

THE NAMES WE GAVE OUR LIVED-EXPERIENCE PRIOR TO SOME OF US BECOMING RE-HOUSED

- *“Survival” was our most common description.*
- *“For me it was a ‘Self-defense Mentality.’ Sleeping with ‘one eye open’ was exhausting. It took the kindness out of many of us.”*
- *“Living Outside.” “Living on the Streets.” “Roofless.”*
- *“Fleeing violence” towards us and our children in our homes.*
- *“In Transition.” “In Between Housing.”*
- *“I hated the word homeless. I considered myself ‘Residentially Challenged’.”*
- *“Invisible”; “Feeling Dead Inside”; “I was just existing in suspended animation.”*
- *“A Hell Hole.”*
- *Some of us agreed the term “Homelessness” applied.*

INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES THAT CONTRIBUTED TO US EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS: ALMOST TOO MANY TO LIST, AND FAR BEYOND “BAD PEOPLE AND BAD CHOICES”

- *For 3 of us, a parent died before we were 12 years old. Some of us lost our support when a surviving parent died. “I was told to leave home at age 18.” Another said, “I was in foster homes until age 18; then I had nowhere else to go.”*
- *Adults and partners were physically or sexually abusive. We were not believed. Some of us left home to escape being beaten, starved, or molested.*
- *An older brother/sister had died or suicided at home.*
- *Some of us developed serious mental challenges as preteens, teens, younger or older adults.*
- *Some of us developed serious alcohol and drug abuse starting as pre-teens or teens. Our alcohol or drug undermined our ability to keep a job. “I started huffing gasoline at age 13. I couldn’t stand feelings of being molested.”*
- *Some of us had been successful as adults, had learned trades, attended college, were married and owned homes. Serious mental challenges, divorces, or being terrorized/beaten/raped, or drug/alcohol use made it impossible to continue to work.*
- *“I had a life prior to alcohol. I was working and raising children.”*
- *Some of us were too traumatized to organize ourselves and plan after we fled our homes.*

- *Disabling physical conditions developed in adulthood, yet we were not “certified” as disabled.*
- *Two of us couldn’t get hired again after getting arrested and going to jail or prison.*

HOW WAS LIVING OUTSIDE/ON THE STREETS PREFERABLE TO BEING WHERE YOU HAD BEEN LIVING?

- *It wasn’t preferable; it wasn’t our choice; we were told to get out.*
- *“I felt much safer outside than where I was 27 years ago.”*
- *“It was better for me: I was part of a family outside, with good and bad things, but better than before.”*
- *We sought freedom from being constantly demeaned, degraded, beaten, or raped at home.*
- *“I was afraid to live inside again with other people.”*
- *We survived by living by our wits.*

WHAT ALTERNATIVE PLACES DID WE LIVE BEFORE WE WERE RE-HOUSED? MANY, NOT JUST ON SIDEWALKS.

- *On friend’s couches; or camping in their backyards.*
- *We “camped rough” either alone or with others; lived in tents, slept in abandoned buildings.*
- *We were admitted again and again to shelters; hospitals for illnesses, detoxes, rehabs, acute mental health crisis stays, or long-term residential stays. Some of us spent time in jails or court-ordered treatment.*
- *Some of us had cars or vans to live in.*

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE BARRIERS WE FACED TO BECOMING RE-HOUSED? ALMOST TOO MANY TO LIST

- *“You just can’t get help when you need it. We needed a hand up, not a handout.”*
- *One of us lost his disability benefits. “I didn’t have a mailing address and didn’t get mail about needing another exam.”*
- *Our cellphones or our medications were repeatedly stolen while living outside.*
- *“There are no free bus passes, you have to have an income to buy one. How are we supposed to get around to agencies that are miles apart?”*
- *We were not able to keep ourselves stable enough to plan.*
- *We were not treated respectfully in shelters. Three women said they “Didn’t feel safe staying in shelters.”*

- *“You have to have government funding to contribute to housing costs. There’s no housing just for free.”*
- *Several of us have “Section 8” vouchers approved for housing: “I am waiting in a line that could take years for my turn.”*
- *A few of us refused to comply with the “system,” or be diagnosed with a mental illness to qualify for disability benefits.*
- *A few of us refused to be “classified” as homeless when seeking help.*
- *A few of us couldn’t follow our housing “contracts;” we wanted to take in others still on the street, and we were kicked out when we did.*
- *Some of us made bad choices about drugs, or new partners and wound up homeless again.*

AGENCIES PUT UP VISIBILE AND INVISABLE BARRIERS TO BECOMING RE-HOUSED

- *Agencies work 9-5, M-F. “We need help seven days a week and on holidays.”*
- *“Agencies should be clear from the start what is expected of us, how long will it take, and what are the milestones we must pass to become housed.”*
- *Agencies make choices about who should get housing first; old people who could die first, families with impaired men or women with children second, impaired single women and men last next, and able-bodied men and women last.*
- *“Agencies had power over us; we were not believed”. “We were not treated with respect by agency workers.”*
- *“During Covid you can’t just walk into an agency if you’re nearby.”*
- *We couldn’t stand telling our story over and over again and filling out form after form at every different agency.*
- *Many of us were unable to keep in touch with agencies; unable to charge cellphones, no mailing addresses, police kept busting up our camps, we had no stable location where we could be found.*

HOW LONG WERE SOME OF US LIVING OUTSIDE, INCLUDING A FEW IN OUR CARS?

For a few of us, for 1 to 3 years. For many, 4.5 to 20 years. For some 25 to 37 years.

WHAT KEPT US GOING DURING HARD TIMES?

Telling People Straight Out Who I AM

“After 12 years in prison and living outside for 19 months, I’m now living in a donated van. I’m now working delivering and installing appliances. When I first met my boss, I told him straight out: ‘I just got out of prison.’ The officers in prison taught me that you only get respect if you give respect. I held many jobs in prison and sent money home each month. I had no respect for anyone before I went in. Now my friends and coworkers are behind me 100%. It’s hard for me to talk like this, but people give me respect when I do. Now I help homeless people by giving out food.”

- *“People showing us kindness, being able to shower once a week.”*
- *“For me, seeing people smile kept me going.”*
- *“Keeping as active and as healthy as possible”.*
- *By focusing on what we needed to do to survive each day.*
- *“I found church again. It encouraged me that life didn’t have to be like this.”*

Remembering Who We Are

“Me? I didn’t judge myself as homeless. I was a philosopher and a songwriter. I kept a journal all the years I lived outside. It helped me remember who I am.”



Making Personal Progress.

“My grandparents, teachers and backpacking friends taught me that it’s about making it through, taking things slowly, being consistent and saving your energy. I still knit, sew, read books, and make drawings even though I live outside. My friends appreciate my artwork. It helps them remember things they’ve done. Chiura Obata’s images of Yellowstone and the Sierras are very inspiring. We live in such a beautiful place.”



(Chiura Obata “El Capitan”, 1931)

Making “Street Communities,” We Aren’t Alone

“Living outside wasn’t just about me; we were in this together, we watch out for each other. There are groups of veterans, ‘train-track people’, and agricultural workers that check on me that I’m alive and O.K. I’ve teamed up with several other homeless people. It helps me to hear other people’s stories.”

WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE WHEN PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS WORK WITH EACH OTHER?

- *A few of us advocated for ourselves and other homeless people: “Some of them are lost. I’m a fighter. I’ve put people in touch with agencies that provide housing.”*

Holding Onto Kindness

“We look out for each other; if someone has food, we share it. My father and I have been camping for 9 years, living day by day. He’s 65 and I’m 42. He gets social security and I get SSI. We sleep at night near the courthouse and take the bus to the showers. We were taught to share food by my great grandmother. She had a lot of fruit trees and would collect the fruit and give it to others. My grandmother and father worked as cooks and taught me how to cook. I love to barbeque. We collect free food and sometimes buy some and share the food with everybody.”

- *Being kind to others. “I pick up trash. I help protect the environment.”*

Keeping Our Faith

"I'm a believer in God. I volunteer to help other homeless people. Twenty-seven years ago, when I was 10 years old, I started attending a youth center run by two Christian people who donated all the money for it. I started helping there by setting things up for the younger kids. By age 13 I was working directly with younger kids, playing board games. Now my wife and I, after living outside for 3 years, finally have a bus to live in. I have a steady job maintaining things, but we still volunteer every Saturday. We meet and talk with other people about what we do, and they come and volunteer also."

AS WE SAID "NO" TO HOMELESSNESS, WHAT WERE WE SAYING "YES" TO? WHAT WERE OUR DESIRES?

- *We wanted to stop being looked down on, having our bags checked when we went into stores, and called "drunks, bums or whores."*
- *We wanted to stop having to deal with police or social workers.*
- *We wanted to be safe from other people's bad/dangerous behavior.*
- *Some of us said, "We can't do this anymore, we're too old, too broken physically now."*
- *"Having bathrooms that weren't locked at night."*
- *Being warm and dry; being able to shower. Being able to do our laundry.*
- *Being able to sleep, plan, keep appointments.*
- *Living clean and free of alcohol/drugs.*
- *"Keeping my medication from being stolen so I could take it."*
- *"Having hope again."*
- *"Maybe I just could have a van to live in."*
- *"You can't have a good life while living on the streets."*

THE CHALLENGES SOME OF US WE MET WHEN FIRST RE-HOUSED

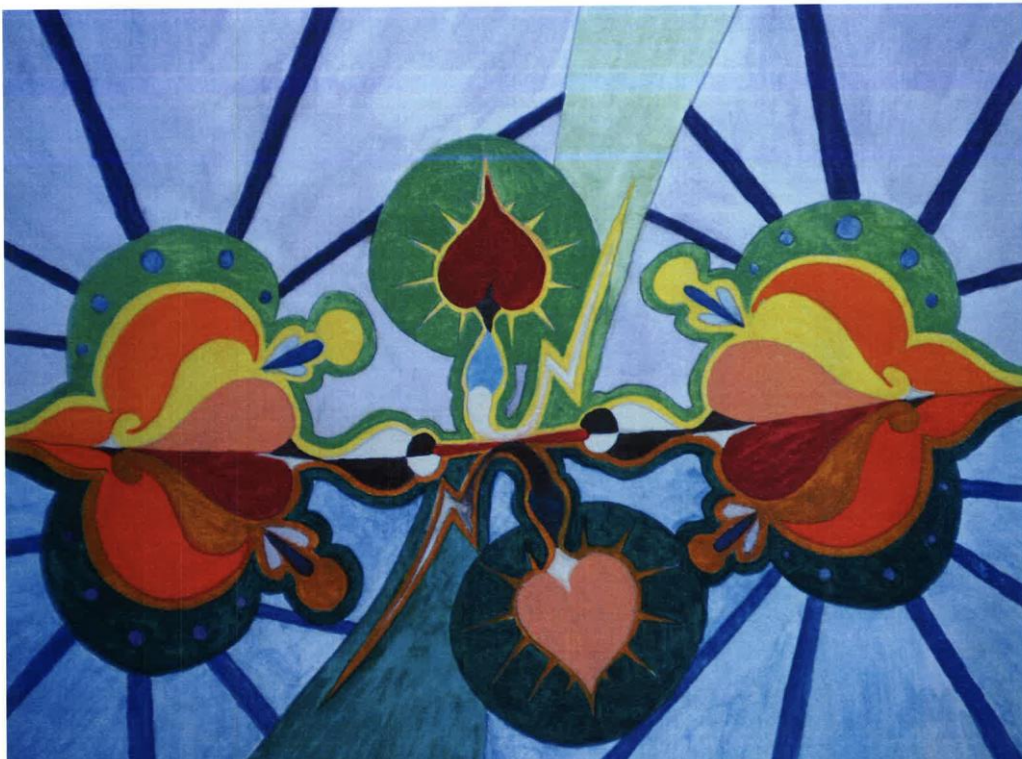
- *Some of us took several tries at housing before we became successful living inside again.*
- *Letting other homeless people move in with us broke our lease agreements and we were evicted.*
- *We felt badly about those still living outside. "I let someone in to shower a few times. Then I relapsed on drugs."*

- *“Street life” had become part of us; we didn’t feel safe without our things in plastic totes or backpacks, “Just in case.”*
- *Our “street ways” made us “roommate challenged;” it was difficult to cooperate with others in group housing; some of us needed to be “retrained” how to do those things.*
- *Some of us felt trapped living within 4 walls; some of us needed time to get used to living back inside again.*
- *It took time for some of us to believe in hope, to get over feeling helpless and begin to plan for a future.*
- *“At first, I was just existing in an empty room. I had no interests.”*

SPECIAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGES WE USED TO BECOME SUCCESSFUL IN HOUSING

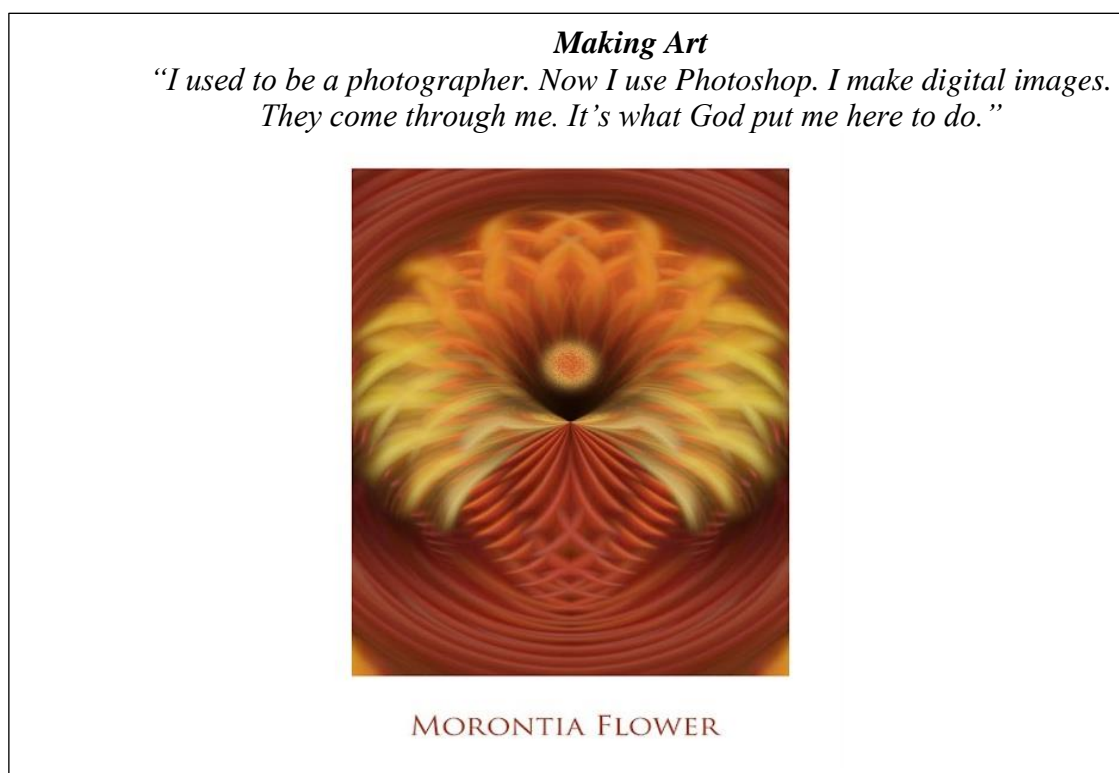
Learning How To Reach Out, To Be Heard And Seen

“I began to draw when I was ten years old. A Vietnam who became my stepfather used to draw without lifting his pen off the paper. I practiced through high school, but my art teacher really didn’t ‘get’ what I was doing, and my stepfather said, ‘You’ll never be a commercial success.’ After I was back in housing, avoided groups for a while but when I went, I was welcomed and went back regularly. I started going to an art group and began to spend a few hours a day with art. It kept my mind off drinking. It was very personalized and very spiritual, my way of having a conversation with my higher power. Soon I was leading an art group and was asked to stay on. “We can benefit from what you’ve learned.” I had to learn to trust in this world. Now I’m kind, predictable and trustworthy. Since then, I’ve sold quite a few pieces. My fulltime work now is helping others find housing and set up rooms for them, so the room won’t bare when they arrive, and help them become successful in housing.”



- *Finding A Purpose. “It was important to find a sense of purpose; what I’m here to do.”*

- *Having hope for the future*
- *Staying busy, being productive.*
- *Some of us took up interests that we used to enjoy. Others found new interests.*
- *“I slowly came to understand how having a daily routine was helpful.”*
- *Learning how to use support from others. “Using help is a skill; two minds are better than one.”*
- *“I came alive when people said they had hope for me.”*
- *Learning respect goes both ways.*
- *“I learned to want to get better for myself, and not just do what I was told to do.”*
- *“I learned how to take care of myself, set boundaries with others, or closing my door and being alone for a while.”*



- *We learned life is a challenge; build a support team.*
- *Setting aside stories about “being a man” or “how a woman should be.”*
- *Learning from prior attempts at housing or while living in other facilities.*
- *Learning from our mistakes; not stopping needed medications.*

For information contact: Michael Arcuri at mic312arc@gmail.com

- *Learning patience and forbearance; willingness to follow rules; acceptance.*
- *Reconnecting with spirituality, Church, or God.*

WHO HELPED US MAKE OUR WAY FORWARD AND BECAME PART OF OUR “TEAMS OF LIFE” (DENBOROUGH, 2008b).

- *Grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins. Parents of childhood friends.*
- *Teachers, coaches. Former or current bosses.*
- *Roommates in housing. Friends who were ahead of us on the journey.*
- *Therapists. AA sponsors. Case managers. People who took a stand for us.*
- *Drop-in centers.*
- *Our churches; our faith in God or spirituality.*

WHAT FAMILIAL OR CULTURAL HERITAGES CONTRIBUTED TO OUR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGES?

PAINTING OUTSIDE THE LINES

“I’m an artist. I can paint like crazy. I started painting in kindergarten. I still have paintings I did for my mom. I painted my ‘family tree’ when I retired. Years ago, I was told I would soon die of cancer, so I volunteered to paint a large mural on the side of the hospital. After 8 months, I went to a local college to ask students to volunteer to help me. They painted on an area I called ‘the community section.’ I didn’t die and we finished it together. Now sometimes I teach kids to paint at car shows. I’ve painted ‘outside the lines’ all my life and made it my own.”



- *“History helps us have perspective, how we got here now, and where we are going.”*
- *Many of us said, “The people who supported us would be very proud of us if they were here today”*

HOW THE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGES WERE USEFUL FOR US OR OTHERS

- *Some of us now volunteer to help others at shelters.*
- *Some of us have now become case managers or volunteers for others just starting their journeys back into housing.*

Helping Others

"I lived outside for 3 years. I'm back in housing for 7 years, but I've help run a community shower location for 4 years. It brings joy to me and joy to others. I'm now part of a group who do this. I've made many friends, some are still homeless, and others live in cars or vans. I've recruited other people to volunteer at the showers as well. We now have about 20 volunteers."

WHAT BECAME POSSIBLE FOR US WITH RE-HOUSING?

- *Getting off drugs/alcohol. "I graduated from drug court."*
- *We could make and keep commitments to ourselves and others.*
- *"I'm learning to cook using spices, garden, and grow plants."*
- *Several of us learned how to make music and art.*
- *"I learned to use YouTube to find out how to do things."*
- *"I decorated my own place with drapes and curtains."*
- *"I can't stand bare walls. The art on my walls is the window of my soul."*
- *We could go to libraries, borrow books, music, and videos.*
- *Volunteering: "I now volunteer at shelters sometimes."*
- *Some of us have continued our education, earned GEDs; earned certificates, and are thinking about college.*
- *Returning to work: Several of us now work part-time.*
- *Making communities.*
- *"I now help others. It's been a profound learning experience."*

HOW DOES BEING RE-HOUSED HAVE US FEELING ABOUT OURSELVES NOW?

- *“It was something I didn’t think I could do, but I did.”*
- *We’re treated better now; people don’t look down on us.*
- *“So much in my life is working.”*
- *What we do is bringing us joy.*
- *“I feel alive again.”*
- *“I’m authentic. I’m trustworthy. I’m kind. I’m generous.”*
- *“I have my own place.”*
- *“My medical conditions are improving.”*
- *Some of us are reconnecting with our children or are looking forward to doing so.*
- *We’re able to give back, pay off our fines and do our community service.*
- *“Life is a lot better now than ever.”*
- *Some of us feel more grateful now than ever for simple things; making a hot cup of coffee; taking a shower when we want to.*
- *We can have things again; watch our sports teams, listen to music.*
- *“Jake said, I don’t have much, but I contribute to homeless advocacy.”*

MUSIC AND SONG WRITING

Jake wrote a song, thanking a local helping agency, Transitions-Mental Health Agency (T-MHA): “I have learned to give to others with no expectation of return.”

T-MHA We Are The Dreamers



“We are standing at the threshold,
Where our hopes they must reside.
As we knock on the doors of justice,
Where we’ve waited by and by.
The hearts that once were broken,
Are now on paths to mend.
As we join with one another,
To begin our life again

..... (Chorus)

T-MHA I am the dreamer,
Seeing now these brighter days.
T-MHA, we are the dreamers,
As you bravely lead the way.

Far too often lost and lonely,
As we search for reasons why.
Yes, we really have some answers,
That the whole world can’t deny.
As these prison walls are crumbling,
And our hands will be untied,
We are seeking, we are mighty,
As our souls look deep inside.”

..... (Chorus)



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This group document, privileging the voices of those who are unhoused and those preferring to be re-housed, was compiled by Michael Arcuri in 2021 in fulfillment of a master's degree in Narrative Therapy in Community Work through the University of Melbourne and the Dulwich Centre of Australia.

It was co-created by 27 volunteers who have given their permission to duplicate and share any part of this document in the hopes that it will inform, inspire, and lead to successful local community action in your area.

Communications sent to Michael Arcuri will be shared with the co-creators of this document. We welcome any individual or group comments or feedback.