

Of Suspenders & Men:

Getting Back on Your Feet with Homelessness & Terminal Illness

Fargo-Moorhead Dorothy Day House of Hospitality gives Bart hope

By Elizabeth Olson, Shelter Director



"Be sure to get my suspenders in the picture. Everywhere I've been, people know me by 'em. Worn 'em since I was 19. They're just...who I am. Me."

It was one of those conversations you get to have when working the overnight shift. Most of the shelter guests are snoozing by 1 a.m., so there is more time to visit with guys like Bart who had just walked two miles back from work. He was thawing his fingers over the dining room radiator, as even good gloves are no match for the bitter cold of a January night in Fargo-Moorhead. We visited about how tremendously grateful he was to have found a job after two months of searching.

"And the people at Blackbird Pizza, I mean the other employees there," he said, "they don't look down on me, even though I'm 'just' a dishwasher! It's like you guys here at the Dorothy Day House. You don't treat us like scary homeless dudes. You help us with a place to stay and to get back on our feet."

He paused a few moments, then added, "I'm not always the best at getting back on my feet."

From what Bart went on to describe, it was clear that he was actually amazing at getting back on his feet. He had been

homeless for the majority of his 56 years of life. In an achingly brief way, he summarized that each year since he was 19 had weighed him down with a little more guilt, a little more shame. He talked about having PTSD, and it was clear that he had survived unspeakably painful things. Even through his self-deprecation and sorrow, he rocked back and forth between hope and belief.

"I would like to get back on my feet," he told me.

To celebrate his bravery in voicing this dream, we took his picture, ensuring his trademark suspenders were featured.

I always think back on this night as the first of many poignant, illuminating conversations I would be privileged to have with Bart during his lifetime. We met often during his November 2014- June 2015 stay at the Dorothy Day House (DDH), working on finding housing, steady employment, and fighting through triggers of PTSD: hearing doors slam, being turned down for apartments, feelings of rejection, shame, guilt, etc. Yet, Bart's resilience continued to

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ride through these waves.

In May 2015, Bart went to Homeless Health for a check-up of his perpetually pesky gallbladder. The clinic staff and Bart were deeply shocked to discover that he had cancer in his liver. Bart began isolating himself and even checked out of DDH. After giving him some space for a few days, we reached out and looked for him. He agreed to come back and talk. We sat on the porch. He wore black sunglasses the whole time, staring at the noisy 5 p.m. traffic on 8th Street.

"I guess it's about time my lifestyle caught up with me," Bart said. "What do you say to a guy like me, who spent my life drinking, smoking, sleeping outside, and running away from everything?"

"I say that homelessness and cancer are very similar," was my response, "because people do not deserve, under any circumstance, to go through either of them."

He tilted his head down. "Then why can't I seem to get out of either of them?"

"Because we aren't done yet," I responded stubbornly.

He gave a small smile and thanked me for the reminder.

Over the next two weeks, we worked like crazy and were fortunate that Fargo Housing & Redevelopment Authority had an efficiency apartment come open downtown, quite close to Roger Maris Cancer Center. When Kasye, the resident manager, told Bart they would be happy to have him call it home, he doubled over with the emotion that ran through him. We set up a move-in date for three days

from then, the following Monday.

That Monday I got a call from Bart in a panic, saying that he was being admitted to the hospital. We worked with Fargo HRA, and they allowed me to do the check-in and to have him sign the lease in the hospital.

While Bart went through chemo for the next six days, Colin, a DDH Shelter Advocate, and I spruced up his apartment with household items we are fortunate to have community members donate to DDH. I showed Bart pictures of his place when we visited. Just by stepping into his hospital room, anyone could sense Bart's frenzy of nervousness and excitement.

When the physician came to talk to Bart on Monday of the following week, the world stilled. He explained that the cancer had spread nearly everywhere in Bart's body and that it was too advanced to benefit from further treatment. He estimated that Bart had about three weeks to live and that Bart would need 24/7 care to make his time comfortable and safe.

"But I haven't gotten to spend even one day in my apartment," Bart told me softly that afternoon.

Due to Bart having no local family or friends who would be able to care for him 24/7, Sanford's case management team suggested Bart be transferred to Sanford's Palliative Care Unit. Bart expressed that both his parents died in a hospital, so he did not want to go to PCU. In addition, even though the hospital staff went above and beyond to make Bart feel comfortable, with the beeping machines, different people coming and going, it was a nightmare of triggers for Bart's PTSD. We consulted Hospice who

was more than ready to work with him but could not work with him if he was living alone in an apartment.

Within a couple days, Bart's condition deteriorated so significantly that the doctor was not sure he would make it through the next three days, much less the three weeks he had initially estimated.

Bart was giving up; it was palpable. His goal of getting back on his feet was slipping away, along with his belief that he didn't deserve to be homeless or have cancer.

On the hospital tray next to his bed laid Bart's suspenders; the ones he had described to me seven months before that, "They're just...who I am. Me." It occurred to me these suspenders had done more than hold up his pants since he was 19; they had held Bart together. He had once told me he was not always good at getting back on his feet. I had disagreed with him, as he had clearly made it through vulnerable, dangerous situations that would have crushed most people. Yet, seeing Bart lying in the hospital bed, it was clear that this was the first time in his life where the hope inside him, that had kept him going for 56 years, might not be enough to get him back up.

It was time to fight as hard as we could so that Bart would be able to fight for himself again. After about 100 phone calls, a miracle happened. Fargo HRA offered to open up a medical respite apartment at New Horizons Manor that was not quite ready yet, but it had the 24/7 home health care on site that Bart needed and was handicap accessible. Because Bart could not work and had no

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income/health insurance to pay for home health services, Cass County Social Services came to the hospital within an hour of our phone call and approved him for a needs-based program to pay for care. The home health agency, Tammy's Angels, normally needed two weeks to set up staffing for new clients at New Horizons, but Tammy told me she would do whatever it took to have everything ready by the next morning. Hospice was then able to work with him since Tammy's Angels would be there for him 24/7.

We scheduled Bart to be discharged from the hospital and to move into his apartment at New Horizons the next morning. As I left the hospital that evening, I prayed Bart would make it through the night. It haunted me to think of Bart being so close to breaking out of homelessness and not making it.

Bart did make it. The journey was rough, but seeing the incredulous look on his face as he was wheeled into

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his new apartment was indescribable. His many helpers from Hospice and Tammy's Angels got him settled in, and even though he was exhausted, he seemed happy.

When a couple of us from DDH visited Bart the next day, we could not believe our eyes. He was buzzing around the apartment in his wheelchair, unpacking his stuff, and wearing a glittery blue wallet clipped to his shirt. I asked where the wallet came from, and he explained that he had wheeled himself 1 1/2 blocks to the dollar store and picked up a few things! I could not believe it. My incredulity continued when I visited him two days later. He was walking around his apartment, making a list of how he wanted to decorate and things he wanted to accomplish. The transformation he went through from homeless and sick to housed and hopeful was incredible.

Throughout the next few weeks, Bart continued to do much better than anyone could have dreamed. We met regularly at the park next to his apartment, and one day he revealed something that put his whole life into perspective.



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"I had a twin brother, you know," he said, out of the blue. "We were identical. He died when we were 19. I couldn't go home after that. I was always the black sheep of the family, but losing him, my other half, made the world too painful. Anytime I tried to settle down, not be homeless anymore, I just couldn't do it. The only way to cope was to numb and run."

And feeling better feels good."

Even when you have experienced horrible things for most of your childhood, been homeless most of your life, and have cancer in most parts of your body, it is never too late to believe in yourself and respect your dreams. Thank goodness for the many community agencies that partnered together to fight alongside Bart for the justice and peace he deserved.

Bart passed away in his apartment this year, having spent his last 27 days of life in his own apartment. He died with the knowledge that no one deserves to experience homelessness or cancer. He died feeling that he was worthy of compassion and dignity. He died treasuring his trademark suspenders. "They're just... who I am. Me."

He continued, "I'm glad I ended up here. For the first time in my life, I really want to take care of myself. Maybe it's messed up that it wasn't until I got sick that I actually am trying to get better, even though they say I won't."

His next words were ones I will never forget: "You know, I think I'm just going to keep trying. Keep eating those vegetables and to heck with being sleepy from morphine. As long as I'm trying to get better, I feel better."



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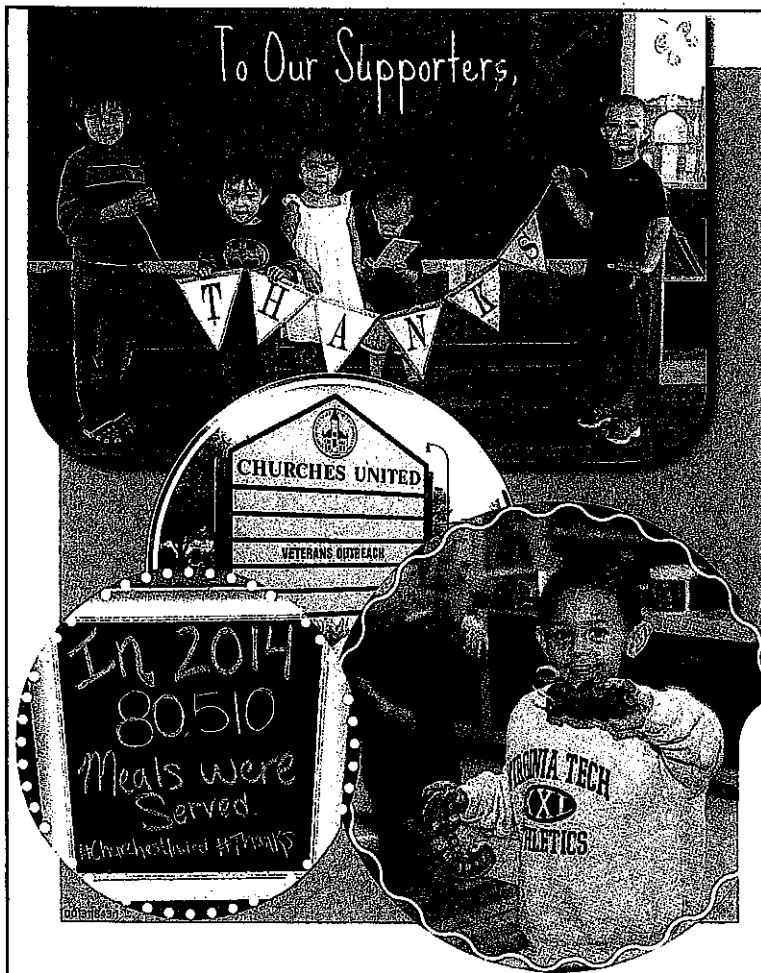
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