The gospel of 'White Mike'

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Editors' note: A little over a year ago, writer Jeff Stern profiled a group of three homeless men who lived together along Durham's railroad tracks ("The Family," March 29, 2006). This week, one of them, Mike Kelly, graduated from Housing for New Hope's PATH program. He's working and just moved into his own apartment. Recently, he sat down with Stern to talk about his stay at Phoenix House transitional housing, beating addictions, his new life and his old friends, Mark and Concrete.

A year ago, Mike Kelly was homeless, camping out along Durham's railroad tracks.
Photo by Lissa Gotwals

I called myself the invisible man. I wasn't a human being because I couldn't prove who I was. The only people who knew me were the officers who had arrested me. Now, I am graduating from the Phoenix House. I have transitioned into my own apartment, and I've been hired there as a night watchman, so I now have two jobs. I want to help any way I can.

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Not so long before, I had been living the American dream. I was making $60,000 a year, I had a home, a family and two cars. Growing up my life was good too. You watched *Leave it to Beaver*? That was just like the neighborhood I grew up in. I was my own little version of Eddie Haskell.

In less than six months, my world came to an end. I got a divorce, lost my family, my home and almost everything I owned, and it happened so fast I couldn't believe it. It has been said that the average American is a few paychecks and a few bad decisions away from being homeless.

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This is difficult for me. They are my friends. Mark wants to make the decision, and he has, "kinda sorta," like he'd always say—he's "kinda sorta" tried. But he's so used to being the way he is that it's hard to change. But he's proud of me. He's a full-blown alcoholic; he's not ready to change yet.

He's tried, he just can't stop. I have spoken with him, I've cried with him, I've begged him, and he's made it as far as the shelter. I love him like a brother, he was the only family I had for a while. I'm partially responsible, because when he went to the shelter I was so proud of him, I gave him ten dollars to buy some cigarettes and I know he went out and bought cigarettes and some beer.

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The road to heaven is a narrow one, as if a path. The road to hell is wide and easy to follow. Which road was I on? I did not know. I would lay in my camp and pray to God daily. I would beg his forgiveness for my pride and vanity, which surely brought me this punishment. I would try to figure out when it started, so I could guess when it would end.

You're always afraid. When you lay down to go to sleep, you're afraid of the rats that come out at night. And you're afraid of the people that come after you when you're sleeping. You can't have a good night's sleep when you're afraid of what might come out. But I survived in the woods two years like that.

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One day, I met people from Housing for New Hope. People had talked to me about the shelters before. I told them about how they only house bums, and they kick you out every morning anyway. I told them how the mission makes you work without pay, just ten bucks of "love money," and how you can't leave when you want to. I compared it to white slavery, and I didn't like it.

I didn't want to stop drinking. Keep in mind that when you're homeless and sleeping outside in all sorts of weather, alcohol is to the human body what antifreeze is to a car. It helps you through the weather, even though over time it causes internal damage.

Then I almost died. Twice.

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Concrete got to where he knew we went to the Narcotics Anonymous meetings every Thursday night at Blacknall Presbyterian, and he'd be there waiting for me when the van got there. And he knew when the meetings ended too, so he was always there when I came out, too. Sometimes he wouldn't even say anything, he'd just stand next to me, and grin. That's Concrete way. Sometimes he'd poke me in the belly and say, "You're getting fat now!" That's his way of saying he's proud of me. For Concrete to do that, that means something.

I think when Concrete disappeared, he made that step on his own. I think he went to the ER, and had himself committed. They're not allowed to just come and take you. He went up there and got the meds he needed, but when they discharge you, they only give you seven days' worth of meds. After that, you're on your own.

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The other guys in the Phoenix House, you get close to them. They're your friends, they're your comrades, you're all fighting for the same thing. And then one day one of them doesn't come home.

They might have gotten back with a girlfriend that's still using, and once they use, they know they can't come back. When you sit in the meetings, they tell you that if you're lucky, two or three out of the eight people in the house will make it through the program. Probably only one.

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Street people can get no help. But I have seen couples separate just so the wife can go apply for government aid because her husband left her, and they get it! Women pull up all day long driving BMWs and Acuras, and cash in. So many people suffer needlessly while others lie, cheat and steal from these programs.

Housing for New Hope does the one thing not enough organizations do. They understand that you can't sit in an office waiting for a call from someone who has no phone to call with. They go out and find the people that truly need help.

Mike Kelly graduated from Housing for New Hope's program on April 29. Above, he gives an address backed by Phoenix House manager Sam Fisher, right, and program director Alphonso Williams.
Photo by Derek Anderson

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I did have a blowout out on the road to recovery. I had to pull over and fix the tire.

When I had been at the Phoenix House for about six weeks, I got in an argument. At that time, I was starting to really feel all the emotions that I had been drowning out with the alcohol. It happened when I had only put in 28 hours of work one week, instead of the minimum of 32 that the Phoenix House requires you to do. They came in and said I needed to get up and go find more work. I said they've been working the hell out of me, that I just needed to lie in bed and sleep that day. Things kind of escalated from there. I was pretty much ready to give up.

Every normal human being is going to get mad at the alarm clock every once in awhile. Maybe you stayed up watching *Letterman* when you shouldn't have. And that mood stays with you. Everybody rebels against the system at a certain point.

They forced me out of the house that morning, and I got on the bus, and I ended up going out to the old campsite. I just sat there by myself for a few hours. I sat there and watched a couple trains go by, I sat and looked at all the dirt and empty beer bottles. And I thought to myself, "Nope, we're gonna do this. It's for the best. I don't need to be back out here."

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When I moved into my new apartment in December, there was all this bamboo over there. I'd been living there for about a week, and one day I was walking around the corner carrying some stuff, and the wind picked up and blew some of the bamboo to the side, and I saw something behind it. I said what the hell is that? It looks just like a tent. And it looks just like the tent I had lived in.

I asked around, and it turns out a guy got kicked out of the apartment complex because he couldn't pay his rent, so he lived in a tent while he was getting his money caught up. But he screwed up again. So he's gone. But I said I'll leave the tent there as a friendly reminder of where I came from.

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Just keep in mind, all homeless people are afraid. We are afraid of the system, the law, losing whatever we have left, trying to start over and failing again. But most of all, we are afraid to change. We have gotten used to who we are, and we have been forced to accept it. We need you to help us believe that change is possible.

Thank you for listening.

For information on Housing for New Hope's programs, see www.housingfornewhope.org. *To read more about Mike, see* www.housingfornewhope.org/Michael-s-Story.249.0.html.