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'Every person deserves respect and dignity'

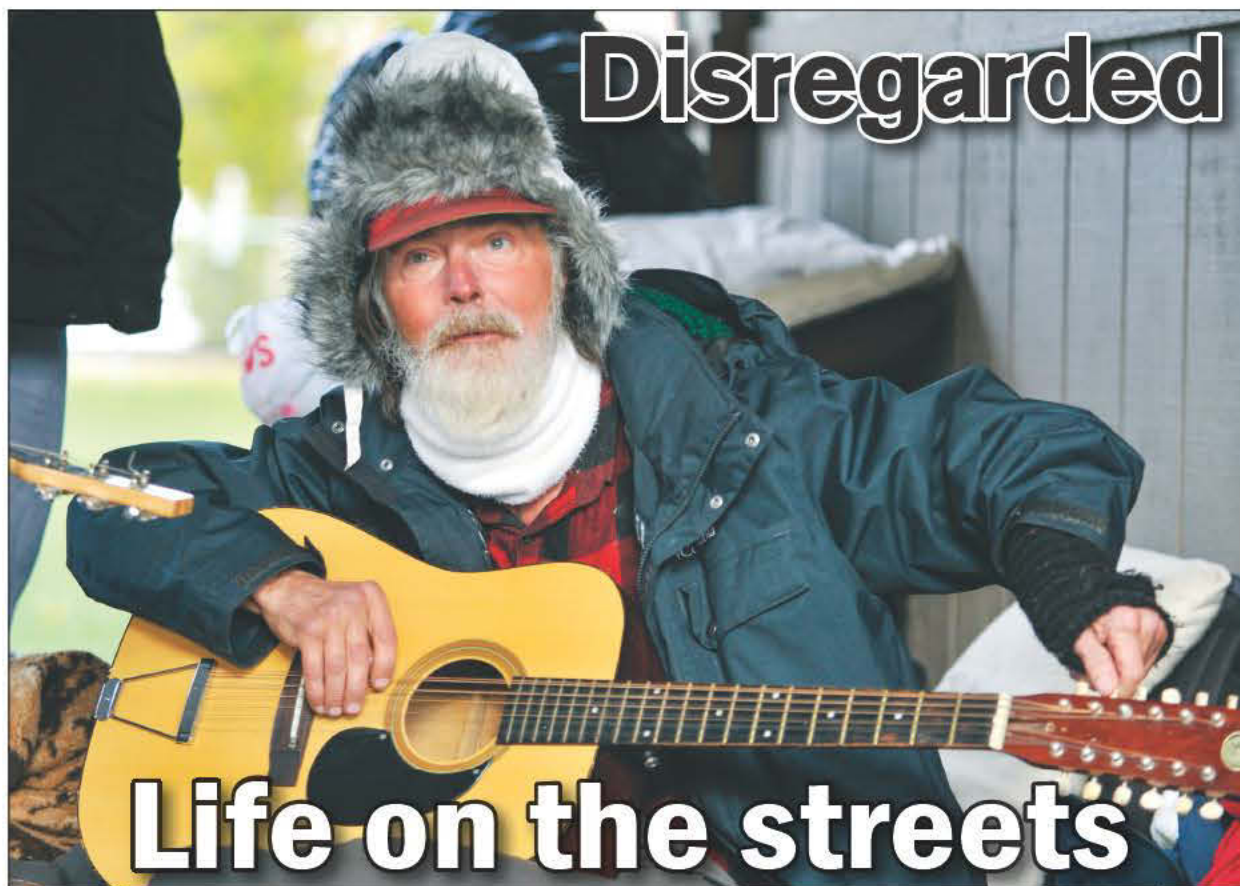
HEATHER GRAVES EDITOR

In the past seven years, seven people experiencing unsheltered homelessness have died on Brown County streets – with the most recent two being suicides.

Take a moment to let that sink in.

It's a number Paul VanHandel, Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) member, former Green Bay Police officer and longtime advocate for the homeless, said is extremely hard to accept.

"That's a real-life statistic," VanHandel said, fighting back tears. "One of them, she was the first (homeless individual) to contact us at the Homeless Outreach Team. She couldn't access services, and a year later she com-



Disregarded

Life on the streets

Dan lived in the park shelter at St. John's Park in downtown Green Bay for much of 2021.

Josh Staloch Photo

mitted suicide after being homeless... so, it was unfortunate. It sucks."

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines

unsheltered homelessness "as people whose primary nighttime location is a pub-

lic or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping

accommodation for people." VanHandel said every person living in a car, an RV, a tent, in a park, under a bridge, on the street or on a friend's couch has a story of how they got there – as unique as they are.

And as is anyone's, their stories are profoundly human.

Every day is a constant struggle for those unsheltered – 24 hours a day, seven days a week filled with uncertainty surrounding shelter, food, water, warmth, safety and stability.

On a single night, more than half a million Americans go homeless, which represents 0.2% of the U.S. population – of those, 35% are living on the streets, according to HUD.

A series of poor choices

For much of the late spring, summer and fall of 2021, Bryon, a Green Bay resident in his late 40s, called St. John's Park "home" – keeping cool, warm and safe any way he could.

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Packers threaten litigation if agreement altered

BY HEATHER GRAVES EDITOR

GREEN BAY – Things got a little tense at the Tuesday, Jan. 11, Green Bay Finance Committee meeting.

For the first time since calling for the disbandment of the Lambeau Field Stadium District, State Rep. David Steffen (R-Green Bay) spoke to Green Bay alderpersons regarding his plan – following a request by City Council President



The Packers play in Lambeau Field, but the organization leases it from the City of Green Bay and the Stadium District.

Press Times File Photo

Jesse Brunette.

Aaron Popkey, the Green Bay Packers director of Public Affairs, was also on hand threatening legal action against the State of Wisconsin and the City of Green Bay, if the proposed legislation goes forward.

"It would constitute a breach of trust and illegal evisceration of the Lambeau lease," Popkey said. "It would leave no choice other than immediate major litigation to prevent it from taking effect."

In November, Steffen proposed legislation to eliminate the Stadium District and transfer its responsibilities to the City of Green Bay.

It's a plan, Popkey said, the Packers are not on-board with.

He said the organization has already wasted time and resources on what he

See DISTRICT page 8

Opening night approaches for NDA's 'Footloose: The Musical'

BY JOSH STALOCH STAFF WRITER

GREEN BAY – After an unprecedented 2021 forced Notre Dame Academy (NDA) in Green Bay to perform its musical for an online audience only, the school will be putting on its production

of "Footloose: The Musical" for a live audience this year, and the excitement is building.

Co-directors Andrea Gilson and Chris Salerno said last year's experience has made the kids extra enthusiastic about

See FOOTLOOSE page 14



During a recent rehearsal for Notre Dame Academy's rendition of "Footloose: The Musical," Reverend Shaw Moore, played by Joey Bonadonna, left, and Ariel Moore, played by Molly Kukiela, work on a scene.

Josh Staloch Photo



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HOMELESS
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The college-educated father of two said for years he thrived as a high school basketball coach in California, until his divorce in the early 2000s, and what he described as a series of poor choices, left him without a roof over his head.

Bryon said though he's struggled with homelessness off and on for more than two decades, he doesn't want it to define who he is.

He said the negative stigma society has toward homeless individuals is frustrating.

"Don't stereotype the homeless population," he said. "A lot of homeless individuals have talent, or a skill set that can be used. There are a lot of smart, loving people out there who have been hurt."

It's a bias, Bryon said he has personally experienced.

"I was trying to get to a doctor's appointment, and I was standing on the street corner when this guy drove up to the stop sign," he said. "We made eye contact and he rolled his window down and said, 'I don't have any money to give you.' I wasn't asking for money, I just needed directions. When he found that out his tone changed completely, and he was willing to help. That is what I am talking about. Don't stereotype a person standing on the street corner by the way they look. I am not a bad person, I just needed directions."

Bryon said he has been working hard to get back on his feet.

He said he has a job, will soon be in his own apartment, and most importantly, recently had the opportunity to visit and talk to his two children on a regular basis.

He also recently graduated from The Joseph Project - a four-day, intensive



This tent serves as home for two unsheltered individuals. The pair said they've done what they can to "winterize" their tent as they brace for the cold Wisconsin winter - which in recent days reached temperatures in the double digits below zero. **Josh Staloch Photo**

"I've spent hours talking to the people that are just hollow shells of themselves, and I'm like, 'How can we allow this?' - Paul VanHandel

employment program hosted by St. John's Shelter's daytime facility, the Micah Center.

"I just want to be involved in the community again," he said with cautious optimism. "When I was a coach, each person on the team had a role. Being a homeless person, I don't feel like I have a role in the community. I am making the necessary positive choices, but it is difficult. Most of the time, I just want to be heard and seen as being more than just a homeless person. Every person deserves respect and dignity."

'A recurring struggle'

Growing up in Milwaukee, Madee, 49, said he followed the same path that many children from middle-class families take.

He participated in sports, did well in school and developed a strong work ethic at a young age.

After high school he attended St. Norbert College where he earned a double-major bachelor's degree in sociology and history.

He said he had a good job and an apartment he shared with a girlfriend.

Madee had, what he called, a "pretty good existence."

A broken leg not fully rehabbed, which led to long-term, debilitating pain, and eventually mental health

issues, sent Madee's "pretty good existence" off the rails, and he found himself homeless.

He said his days are now filled with uncertainty and disappointment - in himself and his situation - as he searches for the path back to stability.

"The situation I am in, I look back at it," he said, pausing for a few moments. "And you don't really come up with reasons why you get there."

Madee said as a kid he would see homeless men and women with shopping carts on TV and wondered how they got there.

"I can understand now why they are in that kind of state," he said. "When you are in that much pain, you just don't care about anything. It's a blanket effort."

Madee said his situation

has much to do with physical pain stemming from his broken leg.

"Honestly, it was excruciating pain, where you felt like you just wanted to die," he said. "It put my whole body out of whack. Literally, pain every day. You can't even think. It felt like I was in a physical hell. If we didn't believe in hell afterwards, death would be the best place to be, I think. Even rain doesn't matter. You are in so much pain, you just don't give a damn."

Off and on for the last three years, Madee has called various places in Green Bay home - shelters, bushes, parks.

After living in a bush near the railroad tracks in Green Bay for three months this past summer, cold temperatures and snow prompted Madee to seek a

bed at St. John's Homeless Shelter, where he's been since it opened in November.

Though it's warm, Madee said he prefers being outside.

"I have a mental illness - I am bipolar," he said, "and when you are in that much pain, you feel that yucky as a human being, you don't want to be around people. I would rather lay outside in the cold, than be in there. I literally mean that."

Recent physical therapy, Madee said, has helped relieve some of his pain.

"I feel better," he said. "I don't have as much pain as I used to. I am physically in a better place. I can think a little more clearly now. I want to get back on my feet and in the direction I was before."

Part of that path forward includes employment, which Madee has - working part time for a temp agency that sends him anywhere in the city where they need him - which he gets to on his bike.

According to the Urban Institute, a national nonprofit research organization, about 25% of the homeless population is employed.

But sometimes things still fall short.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition notes renters in Wisconsin need to earn a wage of at least \$17.89 per hour to afford a two-bedroom rental.

Wisconsin's minimum wage sits at \$7.25.

VanHandel said he hopes this past summer is the last Madee will spend on the streets.

called a life-changing, terrible decision, which she said was encouraged by peer pressure, in 2016, Toby found herself in a place she never imagined - in jail and labeled a sex offender.

After spending 3 1/2 years behind bars, Toby, as she'd like to be called, was released in 2019 to serve the remainder of her nearly nine-year sentence with a GPS monitoring bracelet strapped to her ankle.

When she was released, Toby said she spent nearly two years living with friends, but after breaking her ankle, which required surgery, she said things became tense, and she found herself looking for a new place to live.

Because of the requirements she must follow due to her sex offender status, Toby said she is limited on where she can reside.

Green Bay ordinances require sex offenders to live at least 1,500 feet away from schools, parks and day care centers - which is most of the city, minus a few small pockets, according to the city's offender's map.

Toby is unable to reside at St. John's Shelter, because of its close proximity to a school, and because of her conviction, she's unable to stay at New Community Shelter.

Toby said she fully accepts responsibility for her poor choices that landed her in jail and on the sex offenders registry.

She said because of the restrictions, she finds herself out of options.

According to data released by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections in 2018,

"A lot of homeless individuals have talent, or a skill set that can be used. There are a lot of smart, loving people out there who have been hurt." - Bryon

"You went from unsheltered to sheltered to unsheltered and now you are back sheltered again," he said. "We don't want you to go through that again. That ain't right. We are going to try and work with you, and try and get you somewhere where you need to be, where you are comfortable. Keep up the good work. You have been following through."

Living in the woods

After making what she

about 10% of the more than 1,200 offenders in the state on GPS monitoring have no permanent place to life.

"It's an uphill battle just trying to find an apartment with my situation," Toby said. "It is also an uphill battle to find a job, because if they have teenagers there, I have to let the manager know about my situation, and a lot of them won't hire me because of that situation. Even if I provide them

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HOMELESS
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with my probation officer's number, so they can call and get more information on me, they still won't hire me."

Toby, and her boyfriend, Sean, currently live in a tent in a wooden area in Howard.

"I think somebody needs to see what we are going through," Sean said.

It's not the first location they've set up camp this year.

The pair was living in downtown Green Bay, when they were told to leave by law enforcement because of the radius restrictions.

"I don't care to go to the shelter," Sean said. "I don't care what they have to say. I don't care about the people. I'd rather live out here, take my chances. I chose to stay out here because of my own problems, and because of her."

Sean said he has stayed at shelters in the past, but they are all the same.

"It is either A or B," he said. "It's a drug addict or an alcoholic - they are not in my situation."

Sean admits he has untreated mental health issues, and struggles with authority.

"I can get the help, I just don't have the funding," Sean said. "I can't hold a job. I have a big people problem. I don't like authority. I deal with mental health issues. I've been like that all my life."

Still on probation, Toby said she continues to look for work.

The couple received a portable charging station from Wise Women Gathering for Toby to charge her GPS-monitoring bracelet.

As far as basic needs, they use a makeshift toilet in camp, and shower at Toby's brother's house.

"The rest of my family can't help with my situa-



Sean admits he has untreated mental health issues, and struggles with authority. He is currently living in a tent with his girlfriend in a wooden area in Howard. **Josh Staloch Photo**

According to the Urban Institute, a national nonprofit research organization, about 25% of the homeless population is employed.

tion, because of grandkids and great grandkids, and I understand that," she said. "I'm at a low risk of reoffending."

Sean said as long as Toby has to remain on the streets, he will be staying with her.

"Sean is like my best friend," Toby said. "I don't have nothing, except for Sean. If I didn't have Sean, then I wouldn't be anywhere."

Dating for more than a year, and recently engaged, the pair said when temperatures become nearly unbearable, they will ride the bus to warm up.

They said they've done what they can to "winterize" their tent and brace for the cold Wisconsin winter - which in recent days reached temperatures in the double digits below zero.

"It's either I sink or

swim, and I don't give up easily," Sean said.

An uncertain future

When asked how long he's been homeless, 58-year-old Dan was unsure how to answer.

"This time?" he hesitantly responded.

"When I first rolled into Green Bay in 2017, I was living in my car," Dan said. "I lived in the Walmart parking lot until Nov. 30, and then it got kind of chilly. I then stayed at New Community Shelter from Nov. 30 to June 6 or 8."

Dan said he moved out of New Community in June 2018 after getting a job and a "pad" of his own.

"Everything was cool," he said.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived.

Dan said he lost his job, his apartment and found himself back on the streets.

"Currently, I've been homeless for more than 13 months," he said in late October.

Due to circumstances he said he takes full responsibility for, Dan isn't welcome at St. John's or New Community Shelter.

"I have a big, bad, potty mouth, and got busted out of (New Community Shelter) for being disrespectful," he said. "I will honestly say it is my fault."

When asked what the winter months will look like for him, Dan said "my crystal ball is broken, my magic wand is in the shop and I wasn't born with ESP, how the (heck) do I know?"

"My goal is to get my

money from Social Security and get a pad - period," he said. "But, meanwhile, how do I live today? But I'll survive. I'm a survivor."

Dan's acknowledged stubborn side has significantly limited his options.

On a single night, more than half a million Americans go homeless - of those, 35% are living on the streets, according to HUD.

"He has burned every bridge in Brown County," Green Bay Police Lieutenant Nate Allen, the department's westside community police officer, said. "I told HOT, this is it. Dan's answer isn't Brown County. He's such a disruption when he goes into St. John's. What do you do?"

VanHandel said he has continued to outreach with Dan, and while privacy reasons prevent him from disclosing any specifics of his current situation or whereabouts, VanHandel said "we have been working on options for Dan, doing what we can to keep him safe."

Not giving up
Until St. John's last resort shelter opened Nov.

1, VanHandel said 72 individuals were living on the street in various locations throughout the city - a number he said fluctuated up and down since St. John's closed for the season April 30, 2021.

He said many of the 72 individuals have, at least periodically, sought shelter at St. John's since it opened.

But VanHandel stressed that if outreach doesn't continue, those 72 individuals will find themselves right back on the streets come April 30 when St. John's shelter season ends.

"This is staring us right in the face," he said, "and it's not going away. It's going to continue to be a burden. And you're going to continue to get calls at City Hall and the police department until we actually honestly do something."

Though temperatures prompted many to find shelter, VanHandel said on any given night, 20-25 people are still sleeping on the streets, in cars or on friends' couches.

"Nobody has had more time on the street (than I have)," VanHandel said, "and I'm not saying this to be big-headed or anything. I would say, I have more time on the street working with people that are homeless. I've spent hours talking to the people that are just hollow shells of themselves

NEXT WEEK:
Disregarded: Street outreach: Bridging the gap follows HOT member Paul VanHandel as he works tirelessly to help those unsheltered find a path to self-sufficiency.

DISREGARDED: THE VIDEO
In partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, the educational partner of the NEW News Lab, The Press Times compiled a supporting short video to accompany the series' written pieces. Visit gopresstimes.com to view this impactful piece.

and I'm like, 'How can we allow this?' You know, it's absolutely just mind-boggling, and then when you try and make connections, it's just you can't do it. There's nowhere for them to go because they deny that they want anything at all, so you end up getting stuck, and all you can do is go back and have that conversation again and keep trying."

VanHandel said the HOT team never gives up on anybody.

"You know, when somebody says 'no,' instead of disengaging, we just re-engage again and again, and again, until we can get somewhere," he said. "That's street outreach."

In 2020, the most recent available data, Wisconsin had an estimated 4,515 experiencing homelessness.

In 2021, the Brown County Health and Human Services Department served approximately 175 individuals who identified as homeless.

VanHandel said starting at 11:45 p.m. through 4-5 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 26, area volunteers will conduct the 2022 Point-in-Time count - a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness in Brown County in one single night.

It's a count that is required by HUD and conducted in cities throughout the country twice a year - in January and July.

I want to get back on my feet and in the direction I was before." - Madee



A broken leg not fully rehabbed, which led to long-term, debilitating pain, and eventually mental health issues, sent Madee's "pretty good existence" off the rails, and he found himself homeless. **Josh Staloch Photo**

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