

# Homeless population lives with mixed perceptions

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As he dragged his right foot across the floor, a homeless man at the Salvation Army store shook his head.

He said it would be a 45-minute walk to the library on Tunnel Road; it could take longer with the limp in his right leg. He picked the library because he said it was a place where he could go, "Just to keep warm."

Before leaving, he glanced down at his foot dragging across the floor, sighed and said, "I look like a drunk."

In addition to labels like "addict," "alcoholic," and "lazy," the homeless are often called other names.

"When I think about the homeless, I usually think about someone who is unkempt or unclean," sophomore Bryan Hough said.

Senior management student Stan Setzer, said he sees another image of the homeless.

"During most of my encounters with the homeless, they've been holding alcohol, drinking it or they smell like it," Setzer said.

Despite these claims, not all members of the homeless said they fall into these conceptions.

Two of Asheville's homeless tell their story with hopes people may view them differently.

Vietnam veteran Mark Ferrell said he came to Asheville with a plan.

"I ended up in Asheville because I saw a problem with homeless veterans, and I was told I would get a lot of cooperation in Asheville to build a homeless veterans shelter," the 55-year-old said.

After serving four years in the Army and two years in the Navy, Ferrell said soldiers come home unaware and unprepared.

"These vets are coming home and there's nothing for them. The hospitals are swamped as far as the Veteran's Affairs hospitals go, and their programs are just obsolete. They're trying to solve problems that can't be solved," Ferrell said.

While Ferrell sees compassion in different organizations around the town, he said he doesn't see compassion in the one place he expected it.

"I think society has lost its empathy for its fellow man. They're very jaded," Ferrell said. "But, you really can't blame them.



Ian Hayes - Staff Photographer

**Rickie Messer, 49, from Greenville, S.C., attempts to stay warm in downtown Asheville. Local residents hold differing opinions and perceptions of the city's homeless population.**

Homeless people are always portrayed as scraggly bums that just crawled out of a garbage can somewhere and they're down on their luck and they were drug addicts, alcoholics, whatever have you, and that's just not the case."

However, being homeless isn't just a way of life for Ferrell; it's a tool.

"I am (homeless), but it's by choice. I chose to be here," he said. "In the grand scheme of things, being here is helping me learn things that I'll need to know to run my own shelter. I've always heard if you want to be good at something, 'Go do it,' and it's true. You have to walk a mile in someone's shoes to gain full understanding. Without that, it's all conjecture and hearsay, for lack of a better term."

Since his time in Asheville, Ferrell said since he knows what it's like to be homeless, he understands what the homeless need.

According to the 55-year-old, the homeless need jobs.

Even in these economic conditions, Ferrell said everyone should realize they aren't

much different from the homeless.

"They don't understand. Once they're in the boat that everyone else is in, they'll understand. And they'll be the ones voicing the most anger about, 'Why won't anyone help me.' Well, you didn't help anybody either. Karma's like that, it tends to come and bite you," Ferrell said.

For Tim Putnam, it wasn't karma that bit him, it was something beyond his control: mental illness.

A former restaurant manager, Putnam said he remembers what happened that led to his current situation. Staring off as if into his past, Putnam said he remembers he felt out of control.

"I lost everything, attempted suicide and went into a mental institution for 45 days," Putnam said.

While in the hospital he was diagnosed with major depressive disorder.

After the diagnosis, Putnam said he worried he would revert to his depression.

"It's probably one of my biggest fears because I know with mental health a lot of people end up on the streets," he said.

"But, it's not as bad as most people paint it. A lot of people create their own problems when they're out here."

According to Putnam, Asheville provides the homeless with many opportunities; however, he does not think many utilize them.

"I think a lot of people just want to be where they are. They don't have to work, no requirements on them and it's freedom in their mind," the Greensboro native said.

After applying for a job through Goodwill, Putnam starts his new job this week. Putnam said he anticipates being out of homelessness fairly quickly.

"I've been fortunate to pick Asheville because everyone's been very helpful," he said.

According to Putnam, this helpful nature does Asheville more harm than good when trying to solve homelessness.

"I think so many people come here because this town is so good that you can't end something that's going to keep on

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