

## Enzio's Story

Having done a series of interviews with homeless men in the mid-10s, I have come to believe every homeless man shares three things in common with his homeless brothers: he is the product of a broken relationship; he is addicted or has been addicted to something; and he smokes cigarettes. Frankly, my experience five years ago and the answers to the questions I asked, numbed me to the plight of the homeless man.

I was disheartened and walked away from the interview project when one too many homeless man told me what a great life it was. The last man I interviewed actually smiled when he spoke these words, "It's a good life. I guess I'm addicted to homelessness." In good conscience, I could not bring myself to publish the interview. Since moving back to the desert, I have been helping my friend Carl – Director of the St. Francis Shelter – with his website. Recently, he asked me if I would consider getting back into the interview project with the staff at the shelter. With some reservation, I reluctantly agreed.

Yesterday, I conducted the first interview with a man named Enzio.

In one fell swoop, through a handful of spontaneous answers, Enzio reconfirmed my faith in the human race, in community, and in the process of recovery.

I hope I can do justice to the words Enzio imparted to me during our 75-minute conversation. Only you can be the judge of that.

My friend Enzio fits the mold of the homeless man as I have come to know it: he is the product of broken relationships; he is addicted or been addicted to something; and he smokes cigarettes. I am told Enzio suffers mental illness and controls it with prescribed medicine. He is alcoholic.

Born in Tucson in 1977, his childhood was not typical. He claims one sister, a half-sister, and an adopted brother. While he earned his high school degree from Sabino High School where he enjoyed playing football, his adolescent journey includes five years at the Arizona Boys Ranch when he was 12 to 17-years old and life with foster care as he completed high school. A proud, reliable, and trustworthy man, Enzio looks back on his youth with no regrets.



*"We will fight in the shade!"*

His favorite quotation is from the film "300" and it reflects his optimism and his willingness to deal with immediate challenges in a positive way. At the Thermopylae Pass when the Persian emissary tells the Spartan warriors that the enormous number of Persian

arrows will blot out the sun, Dienikes – considered the bravest of Spartans – replies, “Then we will fight in the shade!” That, my friends, is making lemonade out of lemons!

Married twice, Enzo has three daughters, an adopted daughter, two stepchildren and a son by his second wife. He is particularly close to his teenage son. When Enzo separated from his second wife, he and his son moved in with a friend.

Despite his failing relationships, Enzo maintained employment with Abrams Airborne and Tradesman Trees, both in Tucson. He proudly recalls a situation with Abrams when he contributed to the solution of a complex negotiation as a government client was ready to walk away from a new weapon because it exceeded weight limitations. Enzo, an hourly laborer, timidly raised his hand and suggested that Abrams replace the heavy steel housings with lighter material. The company took Enzo’s advice and six days later, the deal was successfully closed. “As an hourly employee,” he says, “That made me feel real good that the company would listen to me. I was very proud.”

Enzo was dealing as well as could be expected until his friend and roommate’s untimely death in 2018. That event precipitated his fall from grace. When his friend died, the estate took control of the house and Enzo and his son could no longer occupy the home they shared for the previous year with the good man, a Samaritan of sorts.

The situation produced another event of biblical coincidence. With nowhere to turn, Enzo approached his stepchildren’s father, a man he despised and hated; a man who had no love for Enzo either. “We hated each other,” Enzo says and chokes on the vile words. “But together, we put those feelings aside for the sake of the boy.” At that moment, two proud men moved to that special place that Jesus speaks of when he tells us to love our enemies as we love ourselves... and our children!



*Love Your Enemies*

With the boy cared for and winter approaching, Enzo and his trusted dog Athena – a pit/boxer mix – had no choice but to turn to the streets. For the first time in his life, Enzo was homeless.

“I did not know what to do,” he says, “but I had to take care of my dog. Finally, it got so cold, I called the police on myself hoping they would take care of my dog.” The cruiser pulled up and the officer got out. “I was certain I would lose Athena, but I know she would be taken care of.”

The officer invited Enzo and Athena into his warm car. “Let me make a phone call,” he told me. I was certain it was all over when we pulled away from the curb, but the next thing I knew, he pulled up to the St. Francis Shelter.” The officer had called Carl and Carl insisted that he bring the homeless man and his dog to the winter shelter. That night was a defining moment in Enzo’s life. At the very moment he thought he had lost it all, he was found.

Enzio's best friend is Tommy who used to manage the shelter's thrift store. Shortly after the winter season in 2019, Enzio chanced to run into Tommy and Carl at a nearby Circle K. Tommy had been talking to Enzio for a while about joining the shelter staff. When Carl asked him, "How ya doin'?" all Enzio could think to say was "Help me."



Without the reluctance of the Cyrene, Carl lifted Enzio's cross.

Enzio celebrated his one-year tenure on the shelter staff in late March, on fellow staffer Anton's birthday. Today, he is assigned as head of the thrift store warehouse although he shares other duties with his staff mates. "Tommy and Carl gave me a new start on life," he gratefully says. "I would not be where I am without their help." Tommy, by the way, is a housing coordinator today with

Hope, Inc – Helping Ourselves Pursue Enrichment – in Tucson but still volunteers hours at the St. Francis Shelter. "I still see him often," Enzio explains. "He is an inspiration."

Tommy's example is not lost. When asked where he sees himself one year from today, Enzio answers, "I see me, my son and my dog in our own place, me with a good job and volunteering here at the shelter to pass on what I've learned." In the meantime, he fulfills his duties at the shelter.

Not everyone shares the vision that Enzio, Tommy and other men like them do. Some men do not last and leave the shelter staff after a week or two. "To them," Enzio explains, "it is a job, no more, no less. To people like me and Tommy, it is a community. We care about each other. That scares some guys. They prefer to be loners and not part of a community." Enzio holds no ill will against the men who see it differently than he does. It is one of many ways he and staff members like him personify the words of Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words." Enzio preaches well without words.

When a man falls from grace, it requires immense strength to rise up again. When asked what gives him strength, Enzio does not hesitate: "My son, my dog, and my God." His simple



*Enzio, his son and Athena*

and direct answer presents a lesson for all of us to draw from. Enzo has been in that dark place without hope or vision, but accepting strength from those he loves, he looks forward to a better world for all of us as communities large and small across the city, the country and the world realize that we are all connected and part of the single biggest community of all. “If we work together and stay positive,” he says, “everyone becomes better for it.”

“The promise of every day is bigger than my problems,” Enzo continues, and for that reason, he considers the early morning, communal recitation of The Lord’s Prayer his favorite part of the day. “I feel good when I say it with my brothers and it prepares me to begin each day with a positive attitude.”

Homelessness is dismal. When a man suggests it is a ‘good way of life,’ he is lying to himself in an attempt to disguise his self-pity. The St. Francis Shelter changed that for Enzo. “The shelter showed me I was not the forgotten man I thought I was. The community here shows me every day I am worth something, it gives me the footholds that have enabled me to climb out of the hole.”

Enzo is accountable and takes responsibility for everything that has happened in his life, the highs and the lows. “To keep moving forward,” he advises, “you have to cherish the highs and leave the lows behind.”

Enzo is committed to being a good dad and to giving back as much as he can to the people who have given to him what they could when he needed it the most. Many times, that may just involve being a good listener when someone needs to talk. “Just through conversation,” Enzo explains, “you can lift the spirit of someone who was ready to give up.”

Enzo will never give up.