

Mark Hayes: The Human Face of Homelessness

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On a Monday afternoon in March, Mark Hayes entered the Adult Basic Education (ABE) room at the Center for the Homeless clutching a two-page printout in his hands. “Look at this!” he eagerly announced, a smile stealing across his lined face as he handed me the papers. Giving the pages a quick glance, I noticed that they were a biography of a Civil War-era general. I did not understand Mark’s excitement until he explained that the nineteenth-century man shared his last name. Pointing to the second line, he drew my attention to General Arnold Hayes’ time as a professor of mathematics at the U.S. Naval Academy. Immediately, the significance became clear – Mark believed he had found an ancestor that shared his own passion for math.

Mark, a 62-year-old guest at the Center for the Homeless in South Bend, Indiana, spent many an afternoon upstairs in ABE room tutoring fellow homeless men and women as they prepared to earn their GED or complete other math homework. When there were no adults needing assistance, Mark would focus on independent learning in mathematics and history, his two favorite subjects. In late winter, he would often arrive holding a stack of books and papers under his arm and settle into his preferred seat in the middle of the room to begin reading and taking notes on Voltaire’s *Candide*. A few weeks later, after he had finished the book, he was happy to converse with others about it, even those who knew little about Voltaire, proudly revealing his newly-gained understanding. Mark’s next project emerged soon thereafter: reworking Archimedes’ discovery of pi to see how precise a calculation he could make.

I got to know Mark Hayes while working at the Center for the Homeless through a community-based learning course called “Confronting Homelessness” and taught by Professor Benedict Giamo.¹ Like Mark, I tutored in the ABE room, and I was able to observe him as both of us moved about our activities. When neither of us was actively tutoring, we would sit and talk about his latest personal projects.

In late March, after having lived at the Center for a year and a half, Mark moved out to live independently once again. I had been intrigued by his intellectual curiosity and his dual role as tutor and guest, so two weeks later, I arranged a time to sit down with him and discuss his past. After observing, interacting, and interviewing Mark, I have to come to realize that his life story is marred by a collection of detrimental conditions and experiences that is all too common among the 3.5 million homeless people today (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). Through the story he tells of his own pathway through poverty and growth at the Center, Mark reveals himself as a unique and human face of homelessness, demanding that we attend to the prevalence of poverty and destitution today.

Mark’s life history begins with a disturbing amount of abuse (of a kind he chose not explicitly name). It started when he was a young child and continued for decades thereafter. “It

¹ I have changed all names in this paper, with the exception of Professor Benedict Giamo, Dr. Peter Lombardo, and referenced scholars. All information on Mark Hayes’ life history comes from the interview I conducted on April 16, 2012, at the Center for the Homeless, as well as the conversations and interactions I had with Mark as a fellow Adult Basic Education tutor between January and April of 2012.

wasn't my parents, neither one of them," he told me, "but it still started when I was one year old." He was willing to speak openly about only select pieces to this puzzle, and he barely mentioned the perpetrator, simply saying that he had "a bad nurse." Yet the abuse had a clear and profoundly damaging effect on Mark's life, resulting in mental illness that he said began in 1962, when he was twelve years old, and lasted until 1972. As he describes it, "Your mind is a tape recorder; it records everything that happens to you. You get the pressure built up and it affects your conscious decisions, your behavior, your attitude." These traumatic experiences and the memories of them pervaded several decades of Mark's life.

Beyond the emphasis on abuse throughout his childhood, Mark did not tell me much more about that period of his life, jumping instead to his young adult years. After high school he studied mathematics at Purdue for two years before dropping out, a decision he says was related to his abusive home life, which made his conditions "just bad."² Instead of attributing his failure to stay in school exclusively to his mental state, Mark shared a somewhat delusional tale of a Communist takeover of Purdue, complete with Joseph Stalin and Karl Marx working in the administration, acting as the impetus for his withdrawal. While he acknowledged that the episode is not widely considered a part of the university's history, he nevertheless cites it as a primary factor in his decision to leave. This seemed, in part, an effort to create an alternate reality to disguise the monsters of his past and remove some of the responsibility from himself and his history.

After leaving Purdue, Mark served in the Navy during the Vietnam War, an experience he felt only exacerbated his mental illness. During his wartime service, Mark says that he endured constant emotional and verbal abuse, making his time in the military "terrible" at first. "In some ways I feel like a big baby," he told me, distractedly tapping his black and yellow ball cap against the table, "but there should be limits to abuse." This abuse in the Navy only ceased, Mark said, when he began to exhibit signs of his mental illness again, at which point "they finally got off my back."

Removing himself entirely from the harmful situation at the end of his five years of service allowed Mark an opportunity to recover. The Vietnam War veteran astutely understands the abating of his mental illness: "It wasn't innate to me; I wasn't born with it. I just got away from all of the abusive people and started growing and having a relationship with God, and mental illness went away." Although Mark believes his mental illness has been eradicated, vestiges seem to persist in his hold on conspiracy theories and the sometimes-illogical scenarios that dot his personal narrative, joining him to a large percentage of others in the homeless population who struggle, to various degrees, with the disease.³

Mark explained that his prospects began to look up he exited the Navy and was able to secure employment at Bendix, a tire manufacturing plant in South Bend, where he continued working for eleven years. He spent most of the first ten years in the automotive division and a subsequent year or so with the aircraft division. His employment ended abruptly, however, when

² Based on his history of mental illness and the single, short example he gave of a problem he experienced during college, I interpret this to mean that he suffered from volatile mental health and a shaky personal identity.

³ According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 20 to 25 percent of the homeless population in the United States suffers from severe mental illness. The total percentage of mentally ill persons, including those like Mark, who have less severe mental illness, is even greater (National Coalition 2009).

Bendix left town, and, like so many other poor and homeless individuals, Mark fell prey to the widespread phenomenon of deindustrialization. For the next 24 years, despite efforts to apply for work at “probably 2,000 places,” he was gainfully employed only sporadically and for no more than a few months at a time. The sole exception was the 30 months he spent with a transportation yard around the year 2000.

Despite his difficulties in sustaining employment, Mark has consistently taught Sunday school at a local Methodist church for the past thirty years. Given his steady service to the church, one is given pause to wonder why he was unable to secure gainful employment. Not having asked him this question directly, I can only speculate, but perhaps he was discriminated against in the job market because of his age or due to the fact that the South Bend economy simply did not offer many long-term positions at his skill level. It is also possible that more of the explanation lies with Mark’s mental health issues, although this seems less likely given his eleven years working with Bendix after leaving the Navy. Whatever the reason, Mark felt safe in his church community, passionate about his teaching, and maintained a strong enough faith in God to stay involved in Sunday school for decades.

Surviving for years without a regular income was not easy for Mark. Because of his uneven employment history, Mark was only rarely able to collect unemployment benefits, since Indiana state law stipulates that a person must be employed for at least four of the five calendar quarters before the week he or she files a claim. [The compensation is also limited to 26 weeks of full benefits—the amount being based on previous earnings—in a single 52-week period]. Although Mark was able to petition for a few extensions on the tier limit for benefits, he struggled to remain afloat financially. When asked how he managed to pay his bills, he responded, “I don’t know – the good Lord’s will, I guess. I borrowed money, begged, went to this organization [and] that organization, family members, church.” For Mark, life is “a long battle.”

Mark’s veteran status, past abuse, joblessness, and unstable mental health thus make him a quintessential victim of homelessness. Studying the particular susceptibility of Vietnam War veterans to homelessness, Robert Rosenheck and Alan Fontana write, “Vulnerability to homelessness seems to accumulate over time and involves multiple aspects of psychiatric illness, social isolation, and antisocial conduct” (1994, 424). Furthermore, veterans are generally overrepresented in the homeless population. In 2011, the proportion of male war veterans in the homeless population was 30 percent higher than that in the general population, and female veterans were overrepresented by a factor of two (Fargo et al. 2011). This information is troubling considering that veterans overall have a lower rate of poverty than the general population and have access to an exclusive system of benefits, including healthcare, disability and pension assistance, and homeless services (Fargo et al. 2011). When asked why he did not take advantage of this aid, Mark simply said, without clarification, “Every time I go to a veterans program, it blows up in my face like the war did, so I stay away.” Underlying this, Mark distrusts the U.S. military because of the abuse he suffered and because of the troubled history the U.S. military has had with involvement in foreign countries. Mark was also unmarried and socially isolated after returning from the war, two more factors that Rosenheck and Fontana conclude also strongly correlate to homelessness (Perl 2012). Nevertheless, Mark had defied the odds for a remarkable 30+ years before he too succumbed to homelessness.

Perhaps most remarkable, and crucial, in Mark’s tenaciousness to hold onto independent living was the relationship he enjoyed with his landlord in the decade before he entered the Center. This landlord provided Mark with an affordable housing situation, keeping the rent low

and allowing him to get behind a payment or two. In fact, Mark had never been “homeless” *per se*, as he always had shelter at night. By the late 2000s, however, he no longer had his job at the transportation yard and his two years’ of unemployment benefits had ran out, so he was once again unable to pay rent. Meanwhile, he explained, his landlord “went belly up” in the recession, losing his rental properties and leaving Mark without a place to stay. Although Mark had previously been afraid to enter a homeless shelter for fear of “never making it out,” his landlord encouraged him to investigate the Center for the Homeless, telling him that he heard it was less stressful than other shelters. Without housing for the first time in his life, Mark checked into the Center for the Homeless.

It is for people like Mark, who have endured poverty and homelessness and want to get back on their feet, that the Center for the Homeless was created. Founded in 1989 in collaboration with the University of Notre Dame, the Center aims to serve the needs of the homeless in a novel and comprehensive way. Unlike many “emergency” homeless shelters, the Center does not merely give food and temporary shelter to folks on the street; instead it welcomes the homeless in as guests to receive longer-term rehabilitation. The program includes mental health, substance abuse, and relationship counseling; a job readiness class; adult education tutoring to earn a GED or other degree; and debt reconciliation and budgeting support. The Center thus addresses the homeless as “victims of perverse macro-level social forces, compounded by their vulnerability” (Rossi 1992, 26). For many of the guests, the Center becomes a second home, offering the all-important sense of belonging that they often otherwise lack.

However, while Mark did feel a sense of this camaraderie at the Center, he did not build deep relationships with the other guests. When I asked Mark if he had experienced a strong sense of community at the Center, he responded simply, “I’m kind of a loner.” Dr. Peter Lombardo, Director of Community Involvement at the Center, says that “most people we see at the Center for the Homeless are disconnected in one sense or another from the usual networks of support – friends, family,” etc., and Mark was no different (2012). Mark did identify the unique reason he felt he was disconnected from society, saying that it was largely due to his unusual behavior, which he believes is the result of having a high-level intellect. “A lot of times you go into trances, you talk to yourself,” he explains. “That’s unacceptable to the public.... That scares people; they get the wrong impressions; they don’t get to know you.” Because of this, Mark has learned to be wary of others and carefully identifies those with whom he will associate. Even in the Adult Basic Education room, Mark rarely talked casually to others unless directly tutoring a guest; instead, he read classic historical works, worked on mathematics calculations, and occasionally spoke to volunteers about these favorite subjects.

That even the Center for the Homeless could not fully correct the deep social isolation in Mark’s life might seem disheartening. The poignant reality is that Mark has accepted a certain level of social distance from the majority of his neighbors (whether at the Center or outside it), choosing to place his confidence only in the select few whom he has distinguished as trustworthy. However, his time as a guest at the Center for the Homeless also helped mitigate his isolation to some degree, as he enjoyed great support from the staff. In fact, when I first asked Mark about the welcome he received there, he covered his face with his hands, took a deep breath, and warned me, “You’re going to make me cry now.” Slowly raising his head to look back at me, he said, “Jasmine Parks [a counselor at the Center], ... she welcomed me with open arms. She’s a very good girl in my life – that intelligence, that heart, that love.” Mark continued praising his coach at the Center – “She’s probably the best counselor in the building.” Indeed,

Jasmine fought for her client every step of the way, whether she had to battle Mark himself or other staff members at the Center.

Mark is quick to cite the time Jasmine went to bat for him when he resisted participation in the Center's required STAR (Skilled, Trained, Able, and Ready) program, a set of classes designed to teach guests job skills and assist residents in finding employment. Mark displayed an unwillingness to enter the program because of what he felt was a very slim probability that anyone would want to employ him for a single year before his retirement-eligible age of 62, and he believed his time at the Center could be better used addressing other goals. Jasmine sympathized with Mark's feelings, and she also worried that if Mark's applications were consistently turned down, he might interpret that as a pattern of abuse recurring in his life. With this in mind, Jasmine chose to honor Mark's wish not to participate in the STAR classes.

It was decided, instead, that Mark would serve as a math tutor. Mark carefully explained to me how he believed he embodied the qualifications that the Center looks for in tutors: first, they must know the subject area, and second, they must be able to present it. With his 96% average in calculus at Purdue and his experience teaching first- and second-graders for over 30 years as a Sunday school teacher, he felt that he fully met the criteria to be an effective tutor. "I'm used to breaking it down every week for people at levels way lower than me," he said. Through tutoring, Mark found his place at the Center for the Homeless, and what is more, he participated and gave of himself, rather than only passively taking what the Center had to offer him. Furthermore, Mark's presence as a tutor in ABE gave him a valued position of authority within what is more typically the vertical structure in homeless shelters, where relationships are frequently defined by differences in position and power.

Mark was determined to emerge from his time at the Center a different person, and that meant taking responsibility for decision-making and pursuing his interests, which was evident in his creative dedication to ABE. He proudly showed me the addition and subtraction tables he had created with the help of another volunteer. Pulling two papers off of a wall of mathematics resources, he described the grids' similarity to a multiplication table and explained their usefulness to people who are slow to add and subtract small figures. Mark did not spend time in the ABE room simply to fulfill a requirement set by his coach; he genuinely treasured the opportunity to teach other guests math skills and actively contribute to the Center.

Jasmine, beyond allowing Mark to make important decisions about his path at the Center, also helped him deal with his past abuse during individual counseling sessions. "I had to cry it out in front of her about all the crap that's happened to me – I don't know how many times," Mark told me candidly. (If ever Mark was afraid to show emotion, he is no longer. Coming close to tears several times during our interview, he also mentioned many former episodes of crying.) What Jasmine did for Mark during these sessions was to lovingly transform his attitude through sincere support and encouragement. "All my life I've been told, 'You can't, you can't, you can't.' ... Over here I'm told, 'You can, you can, you can.'" Mark instructively explained why he felt counseling worked for him: "It's because the abuses that other people do to you, that's not your fault, okay? So it's not your fault, there is a God in heaven, there are second chances, and it's logical that they can remove that [abuse] from you." By clearly laying out three rational reasons for the success of his abuse counseling, Mark is also reminding himself that he is not to blame for the decades of maltreatment he endured. He praises the counseling sessions with Jasmine for teaching him more about mental illness than he ever learned in his health, psychology, and sociology classes in high school and college, particularly the understanding that mental illness could be either a congenital or a traumatically-induced condition. Only decades

later, when he was finally able to deal with his abuse in a safe setting, did he realize that his mental illness was not something of which to be ashamed and but something that he could move past.

Another key element in Mark's recovery was his participation in the SOSH (Starting Over, Stepping Higher) program. In SOSH class, one of the Center's premier programs for overcoming abuse, Mark confronted his past through discussion with other guests and the use of multimedia materials. Watching what Mark describes as clips of "unusual circumstances" concerning the maltreatment of people brought guests' experiences of abuse into the open and helped them confront their own histories. "They gripped my soul quite often," he says of SOSH classes. Recounting a segment from *The Lion King* he viewed during the class, he again was moved to tears. He explained a scene in which Simba, the young protagonist, speaks to his deceased father's image in a watery reflection, telling his father that he had given up. The father responds, 'No, you have to go back, try it again!' Mark saw in Simba's surrender his own personal history and the sense of disillusionment that he developed throughout life.

Mark explained that he used to "play around" with numbers. As early as age 12, he began to feel that his "mathematical fun" was making his dad an alcoholic, so he stopped doing math except when it was required for homework problems. The reflective and therapeutic work done during SOSH class helped Mark return to the experience of doing math for enjoyment. This has brought him great joy, as evident in his sense of pure elation at recently using geometry, trigonometry, and fractions to recreate Archimedes' calculation of pi. The SOSH classes also enabled Mark to establish some level of connection with his peers. While Mark self-identifies as a "loner" and may not rely heavily on others or belong to a large social circle, SOSH helped him to build meaningful, if only temporary relationships with his peers at the Center. Mark explained that at the end of the program, group members write letters of support to one another. Mark received two uplifting cards telling him that he had proved his peers' first impressions of him to be wrong that he was different (in a positive way) than they had initially thought. These people had taken the time to get to know Mark, to look his past his idiosyncrasies – his way of talking to himself or going into trances – in order to see the good soul underneath. SOSH classes have had similar impacts on other guests as well. Many times when people enter the Center for the Homeless, they feel ashamed to be in a homeless center, and their difficult life experiences may have conditioned them to believe that they are not worthwhile. Yet miracles happen routinely at the Center for the Homeless because guests, through SOSH class and time with their counselors, are able to shirk their self-identity as "failures" and join a supportive community.

After 18 months at the Center for the Homeless, it was finally time for Mark to leave. He had confronted his history of abuse, regained a sense of self-worth, and found a purpose for his mathematics passion through tutoring. The impetus for his departure was his 62nd birthday – since he had become eligible to collect retirement benefits, both Social Security and his Bendix pension, it was time to free up a bunk for the next person. Mark has just begun to create a new life outside of the Center. He celebrates his newfound opportunity to creatively explore the workings of math and history, though he is still figuring out what his regular routine will be in his independent state. He will not look for a job, but, he says, "I can do math. I can do my own formulas. I can read history." He remarks that he is enjoying retirement more than most anything else in his life because he is finally doing what he wants to do. "I'm funded to do whatever I want. It's a great joy to me." Mark has found himself in the delight of learning and has a new a sense of purpose in his life.

Mark is currently living out of a motel, and he shies away from questions regarding his search for a home, saying in somewhat cryptic terms that although the Center tried to assist him in finding long-term housing, “it didn’t work out.” It appears that, since he was pushed out of the Center as soon as his first retirement check arrived, he was unable to save up enough money to pay for a more permanent place to call home. Mark has hope, however, that he will soon move in with a friend for a while, thus allowing him to save money while he searches for affordable housing. Beyond this, he seems to have done little concrete planning for the future.

Despite the continued precariousness of Mark’s situation, he does not discount the transformative effect the Center had on him and on other guests. He emphasizes the value of the Center’s personalized and rehabilitative approach. For people who are led into homelessness by their poor education, addictions, and abuse, the Center is prepared to lift them out. Mark thinks the “plan of attack” – which includes tutoring, GED preparation, job searching, counseling, and SOSH classes – makes a “big, big difference.” Not only do the staff and volunteers address these larger issues, they also deal with small things, like having the requisite math skills to pay a landlord. The Center for the Homeless serves as tremendous resource for guests looking for support to make changes in their life. As Mark puts it, “If you’re serious, the Center can help you out.”

Yet the Center did not succeed in one major respect with Mark; it did not release him to a stable environment. Perhaps the source of the problem was neither Mark’s ability (nor inability) to secure housing, nor a lack of resources at the Center but that the Center simply no longer knew how to help Mark. He had dealt with his abuse, had stabilized mentally, and had found a home tutoring at ABE. Perhaps, in Mark’s case, the staff felt they had done all they could do. They might have assumed he was ready to search for housing independently, and that it was their responsibility to move their focus to the next person.⁴

This leads to an important realization about the nature of homelessness. What the Center for the Homeless and many other shelters do well is to provide needed, individualized assistance to homeless people through education, job preparation, and support in dealing with conditions of abuse (substance or otherwise), yet too often the attention to homelessness stops there. Working with individuals on a purely individual and reactionary level can help alleviate the epidemic but not prevent it. Attention must also be paid to addressing the economic and social systems – those “perverse macro-level social forces” – that placed shelter guests in the position of homelessness in the first place.⁵ A multitude of such forces work against the poor and homeless, ranging from institutional racism to exported manufacturing jobs, and they demand structural fixes. At the same time, the dearth of interpersonal support that homeless people face, as they often lack meaningful, loving relationships, calls for attention as well. To this effect, places like the Center for the Homeless do great work, as they help their guests reestablish a sense of belonging and community.⁶

In the end, this is Mark’s story. More precisely, this is Mark’s story as told to me and filtered through my words, with the connection to “real” historical events at times unclear and dubious. This may not be the whole truth, but ultimately, it does not limit the significance of

⁴ For a deeper discussion of this phenomenon, see Lyon-Callo 2000, 328-45.

⁵ Those vulnerabilities include unemployment, social isolation, crime, mental illness, poor physical health, and long-term alcohol and drug abuse (Rossi, 1992, 26).

⁶ For more on the importance of social belonging and community, see Sister Mary Rose McGeady 1992, 51-70.

telling the story. It is, tragically, only one story among many about fellow citizens who face scarce job opportunities, poor education, various forms of abuse, mental illness, limited social networks, and addictions that lead to them to situations of extreme poverty and destitution – oftentimes without the assistance of resources like the Center for the Homeless. What is most important about this story is that it was one that Mark wished to tell me about his life, and it demonstrates critical pathways, turning points, and ideas about his personal experience with homelessness. Mark’s story paints him as a face of homelessness in a humanizing way, with a dignity that extends much further. Mark is not a one-dimensional “college drop-out” or “veteran” or “homeless man,” but a dynamic human being with a distinctive past and optimistic prospects for the future. It is our responsibility to make sure that he, and every other person in poverty and facing homelessness, has the opportunity to flourish.

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