A: If you could please say your name and start with a little bit about yourself.

I: My name is Isaac Babnik and I'm 44, and I've been here at the SOS Camp for about a month. I'm a newcomer but I've had a lot of my friends stay here since the beginning and I've been trying to get into this place since back in November. So I was really thankful to get in to this program.

A: I'm going to ask you more about that in a second, but first I'd be curious to know how long you've lived in Denver?

I: I'm a native.

A: OK, so you've lived here your whole life?

I: Yeah, learned how to ride a bike and kiss a girl here.

A: [laughs] And do you still have lots of family here too?

I: I still have biological family all over the place. They don't really communicate with me much, but yeah. I still have one or two brothers that I still talk to at least.

A: So you said you've been trying to get into this camp since November. Were you experiencing homelessness before that? And if so, would you care to say a little bit about what that was like?

I: Oh Yeah. Yeah I've been homeless since I left the *Fort Lyons* Program two and a half years ago. That was unexpected, me leaving the program, it was not by design. I went on *a pass* and some things happened, my Mom got sick, and I missed my ride. I ended up leaving the program and I was stuck out in the streets of downtown Denver. It's been a long road, trying to get housing - I just got approved for housing this past weekend. So next month we'll be filling out the paperwork and dotting all the "I"s, crossing all the "t"s and stuff. Yeah it's been a rough road though. Especially this past winter. It was really cold this last winter, being homeless was no easy task.

A: Would you care to say a little bit more about the phrase you're using: "rough road?"

I: Well I'll give you an example. Last winter, when it was 16 degrees outside, I blew up a tent trying to stay warm. If it hadn't been that I was staying in an abandoned *train yard* where there was no neighbors - nothing to hurt. I got up at two o'clock in the morning to go to the bathroom and I was using a kerosene lantern to try to stay warm in a two-man tent. As I turned a corner to go the bathroom it exploded. And when I turned a corner back to see what had happened, there was all my stuff, burning. And it's like 16 degrees outside - it's two o'clock in the morning. So it's moments like that. I had to hospitalize myself twice for "frost nip" which is frost bite - I've already had frost bite damage in my life - and it was right up to the cusp of where my skin was starting to change color. From white to black.

A: So frost nip is before frost bite?

I: Yeah, it's right before. With frost bite damage, it never goes away. The colder it gets, the more painful it gets. It was a rough road, just trying to stay warm. Sleeping is a huge issue. Figuring out where is it safe to sleep? Because you get your stuff stolen all the time or you get harassed by the police because you don't own the property or generally just being homeless. It's work. Especially this last year with COVID. Just trying to *crawl* above water has been really hard. Especially when you don't have access to clean drinking water, or showers, or changes of clothes. It's been difficult at best. But I kept stabbing at it every day, never gave up. Kept putting in *iron* in any fire I could, in any opportunity I could take, I'd try to take it. That actually ended up getting me to where I am now, which is the last hump to getting my own place.

A: That's so exciting.

I: Yes. Yes it is.

A: I have two questions about that. One, if you're ok with thinking about it, that moment when you turned around and saw all of your stuff burning, what did you do following that?

I: The very first moment, once I realized what had happened I started laughing. Because I realized, not even 10 minutes before, I was inside that tent. It was surreal. I mean I was just - I don't know if you've ever come close to a brush with death- I've done it a couple times in my life and my first action is always to laugh. Kinda give that "thanks" out. Alright I'm still here. Nice. OK. Let’s not panic. So I put my stuff out. Luckily I had all my stuff inside my tent in layers. So the top part completely burned to a crisp, but underneath the sleeping bag, underneath the blankets, my backpack wasn't burnt. My shoes weren't burnt, thank god. A couple other things weren't destroyed, but the three sleeping bags, a couple blankets and the tent were completely incinerated. There was just basically the bottom of the tent, that's all that was left.

A: Did you know how to do that layering from experience?

I: Yeah, I've been off and on homeless since I was fifteen. So I've been battling homelessness not just these last two years but almost thirty years. It's been a rough ride.

A: You also said you were taking any opportunity that was coming to you, can you say a little more about what those opportunities are?

I: There's so many of them. There's day shelters and programs, I have more than one case management going on right now, because I wanted to take every opportunity that I could find. Whatever was the quickest - not necessarily the quickest route- whatever was the right route to get into housing or get into a program. Cause there's been some opportunities I passed up because it just wasn't a right fit. I didn't want to take a spot away from someone that could genuinely need that. Any opportunity I could, I took. Then, to show willingness, I oftentimes volunteered at places. In the absence of work, that showed my seriousness. Honestly I tried to keep the best attitude I could possible. Even if it didn't work out, it was good to check that off the list as one more way that didn't work, that's great, eventually I would find the one that did. Sometimes you got to make a million mistakes before you get the right answer. I wasn't afraid to get the door slammed, I wasn't afraid to be told "no," because that's the worst they could do to me, tell me "no I have to do what I'm doing already anyway."

A: Like, "I've heard that before."

I: Right.

A: What is your ideal work situation? What kind of work do you like to do?

I: I like to work with people, actually. One of the skillsets you learn growing up on the streets is people. Because you have to know people and you have to know whether or not you can trust them or be safe around them since you're outdoors all the time. That can be really important to them, whether or not you're going to get by that day, or just get through that day. I like working with people. I like small groups. Just trying to get things done, tasks, I'm a fixit guy myself. I love engineering, if I could go back to school, with this apartment, I'm contemplating going back to get my formal education, my GED, and then go from there. I'm not a stupid person, a little rough around the edges with my education, but I know there's more and I know that my appetite for knowledge hasn't necessarily been wetted yet.

A: I'm curious, when you said you learned about people and you learned who you can trust and who you can't, do you have any stories that stick out in your mind about those lessons?

I: Yeah, I have a guy, a friend of mine, I call him my Big Brother, he's been my friend since I was 18. We had such a weird meeting. He worked at a homeless coffee shop for teenagers, for kids. It was back in the 90's, it gave us a safe place to go at night, when Denver was really cold and really dangerous, on Colfax. So we would hang out there, I met him there and I thought he was one of the kids, not one of the staff. I offered him a joint and he was like "no I'm cool, how about a cup of coffee instead?" I was really embarrassed. I was like "aw that was stupid" and I wanted to leave, but he convinced me to stay and hang out. I took a chance by letting my embarrassment go, he didn't make it a big deal so I thought well I guess it's no big deal. I threw away the joint cause it was a church property and I wasn't trying to be disrespectful. Years later I was best man at his wedding, I was there when at least one of his kids were born, if not both of them. His kids call me Uncle Isaac. We've been really tight over the years. Sometimes when you meet people you make goofy mistakes and I've always been that kind of goofy guy. But you learn to power through it, see how people react, see how you react. My first reaction was to run away, and he was like no let's hang out. Months later we started doing a coffee thing outside, like at Denny's and stuff. It's a friendship that's lasted 25 years.

A: Since you've been at SOS, do you identify as homeless now? And, whether you do or don't, what does the word "homeless" mean to you?

I: Yes. Sort of, mostly not from the SOS camp but from the *environment* of Park Hill. The negative publicity that we've been getting, that's the only thing that's really made this feel like a shelter at all. The staff have been great. Most of the people here I know, we've lived on the street together. When I first got here it was like a day camp for college kids, only we're a little bit older, a little bit rougher around the edges. Much wiser. We enjoy each other's company. As far as being homeless here, I really don't feel homeless here, mostly because it's safe to sleep at night. That's one of the huge things about the SOS camp that was a blessing to me was being able to sleep for more than two hours at a time without feeling like you're going to get your stuff stolen or get assaulted, or even worse catch a charge. Because my *CVR* report, half of it is just trespassing tickets.

A: Just trying to sleep?

I: Just trying to find somewhere to get out of other people's hair. I'm not tying to be underfoot. But at the same time your body tells you "you gotta sleep well today."

A: Could you say a little bit more about the negative attention from Park Hill?

I: The kids- the children of Park Hill were listening to their parents complain about us, so some kids thought it would be fun to come over and shoot bottle rockets at us at night. That could be dangerous. Granted they were just a bunch of snot nose kids, they weren't hurting our feelings really, scared us a little bit and kinda made us a little upset, shooting bottle rockets at two in the morning. But, kids being kids. The part that bothers me is that because the kids were more than likely listening to the parents they came to the conclusion that we don't belong here, because that's what the parents are saying. You know kids only mimic what they see. They're really good at that. That bothered me a little bit. They think that we want to stay here permanently or lower their property values, or steal their bikes or harass their daughters. But they're way out of line because none of us want to be here, and the couple that do are probably here because they have severe trust issues, severe PTSD, severe trauma. If someone would be willing to walk five miles in our shoes maybe they'd understand a little better how big of an opportunity this place is. We get meals, we get a coordinated staff with MCD, Mental Health Corporation of Denver, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, places that want to impact the community of the homeless as a whole. They don't want to fight us, they want to fight poverty. That's a huge difference.

A: To circle back, how do you define homeless?

I: It's kinda tough because homeless is houseless, I don't have my own private property that I can be out from underfoot of people, but it's more than that. It's like you're alone. You have no back up, you have no safety net. You have no mother, brother, sister or auntie you can call on. You've pretty much used up every resource - or burnt every resource - that you had and now no one wants to deal with you. You're like an outcast. When I think of homelessness I often times have the visualization of wandering in the desert alone because there's just nothing out there. You're surrounded by tens of thousands of people and no one to talk to. No one to communicate with or share your woes with. That gets pretty heavy after a while, it really messes with your psyche. That's what I think of when I think of "homeless."

A: I can see why you said you kind of, but not really, feel homeless at SOS.

I: Right, yeah. Because there's guys here that I consider closer to me than biological family, because we've done two or three winters together. We took care of each other when we were sick or injured. Or maybe we decided to make a bad decision and instead of judging that person for it, they brought it in and said that tickled, not gonna do that again are you? The guys you bond with are really tight, lifelong friends. I've noticed that people who are homeless, people that are like war veterans and people that have gone to prison all share similar PTSDs and when you find a bond with those people, you bond deeply because there's not very many people. Park Hill has kind of been an example. People don't want to go outside of their comfort zone and hear my story, because sometimes mine is a Greek tragedy and sometimes it's a good comedy.

A: You said you were trying to get into SOS for months, I'm wondering if you could describe that first day when you finally got in, when you arrived here.

I: That first day I got a phone call from the project manager, I don't want to say her name wrong, Cuica, I was at work. I told my boss right after I got off the phone with her that I got into the SOS camp and that I'm leaving right now to go there, I was on the other side of Lakewood. My boss was so happy to hear the news that he drove me down (without getting permission from anyone). My boss dropped me off and he gave me a little advance on my work and told me to give him a call in couple days. At that point I'd been up for a couple days, I was really rough around the edges, half awake, half asleep, half grumpy. So he let me have a coupe days to get settled in here.

A: What kind of work was that?

I: Actually I have, off and on, three different part time jobs. I have one that works at the *Churnbine* which is a dance studio, I'm a parking attendant, I love that job, I love the people there. I have a second job working with an old friend of mine from *Gedder* HVACs, the last business he owned, now he's just a local handyman that works with a lot of seniors, because he himself is a senior. He's really strong and really has his wits about him still at 78 years old. He's just now thinking about retiring, and I love the man for it. He's a tough old bird. I work with him sometimes doing HVAC work, swamp cooler work. And then the last job I have is something I found online "worst jobs of Denver" going into old folks homes that people have passed away from COVID, and when their family doesn't come to collect their property, we go in in hazmat suits and throw everything out because it's a danger to the rest of the environment because there's a bunch of old people there. So we take all their stuff and it's mandated that we must throw it all away. That was the hard part about that last job. I found memoirs, a man's memories and thoughts and feelings on things and his kids never picked them up. I was going through them reading, thinking wow this doesn't feel right throwing this away, but they were very clear that nothing is to be kept for health reasons. I do little part time jobs like that to keep myself busy. For money. I am a disabled American. I broke my back in two places, on top of my dual diagnosis bipolar disorder. I think I said that in the right order. So I collect SSI and SST so I have an income but it's like $800 a month which is not even enough to really afford a car and insurance, let alone try to get into a place without subsidized housing. I've just been squeaking by with whatever work I can find, just trying to be frugal with what I do have.

A: Returning to that first day that you came into SOS, you rushed over from work, when you first entered the camp what was going through your mind?

I: I was wondering how many of my friends I was going to see. When I first got here I almost got a King's welcome, it was "Hey Isaac's finally here" cause the guys pushing to get me in from the inside all knew me. They're like "you should be at the SOS camp" But you guys had already closed your thing and moved out. You were at Regis and then over here. They were going by old waitlists, new waitlists, it was kinda complicated. Once I finally got in Cuica was really nice and invited me in. As soon as I walked in and toured, three of my friends came up and gave me a hug. It was like I just came home. I'd never been here before but it was some friendly faces, some rabble, rabble, rabble, and yeah, it was good times immediately.

A: How would you describe a typical day here?

I: We usually get up anywhere from 6:00 to 8:30. There are some guys that go to the Network coffee shop to volunteer, so sometimes we'll get up together and we'll hang out, we'll have some coffee.

A: Is that the same one where you met your friend?

I: Yeah. We all network in the same areas. So we'll get up and have a cup of coffee, we'll chill, we'll smoke a little pot sometimes. We just try to uplift each other before any one of us goes off to work or go out to volunteer, whatever it is we're going to do that day. Go see a case worker. And then, because of the heat this summer, a lot of us will scatter back to our tents and try to lie down before eleven. After eleven it's like 120 degrees in our tents sometimes. So we all hang out here in the big tents with the AC or swamp coolers. We do puzzles, we read books, we talk, we just enjoy each other's company. Try to keep it simple, civil and fair. You'd be surprised how often a day will go by fast just by us sitting back and talking with people.

A: A lot to talk about here?

I: Yeah we share war stories, network. I know some places that might be doing a housing list, if I got a housing list I'll network with people, "hey, this worked for me, maybe it will work for you." We try to share all that stuff, cause not everyone has the same goals in life.They have different priorities. If they have the information they can make the best decisions they can. That's part of my thing, I like to be as helpful as possible just because what's the alternative? Holding people back? It doesn't help me and it doesn't help them.

A: I'm thinking about the word SOS. Earlier you talked about safety, Safe Outdoor Spaces, would you care to reflect on either that safety aspect, what that means to you, and also Outdoor, and Space.

I: Obviously we're camping in a parking lot, so this is an outdoor space. Until we get our housing, there's not a lot of places for us to go. So just having somewhere designated for us to be legal - cause you're illegal as a homeless person the second you stop moving. That's the thing, we're constantly moving, constantly shifting our geographic location so we can stay off the radar of the police. So that safety alone. This is our space, we're allowed to be here, we're allowed to sit here, we're allowed to congregate, and "loiter" so to speak. Another safety thing about this place that I think is really neat is that it's closed off to the public. My old drunk, nefarious friends aren't allowed over here because this is a safe space. This is my casa. This is where I rest, this is where I eat. There's some of us who have gone through some sever traumas, where safety is one of those things that takes a bigger seat than you would expect. You go through trauma, you go through traumatic things. One thing that there's never enough of is safety. Cause you're always trying to evaluate, are you trying to hustle me? Is this going left? Are we going to fight? It's the wild west out there. It's the twenty first century but it's still pretty wild out there. It's nice not to have to look over your shoulder and watch your back here. You kind of have to a little bit. I leave my phone laying around here. I leave my vape penlaying around because I know the guys well enough that they'll say "Ah Isaac did it again" and they'll walk it over to my tent.

A: And you'd never do that camping in the street?

I: No way, no way. I've heard of people retaliating against the homeless, setting tents on fire. I've heard of - actually I've seen - people crawl into my tent and try to lay down with me because they're so cold and tired and had no more energy left. Instead of getting mad at them, I'm like "hey, hey, yeah, I gotta know your first name before you come in here buddy. Sorry." And usually I'll give him a blanket or I'll hop out of my tent and settle them into whatever they're going to do next.

A: How often would something like that happen?

I: More often than you'd like to admit. It's scary. At least here I can leave the tent and be safe. Whenever I left my tent outside, before I got to SOS, there was a fifty-fifty shot that my stuff would get stolen. A fifty-fifty shot that Denver Police would come by and see me not there, and take all my stuff and throw it away. Doing that calculation every time. Is it worth breaking down the tent, throwing everything you own back on your back and walking. It's almost like a walk of shame, because there's no way no one knows that you're not homeless when you got a tent, sleeping bag, blankets, a giant 70 liter backpack on you. Everything that you have in the world is on you.

A: I'm curious about that expression "walk of shame." Do you associate shame with homelessness?

I: I did when I was younger and I still kinda do now, just maybe how other people react. It's kinda hard to explain. I'm not ashamed of my living situation, my self, but I've been shamed before. That got me riled up a little bit, got me verbally attacking back, but then I realized that wasn't the right answer. Whenever I see people doing it now I just walk up to them and as calm as I can and just start a dialogue with them. They want a devil's advocate? Fine, I can be a devil's advocate. If they want to actually hear my story and find out that this was not my choice, this was kind of one of the accidental things that when I came into the streets after I left Fort Lyons I was in post traumatic stress therapy. I went through some harsh, harsh stuff and one of my things is trust, and safety. When I came back to Colorado my family decided that they weren't going to work with me. So I had to do it all from ground zero. Literally, the bags I came into town with were stolen the day I got back. I came into my hometown broke, no clothes, no food, no ID. I just started working on it little by little, checking things off, little successes here, little successes there. That's how I was able to get to where I am now. Believe me, there was a million and one little mistakes along the way too. It's not my first rodeo when it comes to this, so I was counting on myself to make good decisions and for the most part I did alright.

A: Would you be comfortable giving a few examples of how you've seen people be shamed, what does that look like?

I: I was sick one time. I was sleeping in a park during the night, a city park, and someone had stolen my shoes off my feet. While I was sick, so I had no strength to fight back. So that morning, I packed up all my stuff, with no shoes, in the middle of a rainstorm, I walked down the street. I did it knowing that people were looking at me, watching me the whole time, "is that guy not wearing any shoes?" Instead of "do you need help?" or "is everything ok?" or even "hang in there" or "you'll get there," people just scoffed and gave me dirty looks. That was the mental walk of shame that I'd done. I had to walk to a church and basically asked a pasture "hey man, do you happen to have a size 8 1/2?" Which, to his credit, he took me to Walmart and bought me shoes. That was pretty humbling. I think I even did a couple hours of volunteer work just to show my appreciation for that. That was a long day. I was mad, I was angry. I even ran into someone that was almost like a spirit guy. It was weird. It was a white Native American dude that sat down and explained to me, "maybe you should learn about the Ronin." The Ronin are people that were samurais without masters. So they were warriors without kings. They roamed the countryside and had authority, but not authority with any of the landowners or the people because they had no landlord to be a warrior for. That was kind of weird. The guy calmed me down. I looked around like "is this really happening?"

A: Was that before you had shoes or after?

I: That was before I had shoes.

A: So you're sitting there in bare feet and you're like, "what is going on here?"

I: Yeah, what is going on here? And I actually did. I grabbed the book he recommend and it gave me a lot of insight. You never know, in the midst of your lowest low, something might pop up and give you little hope, a little "ooh, ok."

A: Shifting a little bit to COVID, I know you had that job working with people who passed away from COVID, I'm wondering how you perceive COVID as having affected your community?

I: Oh my God, yeah. A lot of the churches that were doing services for the homeless shut down. That network and a couple of places shut their doors. No more services. To the credit of Colorado, the Natives or the people that moved here decided they were going to do something about poverty, not homeless people. They come out and do these little feedings here and there, brought clothes, brought the bare essentials like hand sanitizer. Which makes a great heater.

A: A heater?

I: It's flammable. It burns all *quasi*-clean.

A: So how do you do that?

I: Hand sanitizer? Take an empty pop can, tear off the top, stuff some toilet paper in there and douse it with hand sanitizer and light it.

A: Wow.

I: And it will *yield* a little stand alone stove.

A: How long will it burn?

I: Because it's gelatinous, it'll burn quite a while. You learn little tricks of the trade like that. What's the address? 850 Lincoln place used to be a place that we used to go for dinners and a clothing bank for clothes, never reopened. Places stopped allowing us in to their facilities. Churches stopped allowing us into their buildings which severely cut many services that we were allowed to have. Like I said, only a handful of places still struggled through. Especially when the lockdown happened. That was really tough. If it hadn't been for one or two places I probably would have starved. I would've had to have gone to a life of crime, because there's no way I would have been able to willingly starve to death. Not in Colorado. There's been some good people that showed some real resolve to step outside their comfort zone and come and *blow* on us when we needed it. A couple of programs stayed with us through COVID. It was scary. We're in the middle of a world wide pandemic on top of being homeless, on top of all this stuff that we go through every day. Yeah it was a tough year.

A:When you said some organizations were stepping outside of their comfort zone, can you say more about what you mean by that?

I: Well like, instead of allowing us inside with a mask, in parking lots they were serving coffee. They were coming out with recycled clothes or *warmer* clothes, gloves and stuff. We don't - homeless people don't always stay in highly visible places. So you had to come seek us out. We stay underneath bridges, we stay off beaten paths so to speak. So to be found, sometimes, was a little difficult. You had to actually come and seek us out. And it's kinda dangerous. Some of us are dealing with some hardcore addictions, hardcore schizophrenias, hardcore PTSDs again, that we're... not everyone's as nice and calm as I am, some people can get pretty violent. That's the stuff they had to face to do the things that they wanted to do, that was put on their heart to do. That's going outside your comfort zone. With a lot of the drug infested homeless, the guys that are hopelessly addicted and they have no alternative, they can't imagine the world without drugs, loving on them is not easy. You know, people still choose to do it, It's kinda *cool*.

A: So you've talked about how organizations were stepping up during COVID, I'm curious about how you think - if it was on your radar - how the city of Denver was dealing with COVID?

I: The city of Denver was struggling with COVID. I mean, the logistics of the actual COVID, like getting people tested, getting people to the hospitals, they did admirably there. But when it came to the homeless and COVID, that was a debacle. Because the CDC asked us to sit still. There's no way we can sit still unless we make a camp. They're asking us to be safe and to put our neighbors in consideration, not just our own health but their health too. The city is still struggling with it. Because they're allowing people to camp for a certain amount of time, if we're clean about it, if we jump through this hoop, sideways... Some neighborhoods aren't really into it, Park Hill. When I say Park Hill I'm not meaning all the people here. There are five bad apples in a bushel of great apples. But they're more worried about their property value than they are about human consciousness and human beings. That's something they're going to have to get over. I'm a native, I'm their neighbor. I've been there as long as they have. Granted, maybe I didn't make the best choices in the world, but it's not going to stop me from existing. I have the right to exist.

A: If you had some kind of either political power or financial power, and you could have been in the decision making process with COVID and homelessness, what are some changes you might have made?

I: I probably would have tried to do something like the SOS camps a lot sooner. And reached out to more churches, colleges. Buildings that may be, from a bank's point of view, not being used, and see if they'd be willing to take a tax break to allow an SOS camp to go in. They're not going to get on board unless they have an incentive. Unfortunately we're not the best dressed or the flashiest. We're kinda hard to work with, we're not the best with the PR stuff. If we can get the business leaders involved, the local businesses involved, the local churches involved, the community involved, basically, I believe it would eradicate homelessness. Because there would be nowhere left for us to hide.

A: Nowhere left for us to hide. Wow. Can you say a little more about hiding? You've talked about living under bridges and how the second you stop moving you're illegal.

I: Right, because I don't have land or an apartment or storage space. The cops don't have a problem with you moving around, going from point A to point B. It's the stopping. And the stopping is necessary, at least once a day. After a couple days, a couple months, a couple years of walking and walking, I've been hospitalized for walking. Can you imagine that? There were blisters and cracks in my feet that would hold a half quarter. To the point I couldn't walk anymore. I crawled into Stout Street Clinic one time because I had nothing left. Blood gushing out of my shoe just from walking. Trying to sleep during the day in the parks, because parks open at 5 AM and close at 11 PM. You're not allowed to be in the parks after 11, so we wander around all night, 5 o'clock rolls around and now we get a couple hours of sleep. We throw down our bags and whatever we have at the moment and lay down and hope that we wake up with everything still there. I've even been kicked awake by police officers, because they wanted us up. They just weren't thinking rationally at the moment. I'm sure from their perspective they were just giving me like a little toe tap, but I didn't know who they were. I wasn't aware that they were there and I almost got an assault charge, cause as soon as he kicked me I popped up, I was out of my sleeping bag and I grappled with that officer and got him to the ground before I realized "oh my god what am I doing?" And I backed off, and the other officer and his partner were pulling a gun on me for waking up. They don't understand, some of us, like the warriors, the ex cons, we in the homeless community, we've seen some scary things.

A: So more SOS camps?

I: More SOS camps, more day centers. More places for you to get mail, more places where you can get services like PTSD therapy. Maybe even more places that do therapy animals, stuff like that.

A: Like wrap around services?

I: Right. It takes so little, moving forward, to get that momentum going in the right direction. It takes so little to say "ok I got something accomplished, I did something good today, now I can do it again tomorrow." Those small victories are going to be the difference between people getting off the streets with a positive attitude or people just giving up and thinking they're going to live under a bridge the rest of their life. There's guys, even in this SOS camp, that don't believe they're ever going to leave the streets. So places like that are really important, not just for the homeless community, but for the community as a whole. Because I guarantee there's people out there that have that kind of compassion, that kind of empathy, and have no idea what to do with it. We'll be scratching each other's backs.

A: Thinking about that temptation of giving up, you have not given up, I'm wondering if you want to say more about how and why?

I: Well Yeah, I have a sixteen year old daughter that I never got to see grow up. I gave up custody when she was six months old basically. She's learning how to drive now and getting ready to look at colleges and stuff. I want to be able to be in a position that one day when she decides - if she decides - to look me up, that I'm not in the worst place that I could be. That I can show her that while she was learning how to grow up, that I was learning how to do the same thing too and that she would be proud of me and the accomplishments I have made. Because some of them are small, some are crazy wild. So that gets me up every day. I'm the youngest of seven kids, and my Mom's the last one of my elders left, really. I still have aunties and uncles, but none that involve themselves in my life. I'd like to be in a stable position, that way if she needs help or, if something, god forbid, happens, then I can be there for her to execute her wishes, to sing her stories, give her a peace at the golden age of her life. Whatever happened in the past, leave that in the past and put the best foot forward. That gets me going every day.

A: If two people, who have never experienced homelessness, were talking about homelessness, what would you want them to know in order to have a better conversation?

I: Have a better conversation with homeless people? Or have a better idea of the homeless situation?

A: The latter, like if two people, who have never had that experience, were just kind of discussing homelessness.

I: You know it might sound a little weird, but shadow us for a day. If you really want to understand what's going on with us, follow us around, try on our shoes. My best friend and brother Tony, I took him to one of our squats when we were kids, an abandoned silo mill. He brought one of his friends that was a church member and they were just amazed that not only could we find a place that dangerous to sleep, but we called it home. We could have got ourselves killed there, and that was our day area. We take a lot of risks, especially if you're doing the drugs and alcohol. That's huge in the homeless community because that's basically all we got left to try to get us through a day. If you're not smart enough to keep your ducks in a row. Addiction is an easy way out for a lot of us. I've been a victim of that several times in my entire life, so I know that better than most. Come out and talk to us. We might not always make sense but we're always wanting to have a good conversation with people.

A: [Laughs] I love that.

I: Cause there's a lot of us that aren't making much sense out there.

A: That doesn't mean that there's not wisdom.

I: Oh yeah, definitely.

A: You've told so many good stories. I know you were excited to do this interview, I'm wondering how you think it will help change your community?

I: Well, I like to hope that, people who are listening to this, they learn something new or planted a seed of an idea. If you really want to do something for the homeless community, look at the resources you already have. It doesn't take much, it takes so little to turn someone's day around. You give them a perspective of hope, or a full belly, or socks are gold. The silliest things would mean the absolute world to us. If you really want to do something look in your closet, look in your pantry. You'd be surprised what extra you have in abundance would really change someone's life. Even if it's just for that day, or even for that afternoon. I truly do believe that homelessness is never going to be eradicated until the community gets involved, and that's everybody. Not just the church goers, not the leaders of the community, but the community itself. Then literally, like I said before, there'd be nowhere left to hide. I've fallen through the cracks of society all my life. I was never good enough or was never tall enough or was never smart enough. I dropped out of school at a very young age because I thought that was the right thing to do. I just fell off the radar. It's so easy to not be noticed when you're not wanting to be noticed. Years start going by before you realize "wow, I gotta start doing something different."

A: This is my last question: If you were conducting this interview, what would you ask that I didn't ask?

I: How I got here. And that's a traumatic story, but I'm glad you didn't. But at the same time, I got here, this last homeless bout, coming back from Mexico. I was a part of the human trafficking world. I was held captive for five months. I was being held for ransom and stuff like that. So I have severe PTSDs and issues. In two years I went from rehab, not doing drugs any more, to having such a severe drug habit that I almost killed myself a couple times. On purpose.

A: And that got into the trafficking situation?

I: That was after the trafficking. It was so traumatic and heart breaking, because I lost people along the way too. There's a friend of mine that I don't know if they ever made it out. I went back so many times, trying to find them, look for them. I went back into the devil's nest trying to find these people and they were just never seen again. Heavy stuff, but I'm getting better every day. I'm not shaking like I was before when I first started doing my therapy, talking about it. It was so traumatic that I would scream at night from the dreams.

A: How long ago did all that start?

I: The dreams and the screaming started when I was at Fort Lyons about two and a half, three years ago. The Mexico thing was more like four years ago. It's been a little while but when you fall from so-called grace and you lose everything, sometimes you lose more than just personal items. Sometimes you lose a lot more than that. That's what I lost, I lost my way. I had very little hope for humanity or people or myself for that matter. Be careful with that one.

A: It sounds to me like you also learned so much, and that you are very generous with what you know.

I: I'm going to use those dark moments as moments of clarity and help other people that have been in those situations. I'm playing around with an idea of coming back to my community and working the rest of my life, just giving back to the people that saved my life. That's the long term goal, we'll see how I can make it turn into a reality, it's still up in the air. Let's get into that apartment first.

A: Yes, exactly, step one, or this is probably step...

I: Twenty five [both laugh].

A: Would you like to add anything else?

I: Just that we're working our best to get our situation better and if people aren't really wanting us around then help us, help us get off these streets. Nothing would be better than to have a door to close and keep my sleepiness and my cooking and all my things to myself. No problem.