

on the Record

The Real Experts on Family Homelessness

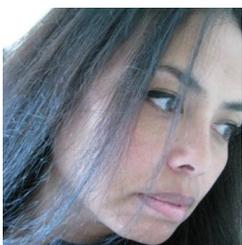
The conversation on family homelessness often includes policy makers, elected officials, researchers, social service providers, and other experts within the field. However, the insight and opinions of those who have faced homelessness firsthand often get overlooked in the process. UNCENSORED talked with four currently and formerly homeless individuals about their experiences and their suggestions on how to improve homeless services. The following are excerpts from these conversations:



Nikki Johnson-Huston was homeless when she was nine years old in San Diego. She was with her mother and her seven-year-old brother. Ms. Johnson-Huston now resides in Philadelphia, and is a tax attorney for the city. She is also a member of the Board of Governors for the Philadelphia Bar Association and an advocate for the homeless.



Randle Loeb was homeless with his wife and three children in Denver, from 1995 to 2004. Currently, Mr. Loeb lives by himself in a church and is still looking for permanent housing. He is the caretaker of the church and manages its homeless shelter. Mr. Loeb is also a writer and advocate.



Carey Fuller has been homeless with her two children in Seattle, since 2004. She is currently looking for a full-time job and permanent housing. She has self-published her writing through Kindle on Amazon.com. Ms. Fuller also works with Mark Horvath on managing and expanding *We Are Visible*. (*We Are Visible* is a Web site that aims to empower homeless people to use social media. Horvath was featured in this column in the Winter 2011 issue.)



Lauren Lovette was homeless with her family in Cincinnati when she was 14 years old. Two years later, in 2008, Ms. Lovette experienced homelessness on her own. She is now an undergraduate student at the University of Cincinnati with a major in Communications and a minor in Sociology.

UNCENSORED: Please describe the time when you and your family were homeless, or if you and your family currently are homeless, where have you been living?

Johnson-Huston: We slept in a lot of different places; some nights on the street, at a couple of different shelters, we were back and forth everywhere. I remember sharing a room with other families. We had to hold on to all our stuff because we were afraid people were going to steal it.

Loeb: We stayed in all kinds of different places including shelters, houses, churches, and on the streets.

Fuller: When we lost our house my youngest was 18 months old and my eldest was eight. I was living off my 401(k). I bought an old Winnebago for us to live out of. We could never get in a shelter. Just last month a shelter told me they had no room. Shelters here were never built to take the numbers.

Lovette: My mom lost her job so we lost our house. There was no temporary housing in the area. We split up and all stayed at differ-

ent people's houses. When I experienced homelessness on my own, I lived at my friend's house for part of the time and then I moved to the local drop-in center so I could receive a certificate for the transitional living program. With the certificate I was able to get an apartment.

UNCENSORED: Were/are homeless services made available to you and your family?

Johnson-Huston: I don't really remember having services. They had toothbrushes and stuff like that. I think a lot of it was helping short term but not in the long term. It's hour by hour; you worry about tomorrow but not really. You worry about today, where you are going to sleep, the next time you are going to eat.

Loeb: We received services at the South Street Clinic. It is the largest homeless services provider for comprehensive services in Colorado. They provided us with mental health care, medical care, eye care, and a pharmacy.

Fuller: I tried to get help from the state but they only gave me food stamps. The only other services I have been able to use were made available to me after my work benefits ran out. I got basic health insurance through the state. Also, a food bank nearby found out I was homeless. They said we could come once a week instead of the usual allowance of once a month.

Lovette: When I was younger, my family did not access services. We didn't know where to go or who to contact. When I was by myself, I knew I was not able to handle things on my own. I received help from Project Connect. [Project Connect is a program offered by the Cincinnati Public Schools that offers academic assistance and supports to homeless students.] They provided me with transportation to and from school, school supplies, and a uniform voucher. If I ever needed somebody to talk to they let me know they were there for me. They also are the ones who told me about the local transitional living program.

on the Homefront

UNCENSORED: Was there a particular person or group of people who impacted you in a special way that you still remember today?

Loeb: The people at the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. They are the largest comprehensive treatment program in Colorado. They have the most extensive services, including transitional and permanent housing. In my case they kept me alive. I am bipolar. I tried to commit suicide. They gave me medication, intervention, all kinds of help to stabilize me. They helped me get disability and medical treatment. They got me a bus pass, an income, the means I needed to take care of myself.

Fuller: There was my sister-in-law, when she first found out we were moving into a motor home she had us park by her house, but the police were harassing us. And, Mark Horvath, I met him through Change.org. Mark's idea of coming out in the open and telling your story, that was really scary for me. But I think Mark is right, that is what we have to do.

Lovette: A couple of people from my school really helped me out, especially Ms. Joy Kay, the school psychologist. It was not her job to work with me; she went out on her own will. She got me connected to other teachers and activities. The word spread that I did not have a place to live. The teachers found out about my poetry. They had me perform at lunch.

UNCENSORED: What was/is the hardest part about being homeless?

Johnson-Huston: The fear. You are afraid all of the time, scared no one is going to help you. People look down on you. No one would choose to be homeless, especially for their children. After a year of being homeless my mom could not do it anymore. She sent me to live with my disabled grandmother in Section 8 housing and my brother went to foster care and dropped out of high school. He was chronically homeless. He was moving so much, we lost track of each other. He had HIV and was addicted to Methamphetamine. He hung himself when he was in court-ordered rehabilitation. He died this past July [2010].

Fuller: It's having to do this with my two kids. My little one doesn't know any different, but my oldest remembers the way things used to be. She wants everything to go back to the way it was.

UNCENSORED: Is there a service that was/is not offered to you or your family that you wish was made available?

Johnson-Huston: I wish we could have stayed together. That is why I love what Project Home does. [Project Home is a Philadelphia-based organization that provides homeless families with supportive housing, health care, education, and employment opportunities.] Some of the women have been there for ten years. They help their kids go to college. My brother spent his whole life trying to overcome being homeless and he couldn't. If he got one or two more breaks he could have the life that I have.

Lovette: Before I was homeless there was an organization, the CCY, Citizens Committee on Youth, which had a career-building workshop. They gave people everything they needed to get a job: bus tokens, resume assistance, interview skills. They closed that down. If it was still open I could have gotten a job through that program and helped my family.

UNCENSORED: Based on your experience, if you could change something about the homeless services in your city, what would it be?

Johnson-Huston: I think what I see is that different people have different needs. There is a one-size-fits-all approach in all places. They should ask, "What can these people accomplish in society? Help them go to college, grad school?" You have to start talking about breaking generational poverty. I am the first person in my family to own a house or go to college.

Fuller: I would like to see them take all the empty buildings and make them into shelters for families. We have all these empty buildings and you see people sleeping on the sidewalk.

UNCENSORED: If you had one piece of advice to give to somebody who was creating a program, law, or policy that would make a difference in family homelessness, what would it be?

Johnson-Huston: You spend the money now or you spend the money later. It was cheaper for my grandmother to utilize welfare to take care of me then than it would be to pay for me now. Children need to be fed, clothed, and educated and if that does not happen many of them will be dependent on the system for their entire lives.

Loeb: I was at a state education meeting listening to a board of education person complain that there will never be enough resources for all to be educated. I don't agree with that. As long as we think there is not enough money, we are throwing away people's lives. They do not give all children the same education, specifically minority and poor children. If children are suffering then we are abandoning them and they will end up in jail or poor, unable to take care of themselves.

Fuller: Policy makers don't see the numbers of people that they do not help. The only thing they see are the hard-core chronic homeless. It's the families who are homeless who have jobs that need the assistance and are not getting it. You can't make blanket policies the way to address homelessness.

UNCENSORED: What have we not asked you that people should know?

Johnson-Huston: Most people who are homeless have hit rock bottom. They have run out of friends, coworkers, cousins, welfare, food stamps, things they can pawn. They don't have anything. These are all the things they do before they get on that shelter line. There has to be better support before it gets to that place.

I hope people look at this issue with a closer eye and a kinder heart. I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for my brother. He is the real face of it. I want to be able to speak for him and for the many like him that don't always have a voice.

Fuller: The one thing that I have noticed is that people assume there are resources available. [Resources] have been closed or are stretched beyond their limit. People think social services are taking up so much money but they are not. Where is the priority in this country? Things are not being done for the most vulnerable people.

These individuals see the issue of family homelessness from the inside looking out. They can offer insight on the obstacles homeless families face where data, research, and budgets fall short. While these are only four of the hundreds of thousands of stories, they represent an acute glimpse of the real face of homelessness in the United States. ■

UNCENSORED would like to thank the contributors for providing their personal snapshots.