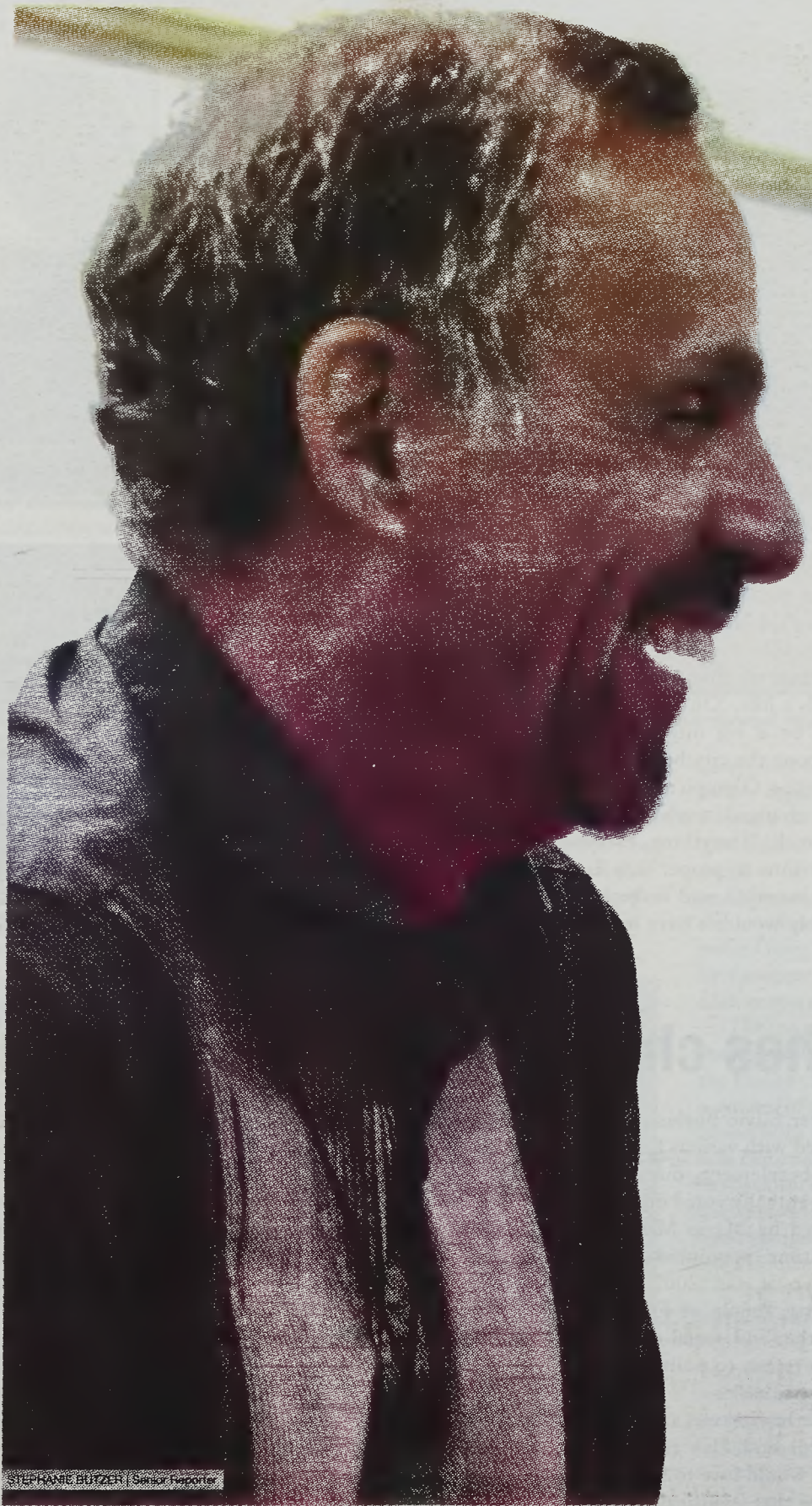


Denying identity: Hassell focuses on the undefinable

Elon professor searches for truth in individuality after challenging youth



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He is a white male from a middle-class family. He grew up in a suburb of Chicago. He is a college professor. He photographs and studies coal-mining communities. He likes to read.

And he used to be homeless.

Ken Hassell, associate professor of art and art history at Elon University, has seen the worst of what life has to offer, including the consequences of poverty. Despite his struggles, he doesn't consider himself a typical survivor of homelessness, a typical professor or a typical husband. There is no typical according to Hassell.

"You think of all the different identities," he said. "And within each one of those identities there are multiple possibilities as well. Identity is not one thing. It's many things. We are many things. And those things are changing."

Opening on a different beat

Hassell, born in 1946, tasted the first sour flavor of categorical culture in high school. Cliques developed and it seemed like identities were set in stone. He did not fit into any of them. He was different and thought there was something wrong with him.

"I don't know that I overtly really thought, 'What is my identity?'" Hassell said. "But I struggled with who I thought I was versus the norm out there."

Hassell found companionship with some unusual men: the school's greasers. The 20-year-olds rode motorcycles to the school from which they had not yet graduated. But Hassell came to appreciate them. They were different from the other "normal" students, and so was he.

Even though Hassell had discovered a comfortable niche, the strains of schoolwork and socialization remained the same. He was not a great student, just barely graduating high school in 1964.

But Hassell's love for literature helped him earn high SAT scores. He was admitted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, but the experience was not what he expected. The structured learning and undisputed social norms dumbfounded him and he dropped out to partake in the anti-Vietnam War protests in the mid-1960s.

Money started to become a problem. Hassell tried driving cabs in Chicago to make a living. He appreciated the passengers who were willing to converse with him during the ride. But sometimes the job was horrible and produced a lot of anxiety.

Once, Hassell drove a cab with a broken brake. It

took him half a block to come to a standstill, so he had to anticipate when he would have to pull over. Another time, the engine shut off as he was driving on Dan Ryan Expressway, a major highway in Chicago. Sometimes the cab worked fine, but the riders treated him like the dregs of society.

"You wouldn't get fares or sometimes you'd get very difficult people," Hassell said. "People would objectify you because they were paying you and therefore you were just an object to fulfill their wishes."

Living fully with nothing

As a gangly 6-foot-1-inch, 120-pound man, Hassell moved to San Francisco in hope of finding a place he could fit in and find a job. He was incredibly poor and lived in transient hotel rooms. Even if a job was undesirable, Hassell accepted it to survive.

Most of the work he shouldered was physical labor. He loaded and unloaded tractor-trailers in 100-degree weather. He was a forklift operator. He assembled commercial sewing machines in a factory.

The manual labor didn't bother Hassell — he liked the workout. Nevertheless, the work did not fulfill his craving to make a change in the world. Each job seemed to be a failure, but he knew they were necessary for him to get by. Hassell began talking to his coworkers in order to make light of the uninspiring workdays.

"I liked the people I worked with," Hassell said. "They were common working people and I got to really know them and like them very much and later on, I would devote my work as an artist to that."

Hassell also acquired a job throwing advertisements to people's doors. Sometimes, he would walk around the financial districts of San Francisco. People struggled to see beyond his long hair and ragged clothes.

"Because I was poor, I had nothing and I looked that way," Hassell said. "The way people looked at me, I knew what they were thinking: I didn't belong there. I was not wanted."

But Hassell pushed past the disdainful people and continued working.

As he went from job to job, he realized he was becoming more resilient. The work also taught him he would be able to survive, no matter what the conditions were.

Many people were in the same bleak situation. Hassell loved to interact with interesting and unfamiliar minds. With each conversation, he learned more about the identity of an individual.

"I met people who were just really way out