypes of homelessness. It’s suburban, not inner city. Its residents are a mix of economics and education and race. And many are children.

“What would you like for Christmas?” Jaleel is asked.

He shrugs his shoulders.

He’s beyond wishing.

Wishing involves emotions, and this is a kid who’s already learned to tuck away his emotions.

His mother weeps copious tears, and he sits beside her and seems off in some other world.

“Go ahead,” his mother says. “Say what you’d like for Christmas.”

“See my father,” he says.

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