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Homelessness in Arkansas

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Homelessness in Arkansas

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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Fayetteville State University
Bachelor of Arts - Telecommunication, 2003

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Abstract

This research aims to reveal a realistic narrative about homelessness in Arkansas through the qualitative perspective provided by people directly affected by homelessness. We interviewed experts with both theoretical and applied experience in examining the causes and different pathways into homelessness, as well as some of the avenues that can assist someone to successfully navigate out of homelessness. This research documentary focuses particularly on the experiences of homeless families headed by single women and the challenges they face in resolving homelessness. Qualitative interviews were performed and a website was created that is targeted towards helping others to find the necessary resources needed to escape the vicious cycle of homelessness.

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Research.....	4
III.	Production.....	7
IV.	Writing.....	9
V.	Conclusion.....	10
VI.	References.....	12
VII.	Appendix.....	14

I. Introduction

Social issues have always interested me. They led me to my field of journalism, which I consider to be an applied field rather than theoretical and documentarian in nature. What I produce is a daily record of the events in the community in which I reside. I consider journalism a profession on the front lines of the changes that affect the community.

Over the course of my career, when I came across the subject of homelessness, it became increasingly clear there was a type of homeless person that was rarely seen on the streets: a person who, through a medical or financial crisis, fell into homelessness (Curtis, Corman, Noonan, & Reichman, 2013). Their stories intrigued me, particularly when I learned there were families that were homeless. It sparked a desire to learn more about this specific group and certain life events that attributed to their homeless status.

Homeless families tend to be led by single parents (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Also, homeless women have a greater chance of being victims of sexual violence on the streets (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010; Mago et al., 2013). Most homeless families are headed by women, and it is difficult for them to find stable, affordable housing, work and a support system to help them care for themselves and their children (Mago et al., 2013).

Many female-led homeless families became homeless due to domestic violence, medical or psychological issues, and/or financial crises (McQuiston, Gorroochurn, Hsu, & Caton, 2014; "Providing Care for Children and Adolescents Facing Homelessness and Housing Insecurity", 2013).

This special interest I have in homeless issues comes from a very personal place. I spent a portion of my childhood growing up in a borough of New York City- Brooklyn. In particular, I grew up in a neighborhood called Brownsville, known for being an impoverished area high in crime and drug use. Growing up, my mother would take my brother and myself to Manhattan where the glaring inequities of the financial system dwelled in an uneasy peace. In the 1980s, Wall Street was the location for making money; however, signs of poverty and homelessness were seen on every corner in the city. As a child, I could not bear to pass a homeless individual and without putting some change into his or her cup.

It becomes more personal when I realized how dangerously close my own family could have come to becoming homeless. My mother was a single parent receiving public assistance; after a series of tragedies and later a brush with domestic violence, the losses truly devastated our small family. She worked long, unorthodox hours in a menial job to help keep us off the streets.

I share this story to display this fact: All it could have taken was one medical emergency or financial disaster and we could have ended up in a shelter, or even worst- bouncing from one relative to another trying to stay off the streets.

My goal in researching and producing this documentary is to tell the story of how deceptively easy it can be to slip into homelessness, especially if you are a woman with children. I interviewed women who freely share their stories and freely admit that they are not “superwomen”, but sought help aggressively and endured hard times in order to transition out of homelessness. I sought to give them a voice and to research some of the root causes of homelessness; additionally, I hoped to explore

strategies for helping people to transition out of homelessness. For example, does a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” strategy work better than a more communal and community-minded social support system approach?

II. Research

When it comes to researching the topic of homelessness and poverty, I used a variety of sources, including local experts working in social services and academic specialists. I took note of the studies citing Arkansas' ranking in child poverty and child hunger ("America's Youngest Outcasts," n.d.).

In order to further explore the concept of “working poor”, I read *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich. In this book, she delves into what life is like living on minimum wage with several different jobs. It particularly illustrated the dead end nature of certain low skilled, low paying jobs. A lot of those jobs were labor intensive with long hours, seemingly arbitrary rules leaving little time for reflective thought at the end of the day; that is not counting the energy she claims is needed to simply prepare for the next day, tend to her children (if she had any to care for during her stint), and prepare dinner (Ehrenreich, 2002). Many people who are living in poverty and transitioning out of homelessness have to take these jobs because they have no other choice. It can make the option of further education difficult or nearly impossible when the funds are just not available and a regularly generated income is needed to continue living.

Malcolm Gladwell wrote about the expense of not treating homelessness, especially chronic homelessness, which results in what is commonly referred to as a *power law* distribution; this is where more of the activity falls more toward one extreme when plotted on a graph (Gladwell, 2009). Since chronic homelessness is not the main focus of this paper, I did not focus much on this in detail.

I interviewed Georgia Mjartin, the Executive Director of “Our House”, a family shelter highly recommended due to its comprehensive approach to dealing with and eliminating homelessness. The

shelter requires its inhabitants to find employment within sixteen days [AD5] of being admitted; it provides workforce and GED skills training to help the shelter residents gain the skills necessary for employment. It also provides free childcare to help parents save money for a deposit on a rental home or a down payment for a house.

Another benefit of “Our House” shelter is that it helps connect families with health care providers and counselors, which is crucial considering that homeless children deal with mental health and medical issues at a much higher rate than children who grow up with stable housing (Coker et al., 2009).

It has a traditional shelter set up as well as apartment style living facilities for families transitioning out of homelessness. Mjartin emphasizes the use of metrics to measure the success of the program. While Mjartin has not actually experienced homelessness herself, she has endeared herself to many of the residents of “Our House” due to her kindness and accessibility. Although “Our House” was founded by churches and denominations of different faiths, she emphasized that “Our House” does not require residents to attend religious services.

Aaron Reddin is a homeless advocate in Central Arkansas and having been homeless once himself. He is an invaluable resource and advisor when discussing the subtexts of the choices between living in an unsheltered or sheltered homeless environment. He illustrated some of the basic needs of companionship that can be neglected or negated inadvertently by homeless shelters. For example, in his experience most homeless shelters do not allow pets. Pets are universally accepted as being part of one’s family (Gunter & Furnham, 1999, Bryant, 1990); on the streets, a dog not only provides companionship but also protection. Taking that into consideration, some homeless individuals do not seek out shelters knowing their pets will not be allowed.

Another major concern he brought up was regarding relationships. Many shelters segregate its residents by sex. Some shelters only allow men, others are women only, and others are family shelters only allowing women with children.

Imagine trying to coordinate a way out of poverty with your partner when he or she is across town in another shelter. Being homeless does not mean one does not deserve personally fulfilling relationships. Due to scheduling conflicts and situational constraints, I could not interview Reddin for this part of the documentary.

I interviewed University of Arkansas, Little Rock (UALR) professor Emeritus David Sink, with the Institute of Government, to cover common misconceptions about homelessness and homeless people. Sink is one of the inaugural professors in the William J. Clinton School of Public Service and taught there as well as UALR. He was part of a committee to develop a 10-year plan aimed to ending chronic homelessness.

He provides a look at ways the government can get involved in ending homelessness, as well as offers a model for community-based nonprofits to better coordinate their efforts to help people (as in some cases, they are duplicative).

Over the course of these conversations, I realized that I really wanted to focus on single parents trying to transition out of homelessness and the unique challenges they faced instead of a broad based attempt to catalogue homelessness.

III. Production

Scheduling and time seemed to be the biggest obstacles during the production phase. My interview subjects all work full-time jobs or are full-time college students (as do I), so planning ahead and incorporating backup dates into the schedule was critical to the documentary.

I filmed my subjects in surroundings that related to them: in their homes, outside their place of work and at popular locations in Little Rock. It is important for the documentary to have a pleasing visual aesthetic and clear sound; it is also important to not let that overshadow the importance of the stories being shared.

One of the interview subjects who was formerly homeless, Ashley Shaw, was filmed at her home in North Little Rock; she had since moved out of “Our House,” the homeless shelter she and her three children once resided. I filmed video of her inside and outside her home with her children. I wanted to reflect the clear resilience of the children and to have a visual representation of the work she did to build a home for herself.

Nia Sockwell, another interviewee, was filmed and interviewed on the grounds of “Our House.” Her shoot proved much more difficult due to a nearly continuous influx of residents in the apartment style residence she lived in. I wanted to be very careful about preserving the privacy of the other residents on the campus.

There were certain challenges to production that were anticipated but were nonetheless disappointing. I wanted to film people saying common stereotypes about homelessness in order to establish that there is

a pervasive stigma that people have toward homelessness; this would establish why homeless families go to great lengths to hide the fact that they are homeless. Predictably, no one would go on camera. Homelessness is an issue that makes many people feel uncomfortable, especially when asking them to share certain stereotypes they may hold. People politely refused and when asked about the reason for the refusal, many stated that sharing those thoughts in a digital medium would cast them in an unflattering light.

Basic videography techniques were employed and capturing clean video was not a problem; however, audio did prove to be a bit of a hurdle. Some of the interviews took place outside; if the day was sunny and windy, it affected not only how the person answers questions, but the quality of capturing the audio of the question.

The same principle goes for shots where a crowd is in the background. In order to preserve the importance and integrity of the shots, I resolved to use subtitles when necessary.

In the production process, I was very careful not to cut into the dialogue of a subject while answering a question and followed up when their answer took an unexpected turn. I tried to find ways to incorporate unexpectedly new information into the documentary and not exclude them for the sake of adhering to a pre-written outline.

IV. Writing

The writing phase was probably the most difficult phase in sorting out what material should be kept and what should be excluded. When the documentary was first conceived, I did not want a narrator because I thought it could distract from the theme of the story. In the end, however, I decided to use a combination of graphical texts and a narrator to transition between scenes in different ways and to alter the tone as necessary.

Statistics had to be presented in a way that did not feel like the viewer was “watching” a newspaper article. It is also the most difficult part to remember where to incorporate silence into all of the sound recorded, as well as judiciously using natural sound to craft a story.

As I worked on a rough draft to final written script, I realized true writing is not complete until the editing process begins. That is when you see and hear what works and what doesn't; what needs to be re-cut or if you may need additional video. Transcribing the audio was the most tedious part of the process, but it was also crucial for identifying quotes that best illustrate the ideas and concepts the interviewee is trying to convey. Weaving the multiple interviews into a compelling narrative was challenging because there was a wealth of information and asides they shared. However, due to time constraints and the necessity of keeping the documentary on a strict focus, I had to pare down certain statements. One way I plan to preserve their asides and anecdotes is through the website I plan to maintain; I will preserve it for the next five years to serve as a resource for those who are facing homelessness.

V. Conclusion

The process of creating the documentary was enormously transformative in several different ways. Personally, it forced me to confront certain misconceptions I harbored internally, as well as think about certain ways public services can end homelessness and poverty; whether it is a delay in public services or calls from school teachers questioning the care of children.

The conception of the project was uncomplicated; care and thought was given to be sure the personal dignity of the women interviewees was respected. Looking at the end product only inspires me to tell more stories of homeless families trying to navigate their way out of poverty, and I would like to especially focus on the discrimination they face in that journey. I feel their stories were presented respectfully, humanely, and truthfully, and could help people to recognize discrimination they may have but could not articulate. In fact, the women who became homeless (Nia and Ashley) revealed they had stereotypes and misconceptions about homeless people before becoming homeless themselves.

I feel the strongest part of the film is the personal narrative of the women I interviewed. Their grace and candidness in speaking about their experiences lend them an authentic credence. Having Dr. David Sink as an academic authority with his experience in creating a Central Arkansas plan to eliminate homelessness; and Georgia Mjartin of "Our House", a family-oriented homeless shelter, as a practical authority helped lay out the issue and also gave hope and a call to action. My aim in this work is to provide a voice for the disenfranchised; I hope to make their issues relatable and inspire others to pay attention to their community and hopefully make a difference.

The weak points of the film include the fact that there was not a more comprehensive sampling of women from different regions of Arkansas, sharing how the struggle out of homelessness can vary from region to region or situation to situation. Also, in acquiring a certain degree of candor can be difficult in that it takes time to gain the trust of people affected since the stigma and shame of homelessness is deeply felt. It is difficult to navigate the balance between capturing the film needed to document the issue in a compelling way, yet also respecting the privacy of those interviewed. A more immersive style might also work in spending a typical day with the women in order to better observe their experiences. More research is needed to track the long term success of families and specifically single women with children escaping homelessness.

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VII. Appendix

Script

Video	Audio
<p>Cut to prominent Little Rock Landmarks,</p> <p>Cut to Clinton Presidential Center</p> <p>Cut to Arkansas River Wetlands</p> <p>Downtown Bridges & downtown traffic interlaced with video of homeless</p> <p>Title Screen Text “Homelessness In Arkansas” over video</p>	<p>Nat music</p> <p>Nat sound fade down</p>
<p>Fade to exteriors of Little Rock Central High School and the Mobi gas station</p> <p>Cut to cloud video</p> <p>Cut to Downtown Bridges & downtown traffic</p> <p>Cut to Rivermarket video</p>	<p>Narrator: Little Rock is known for being a flashpoint in the black civil rights movement. Home to Central High school it’s where segregation was directly challenged in 1957 - thanks to the Supreme Court’s historic Brown versus the Board of Education ruling.</p> <p>Narrator: Fast forward just over half a century, and Little Rock is facing a different challenge. Homelessness. According to the 2010 U.S. census, 14 percent of the population of Little Rock lives below the</p>

<p>Cut to read and reveal graphic: Causes of Homelessness</p>	<p>poverty line.</p> <p>The main causes of homelessness is a shortage of affordable housing, an increase in poverty, domestic violence, mental illness and substance abuse. In some cases it is a gradual downward spiral and in other cases, it's a significant life event that triggers it.</p> <p>Fade to black</p>
<p>Dissolve to interview with Nia, Resident of Our House Homeless Shelter</p> <p>Video of Nia interlaced with cutaways</p>	<p>Narrator:</p> <p>Nia is a Little Rock native. She has been homeless twice.</p> <p>The first time she escaped from an abusive spouse, who isolated her from family.</p> <p>NIA SOT:</p> <p>5:56</p> <p>I had no place to go and we went there and for the first month - it was the hardest thing I could ever remember doing - was going to a shelter and then having a baby.</p> <p>NIA SOT:</p> <p>6:13</p> <p>We had to be out at 7am in the morning. We couldn't come back until 4:30. At the time they didn't have any daycare or anything like that - that the programs and stuff they have not currently.</p>

<p>Cut to nonspecific shelter video</p>	<p>Narrator: Some shelters require residents to leave at a certain time every day and allow them to return later. Others may require residents to attend services or pay a daily rate after a certain amount of time to stay there.</p>
<p>Cut to Nia full again</p> <p>Cut to Nia talking with her daughter</p>	<p>Nia sot 8:59 But to me it was a chance I had roof over my head, I had a room and I took that as a first step toward being positive about my situation. And I kind of tried to make the best of it</p> <p>Narrator: Nia did eventually get out of homelessness, but a combination of factors would send her back to a shelter nearly a decade later.</p>
<p>Fade in time lapse sunrise sequence of Little Rock</p> <p>Little Rock River market shots</p> <p>Cut to man sleeping on bench.</p> <p>Cut to busy streets, people walking</p>	<p>Narrator: When thinking of a homeless person, the image of a grizzled person may come to mind. Dirty clothes, worn down shoes, bearing a sign asking for money. It's a common stereotype but in reality homeless families are at the highest numbers they've been since the great depression (according to the National Center of Family Homelessness)</p>

Fade in GFX and reveal point by point

[[Reveal text/statistics over vo]]
The typical homeless family in Arkansas is headed by a single parent with two children. In Arkansas 29% of children live in poverty.

[[advance text over video]]
13 % of senior citizens are poor.

[[advance text over video]]
and an overall poverty rate of nearly 20 percent

‘[[advance text over video]]
and with nearly 20 percent of Arkansans’ suffering from hunger.
It’s clear that Arkansas is a difficult place to raise a child if you are poor. And even harder if you’re homeless.

Cue background music

Narrator:

Fade in downtown landmarks around the River market again
Cut to CATA bus station
Cut to Little Rock sign in River market
Cut to Razorback water fountain
Cut to welcome to Arkansas sign
Cut to Dr. David Sink walking in the market

Ten years ago, Little Rock earned the reputation of being the “meanest” city in America from the national coalition for the homeless. The report based its claims on the razing of homeless camps in the redevelopment of the downtown River market district. It’s come a long way since then, in part to the efforts of Dr. David Sink, an advocate for the Homeless.

<p>Cut to interview full of David Sink, Clinton school of Public service, UALR Professor Emeritus, interviewee</p> <p>Cut to shots of David in the cafe</p> <p>Cut to video of the Clinton School of Public Service</p> <p>Cut to video of UALR</p> <p>Cut to video of 10 year plan</p>	<p>David Sot</p> <p>I think we stereotype people who are homeless I think we assume that they are substances abusers, mentally ill or on the streets. and although there are many of those - the are also many who three weeks out of the month can live on their check and last month they are couch hoppers. They go from relative to relative to their homes and ask if they can sleep on their couch for a couple of nights . So they're really not permanently homeless, I don't think many people are , I think instead they are desperate to find things to get them through to the next paycheck or next disability payment or whatever their source of income is, there a horrible need for shelters for women - especially domestic violence shelters but that's an area that can be improved.</p> <p>Narrator:</p> <p>Dr. Sink is one of the inaugural professors in the William J. Clinton school of public service, and also taught at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock. He was part of a committee to develop a 10 year plan aimed at ending chronic homelessness.</p>
<p>Back to David interview</p>	<p>David Sot</p> <p>The city of Little Rock decided to get a seat at the table. Truthfully they hadn't been really active.</p>

	<p>and hadn't been too involved in dealing with the day to day problems on the street</p> <p>With some good leadership from the mayor and city manager, the city turned a corner though the plodding of a lot of activists in the city.</p> <p>and they've gotten better at what they were doing</p> <p>Got a ways to go and the city has stepped up - has it done everything it should, not but it is putting a lot of good money into various projects</p>
<p>Back to David interview continued</p>	<p>I was doing a project in North Little Rock recently and it caused me to get there very early in the morning. In fact, just after dawn. I walked down east Washington street and stopped by a car and not paying much attention to it until someone rolled the window down in the car. And there were 5 people in the car: two adults and three children. And I apologized for waking them and they said that's okay, we have to get up and get going because the first feeding across the bridge is in 15 minutes. I realized they had slept there all night in that car. I'm afraid that's happening more and more than we'd like to admit and that's tough. It's tough on the family attempting to stay together. It's tough on the health and hygiene of that family, and it destroys any hope they have to get out of that. they don't choose to live in that car because its pleasant place to be - there there's no place for them to stay in the camp on</p>

	<p>the river, they really are out of options but finding them sometimes are just as hard</p>
<p>Continue David Video full</p> <p>Cut to video of Little Rock CATA Buses</p> <p>Cut to video of different Little Rock/North Little Rock Neighborhoods</p> <p>Cut to David Interview</p>	<p>David Sot:</p> <p>We don't have enough affordable housing - in fact there's not a city in the united states that has enough affordable housing. In the form of group homes or individual apartments. Houses... especially those that are on the bus lines have access to health care, maybe have access to jobs.</p> <p>It's difficult to house people because of the cost of housing and the location of housing and in many cases.</p> <p>David Sot</p> <p>The absence of affordable housing. Rental housing now is extremely expensive. I know that in various neighborhoods that are middle class I guess you call them houses are renting for eight or nine hundred dollars a month. I certainly couldn't afford that and it's awfully hard for something who has a job part time or for some reason else has a physical problem can hold a full time job</p> <p>It's impossible to get an apartment as a result ..they are one step close to being on the street</p>
	<p>Ashley natsot: "Don't get this over here"</p>

<p>Cut to b-roll of Ashley walking outside with her children interview with Ashley</p>	<p>Ashley under b-roll No one ever thinks of the bottom just falling right out</p>
<p>Cut to kids playing outside</p>	<p>Ashley natsot: “uh-oh the neighbors aren’t out”</p>
<p>Cut to Ashley interview</p>	<p>Ashley sot: and you know you have a lot of friends and you have a lot of family and especially in a small town - but nobody wants to take in four people . And then you just stay on this person’s couch and this person’s couch and this person’s couch. For awhile I was doing a lot of couch surfing.</p>
<p>Cut to kids playing outside</p>	<p>Narrator: Ashley became homeless after her then husband went to jail. She was a homemaker and worked part time at her local church. But things slowly began to unravel, after he - the main breadwinner - was no longer there.</p> <p>Ashley SOT Eventually I thought well, we're homeless, i need to look into some homeless shelters.</p>
	<p>Narrator:</p>

<p>Cut to map showing Crossett and Little Rock</p>	<p>She drove three hours from Crossett, a tiny town in south Arkansas to Little Rock with her last \$100 dollars. Before she left, the homeless shelter she called had room for her, by the time she arrived, the vacancy was filled.</p>
<p>Cut to Ashley interview</p>	<p>Ashley sot: so um we - we stayed in the car some and we stayed at the compassion center and that really really was an eye opener for me. We spent a good bit of time going back and forth between shelters. We stayed at the Salvation Army. We stood in line at soup kitchens. It was tough at first and finally we got in at Our house.</p> <p>Ashley sot: I called and they had two beds and they said how many children do you have and I told them three and they said we don't have enough room we've only got 2 beds, please can we just push them together and that's what we did - we pushed those twin beds together and we all just piled up.</p>
<p>Video of Ashley and her children sitting in the sun</p>	<p>And um that was all that I needed - child care and that was all that I needed -was childcare. Our house provides child care. That fact that it takes just one month's wages- just one month's worth of income is what is standing between you and the cold.</p>
<p>Cut to interview of Ashley</p>	

<p>End scene with children playing outside</p>	<p>Ashley sot: and the longer that I stayed at our house for 10 months and I met a lot of wonderful, wonderful people. Veterans, mothers, just so many different the most wonderful people that you would just ever want to meet. It really made me reevaluate my own values and the way that I look at other people - and it really taught me not to pass judgement.</p>
<p>Text on cam</p> <p>Show still/video of Ashley outside of home</p> <p>Show still/video of Nia</p>	<p>Text on Cam: Through habitat for humanity, Ashley brought her first home. She is going to school full time, thanks to a combination of grants and scholarships.</p> <p>Text on Cam: Shortly after the shoot wrapped, Nia, moved out of our house. Her daughter is a straight a student at a local high school and plans to go into the air force.</p>
<p>Call to Action</p> <p>Roll credits</p>	<p>What can you do to help?</p> <p>Donate your time</p>

Many shelters can always use an extra hand
volunteer to help with job skills

Donate money

Support a local shelter by participating in their
fundraisers,

Also by referring potential job leads to your local
shelter

Lobby your city government

For more information go to
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