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2 stories of renewal mark annual homeless memorial service

William Ross and Joy McKee survived difficult years, including homelessness, to rebound with new purpose

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When the community gathers today for the annual Homeless Persons' Memorial Service at Christ Church Cathedral on Monument Circle, two of the participants might not be traditional dignitaries, but instead are citizens with renewed dignity.

William Ross and Joy McKee were once homeless -- scrounging for cash to buy alcohol, sleeping in cars or on borrowed couches, not knowing from where their next meal might come.

They escaped the streets but know that, at one time, they could have ended up like the 27 people who died homeless in Indianapolis this year.

The annual service traditionally is held on the winter solstice, marking the longest night of the year. This year's service, which is open to the public, will include Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman and Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson. Also speaking will be McKee, Ross and Rick Feuille, who was once homeless.

The service has been held since 1996, and the list of homeless people who have died on the streets has grown to 308, said Emily Hervey with the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention.

McKee, 56, and Ross, 51, walked slightly different paths in life but were headed in the same direction.

McKee was born and raised in Edinburgh. Her biological parents were chronic alcoholics, she said, and she was the youngest of eight children. Her closest sibling was nine years older.

"I was told I was unplanned, unexpected, a mistake," she recalled.

When she was 9 years old and the only child left with her parents, she was sent to an adoptive home, only a block and a half from her parents.

Everybody in town knew her story, kids at school teased her, and her adoptive parents were emotionally and verbally abusive, she said.

She left when she was 18, without finishing high school, and moved to Indianapolis to briefly live with an older sister, but that didn't work out for long, McKee said.

She moved out and, as McKee put it, "went from one abusive relationship to another for the next 30 years."

She moved all over the country and married twice. Constants in her life: domestic violence, drugs and alcohol. She lived in cars, in shelters, on the streets. There were times she ate out of trash bins.

"One day after the next, it was worse," she recalled.

Her turning point came about a year ago, first with a 45-day stay at the Julian Center, a brief stay at a transitional program and then participation in the Julian Center's long-term program that includes continued therapy for drug and alcohol addiction.

Today, McKee continues working in that program and has a one-bedroom apartment on the Westside, a car and a part-time job.

"I have managed to untangle the web of all that I went through as a child," she said. "Life is normal today. I really don't think I'm much different from anybody else."

Ross' story also has its roots in his childhood. He was the third child born to a teenage mother who immediately turned him over to his grandmother and left. Although he grew up for 13 years with aunts and uncles and cousins, he was bounced from house to house, he said.

"I say I developed a psychological homelessness," he said. "There was no stability."

At 13, his alcoholic grandmother's condition turned bad, and relatives tracked his mother to Ohio. She was married and had a younger son. Ross was placed on a bus and sent to live with a mother he had never met.

Alcohol, drugs, prison

The next four years were better than his first 13, but his stepfather never fully took to him, and he still didn't have emotional security, he said. He dropped out of high school in the 10th grade, began using alcohol and drugs and, at 17, joined the Navy.

After serving "one year, nine months, 10 days and three hours," he left the Navy.

He went back to Ohio and started on a course of alcohol and drugs and criminal infractions that led to city and county jail stays and a felony theft charge that landed him in state prison.

He connected with a church during his prison stay and spent a year after his release at a church-sponsored college, but it didn't stick. He returned to his old stomping grounds and to drinking, and he got married.

"I flunked out of the marriage, too," he said, but not before his wife got pregnant. He saw his son at birth and then not again for 21 years, but now he's trying to build a relationship.

He moved to Anderson to be near a sister and ran afoul of the law for public intoxication and similar crimes. Married for seven years in the 1990s, Ross was able to continue his alcohol and drug use because his wife simply learned to budget for it, he said. Eventually, she decided enough was enough and cut him loose. From 1997 to 1999, he spent a lot of time at Wheeler Mission.

Then, while he was involved in a volatile, drug-tainted relationship, he was busted for serious charges of aggravated battery and criminal confinement.

While in prison, Ross transferred various college credits to Ball State University and ended up with first an associate's degree and then a bachelor's degree, shaving three years off his sentence. He was released in July 2006 to Wheeler, the only address he could muster.

Enlightened

"When I got to Wheeler's, I saw some of the same people I had seen there years earlier," he said. "That kind of scared me. I thought, is that going to be me in a few years?"

He credits God with finally causing him to hear what people were saying and accept the help offered. He learned to embrace programs and therapy aimed at helping him become independent, and he became diligent in applying his skills productively.

Now working on a master's degree at Martin University, Ross also uses his three-bedroom home as an "urban ministry," giving homeless people a place to stay for what they can afford so they can find solid ground.

He also let go of an undercurrent of rage that held him back for years.

"As I studied homelessness from an academic standpoint, a lot of that anger went away," he said. "I'm no longer angry at the community.

"I want to give back to the community."