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On the Street: Four survivors of homelessness share stories at LHOT event

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LONGMONT — Kevin Kerwin used to see a lot of homeless people when he drove a cab. A lot of times, he'd think "If they'd just ..."

Then, last July, he lost his job. In the blink of an eye, he and his family were living in a tent, trying to keep ahead just enough to survive from day to day.

"It's not that simple," Kerwin said. "You can say 'If you just,' but 'if you just' may take you half the day. ... Most of these guys don't want a handout, they just want to get from point A to point B. And they can't ever seem to get past point A.2."

Kerwin's lucky. He's started to climb back out again. And on Thursday night, he and three others who had also been homeless shared their experiences and thoughts with over 100 people at the Longmont Senior Center.

"I want to thank the people who took the time to listen and to care," said Doug Branstetter, who became homeless in 2003 after a series of catastrophes, including two strokes. "God bless you all and God bless us all."

There's a lot of company out there. In 2009, a count in Longmont found 414 homeless people, according to the Longmont Housing Opportunities Team. That's double the number seen in 2000.

"It just floored me that this was in my community," said Leslie Swedbergh, who volunteers for Homeless Outreach Providing Encouragement, which hits the streets each night to help the homeless. "Homeless people are everywhere — and you don't realize it until you take a minute to look."

LHOT holds the homelessness-awareness events each year to remind Longmont of how much there is to do, and that it needs everyone to do it.

"Homelessness is not definable by one cause or one solution," said Krystal Winship Erazo of the Longmont Housing Authority. "It really takes an entire community to come together and support the solutions."

Roughly half of Longmont's homeless are families. At one time that included Malissa (who didn't give a last name) and her mother. Malissa landed in a group home, then ran away from it and lived on the streets for a year or two. Even getting a job at McDonald's was tough, she said, since she didn't have regular access to a shower.

What started to help her back, she said, was getting a hand from HOPE and from a former guardian. She's now working on finishing her high-school education through the Weld County Diploma Program.

The others had similar stories of being helped by groups such as the OUR Center, or HOPE, or the housing authority, with a good amount of their own energy in the mix as well.



Doug Branstetter, who was once homeless, helps Danna Soto with her light dinner of soup on Wednesday. Branstetter was one of four people who were either homeless, were once homeless or were trying to get out of homelessness who spoke during an event titled "Life In and Out of the Alley." **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**

Life on the streets, in their words

"A lot of people I used to talk to are now 'too busy.' They're worried that I'm going to ask for money ... or they're afraid they're going to end up in my situation. They're afraid they're going to catch the 'homeless bug.'"

Kevin Kerwin

"If you're too dirty, you can be considered a 'hazard to the workplace.'"

Malissa, on the challenge of getting a regular shower

"I feel better about myself. But I feel like I could do a lot more better."

Joe

"Even my children turned their backs to me. They thought I'd done something wrong."

Doug Branstetter

“I didn’t let myself get down,” said Joe, who spent a year homeless after losing a long-held job with a Boulder hotel. “I just kept fighting it and fighting it.”

But even when a place to stay is found — whether through a housing voucher as in Kerwin’s case, or a friend as in Joe’s — the edge can still seem very near sometimes.

“It’s not over,” Branstetter said.

Kerwin said he wants to find a way to keep the homeless and the public better connected with each other, so that the community can better know what needs to be done.

“I don’t want to save the world,” he said. “I just want to hold my little corner of it. If each of us does, it’s not going to be overwhelming.”

Suggestions from LHOT on how to help and what programs are available can be found at www.LHOTonline.org.

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