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Artistry, compassion inspire escape from homelessness



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by Cheryl Deep

The problem of homelessness has long plagued Detroit, but two Wayne State University researchers have found an innovative way to bring fresh attention to the problem.

Olivia Washington, associate professor, Institute of Gerontology and College of Nursing; and David Moxley, professor, School of Social Work, have researched homelessness for nearly a decade.

Each night in Detroit, 10,000 people have no home. About half of the city's homeless are African American and many of those are women, 50 or older.

Sharing stories

In June, Washington and Moxley premiered a breakthrough event combining photographic artistry with honest autobiography to profile the often-forgotten older woman who becomes homeless. "Telling My Story at the Edge of Recovery" features eight homeless women willing to share with the public the intimate and disturbing details of their journey.

At the premier on June 13, eight photographic panels the size of classroom blackboards lined the foyer of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Bricktown Building in Detroit. Each panel represented the life of the African-American woman seated before it.

From a distance, the panels shimmered with flowing colors, photos and drawings layered into an aesthetic backdrop. Up close, specific images within the panels emerge. Photos of crumbling buildings, of garbage-filled yards, of empty churches take shape within the swirl of colors. You enter the mind and soul of homelessness in Detroit where hope vanishes and society is a closed door.

The women's stories varied from drug addiction and mental illness to escaping an abusive husband or losing a home to a fire.

Contributing factors

Homelessness has many faces and many causes, according to Washington. She and Moxley isolated six critical factors that can tip vulnerable people (low income, mid-life or older) into homelessness: changes in status due to divorce or death of a spouse or partner; accidents such as house fires; changes in employment due to the onset of serious health issues; limited retirement income; lack of affordable housing; and the least influential, substance abuse or mental illness.

The pilot project provides innovative therapy intervention to participants. Group support meetings try to lessen the psychological trauma of homelessness while building self-esteem, trust and confidence. Women are encouraged to own their experience (primarily by sharing their story) and to take responsibility for the changes needed to move out of homelessness. "Group members are empowered," Washington explains. "We help them to master their conditions and the circumstances that encouraged them."

"Telling My Story at the Edge of Recovery" is not about hope abandoned but about hope reborn. Today, seven of the eight women are self-supporting and live in their own apartments. They heal themselves by

helping other women travel the rough roads out of homelessness and by their willingness to expose the truths of their own journey.

(Pictured from left to right: Washington, Moxley and Phyllis Ivory Vroom, dean, School of Social Work.)

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