A: And at other places, you're discouraged from saying like ' lets talk about it'?

T: Yeah, some of them, some places as they say 'fraternizing' but one thing I like about here is you understand your boundaries, you know.

A: Can you say more?

T: Yeah, even, like I was explaining to a guy the other day, I said ' when you understand your boundaries, that I'm here for you but you're still gonna respect me as a person' I'm not your mom, I'm not your sis but I'm here as a friend and as a friend sometime if I have spinach in my teeth, I have to tell, you have to tell me ' you have spinach in your teeth' and that's what, even like earlier I was telling a gentlemen, I said, about the radio, I said ' look, turn it down' he's like 'oh well durhdurhdurhdudh' and I explained to him, I said 'I've told everyone to turn their radio down' I said 'we have to live together as a community' and I tell him, I said 'they give you a lot of freedom here.' And he kinda calmed down and he was like 'you know what, you're right,' and I said ' but you have to understand, the people around here, in this little section, some of them love on us, but some of them are waiting for that one thing' and I told him, I said 'don't lose your blessing behind something as simple as turning down your music'

A: I'd be curious to hear more about the community you've seen built in, with the guests here, like is that something you don't see at other shelters, where there's that more and if so why do you think that is?

T: I think here, they're free to be themselves. Like they, thank god, we had one gentleman, who he had been here I think about a week and today when I came in he goes 'guess what Ms. Theresa?" I said "What?" He goes " I'm going to a rehab today" and I just hugged him and I was just so excited and everybody around him was so excited for him.

A: and supportive

T: And supportive and what was so amazing is that, they arranged for him to have an uber to get there. You know, versus, going, walking there thru the streets or getting on a bus where you're being taunted by things that are familiar.

A: Yeah, yeah

T: And you may say, you know what, I'll do it tomorrow versus someone, Andrew, taking him up there. To encourage him along the way, you know. So that made my day today, you know.

A: And what, what is it about this space that allows that to happen, that it couldn't happen elsewhere?

T: A lot of them say it's just a freedom to... like I'm a Christian. Some people, they'll come to me and say ' I don't want to hear about God'.

A: Gotcha, oh yeah.

T: So, I don't beat it on them. I don't judge them. I just love on them for wherever they're at, you know. And that's the thing I think is the biggest around here is that people are able to be themselves. They don't have to be forced to go to a bible study in order to stay on property. Or, I gotta take this class in order to stay here.

A: I See

T: It's like, you're allowing them to make choices for themselves. If you want to get better, you want to get out of this, you have that freedom. If you choose not to, it's, we're still here for you

A: Right, right. Wow

T: And so, I think that's the big thing around here is the freedom that a lot of them have not experienced in a long time. Because I've worked at the Denver Rescue Mission where the lights are out at a certain time and you gotta eat lunch at 5:30. So if you have a job and you get back after 5:30 means you don't have lunch or dinner, where they can just come and go.. you know. And they don't have trash everywhere and they're not dumping food on the ground, you know. So we're allowing them to be adults cause they are adults, you know.

A: And I'm wondering, I have no idea if this model is going to take off, I hope it does. I've heard very good things. If you were sort of advising someone about what it takes to kind of maintain this really like wonderful community feeling in terms of freedom and things functioning, things that, what are some of the things that don't seem obvious, that you know, from your position working here that it takes to keep a place like this up and running?

T: The resources that are out there cause a lot of them don't know and sometime, unfortunately, you have good and bad case managers. So you have some that are just like jumping on it and then you have those that kind of procrastinate. You have those who you ain't really trying to change, so I ain't really trying to help you. So that's kind of a thing I've ran into here.

A: And can I ask, is it case workers with all sorts of organizations?

T: It's all types of organizations.

A: So you're collaborating with everyone

T: Right. So sometime you have, it depends on the person's caseworker. You know, kind of like when a child begins to walk and they're scared but even though you know they're scared, you're still there.

A: Right. right.

T: You know? Even though, you know, like riding a bike. Your dad says " Imma let go but Im gonna be right here" And some of them just need that, you know.

A: That's a really lovely metaphor. Do you have any other stories that just stand out to you about interactions with guests, that are just sort, like the ones you take home with you and think about?

T: Even like a young couple just came Saturday and the lady, the young lady told her boyfriend, she said, no I asked them, " can I pray with y'all" and they said, " yeah" and she said, " he needs prayer". So I was able to pray with them but what was amazing was, I told them, I say, " look,", I say, " you have the opportunity to get on your feet" I say, " take advantage of this." You don't have to worry about rent, kids, a job right now. You can figure out what you truly want to do and they were like, " well we, you know what" and I say,

" even here they have an organization where they pick up trash off of 16th street that comes here, everything arranged to take them to do work" and so I was telling them, I said, " go do that, it's a start, put that money up"

A: And so, that's, they get paid by the hour?

T: Yeah

A: That's cool

T: So I was telling them, take advantage of that. When these people come here for medicaid, when they come here for food stamps, when they come here for housing, sign up for it. You don't have to go and say, " ok well where do I begin or where do I start?". They bring it here which is you know, everybody don't have bus fare.

A: Right

T: You know, I

A: or the knowledge of the bus system

T: Or knowledge of the bus system or know where to begin. You know a lot of people say oh go get social services. Ok, well....

A: Right, right. Yeah, especially with COVID

T: Yeah

A: And then how, and I realize did I ask how long you've worked here?

T: I've been here (pause) 4 weeks, about a month

A: Ok. I can't remember if I asked in the beginning. Then, how long is the lease for this site?

T: It's about three months

A: Three months? That's shorter than I thought. So what is it like operating under that kind of time limit? Does that change the way things feel? Does that change the way you interact with the site?

T: It's a day by day thing. You just hope... like we had to go to court three weeks ago and every time, the Park Hill and all the stuff going back and forth and it was like, it's stressful because it's like you develop a relationship with them and some people you're in the middle of helping them, some people you're just at the beginning and so it's like if this shuts down, where do they go?

A: Yeah

T: Like some people have been kicked out of every shelter.

A: Right, right, yeah but they're doing good here

T: Cause you're, right, so it's like now you're focused, cause anybody if you're trying to figure out rent, gas, job, all the stuff you're trying to figure out and you're dragging everything you own from this spot today, they tell you, you can't stay there, ok well let me go find another spot, I'll go over here but I got be out, get up by 3 because they open up at 6. So those are things that they, that stresses them. They don't have to deal with that here.

A: Right, right and so when these sites move, it's not like, it's not like " Let's all move in one day and will all set up in the new site!", there's like a gap in between.

T: And finding a place like the place they had, Regis, they had before, they didn't have to have background checks because the church is here and there's a daycare, everybody here has had a background check

A: Oh wow, interesting

T: So you see what I'm seeing and the thing is that's been explained to the people in the neighborhood. It's not like they're just letting everybody over here. These people had to go through a background check. They've had their COVID shot.

A: Which is way more than any, necessarily, anyone else in the neighborhood.

T: Exactly, exactly

A: So that, that move's coming up?

T: I think they've been here since June, it's after December, I remember that. So sometime after December

A: And I'm feeling really silly but I don't think I asked you to say your job title.

T: N, no it's ok

A: What is your job title?

T: Resident Assistant, I guess

A: Ok, staff.

(Both laugh)

A: Community member. Probably doesn't even matter. I'm thinking of when

( door bell rings) (recording pauses)

A: Ok we're good. Maybe not so much with this question when you're at site but when you're out in other communities, maybe with your family or with friends, how do you feel, how do you advocate, like if, if you get push up from maybe the kind of work you do or the kind of people you work with, how do you kind of advocate for this community and what are some challenges?

T: People are funny. First off, I always, biblically, explain in the bible it says " you'll always have the homeless and you'll always have the poor". That's in scripture. So, I remind Christians you know the word of god says " Study show yourself approved" but that's actually biblical that you will always have the poor with you and I explain to people, I always use myself. I said, I work, I get paid for two weeks. If I get sick and miss two paychecks, the average rent, the minimum in a decent place is $1200 dollars a month. So if I lose two weeks of a paycheck, I'm behind on rent, that's not including lights, I'm not including food, I'm not including my three kids, lunch money. So, I always tell people " do you know how easy it is to wind up here? It's very easy." And I tell people, I said a lot of times people have the idea that everybody's got mental illnesses, and a lot of homeless people do but if the average person can't afford their medication, they can't afford it and a lot of times what happens is and we were talking about this earlier is when an episode happens, people call the police.

A: right, right

T: Jail's not going to help them.

A: No, certainly not

T: So, I try to explain where they can see past the, what's before them. cause a lot of time people just see oh well COVIDS out there. Well if I put on my mask, get a shot, put on my gloves or whatever it is that you need to do to protect yourself whether it's a homeless person or someone at Kroger. So sometimes you have to get people to see past, I don't want to say their ignorance but the reality.

A: Do you encounter a lot of people with whom you have to kind of really talk this through?

T: Yeah because even before I worked here, I would go out on my own with my kids and we would feed the homeless and people are like aren't you scared? No, I want my kids to love everybody and doing that, that made them realize they're human. You know, you don't have to be the kids that throw cans at them because you think you're above them. They're just, they're just human. The thing that's amazing, if people would sit down and hear their stories, it blows your mind. People that owned radio stations, people that had construc--. It's not like they didn't have a life at one time.

A: Right. right

T: College degrees, people who are RNs that got in drugs and lost everything. So sometimes just hearing their story. Some of them, I tell them " you need to write a book:.

A: Right, yeah

T: you know

A: Yeah, I tell people that a lot too. So, with SOS standing for Safe Outdoor Spaces or Space, I'd love to hear your interpretation of that phrase and/or each of those words.

T: I think what I see here is the physical part is a place where they can come where they don't have to worry about getting robbed or attacked. I think the mental part is a place where, it was really a trip for me, because most people who work here have gone through either homelessness, drugs, alcoholism, some type of traumatic event. So, a lot of us are able to relate versus shunning them or ' how could you do that?'. We understand how you can get there, how you made the choices that you've made and so I think that helps them to, to open up even more with us because they know we've gone through something, you know.

A: Yeah and this, I'm wondering, I'm just thinking it sounds like you do so much supportive work and that you're very, like, you said you know your boundaries, does it sometimes feel like too much? Do the stories kind of add up or do you feel like... I guess I'm asking about self care.

T: Oh, yeah, well the company does offer therapy which I thought was amazing and sometime I tell people you have to figure out what your thing is. Like with me when my stress level gets, I'll run and get some ice or something for here. I'll take a break away from it because it can be overwhelming cause sometime you just want someone to, like one gentlemen, they were arguing about who had the music up loud and all that and I'm like look and I told them, I said " I talk loud, my family, when we get together we're a loud family. So it's gonna be loud." I said, " that's what happened.... you're trying to out hear her and she's trying to out hear you, it's gonna be loud", you know. So just communicating with them is such a big factor and them communicating with each other cause some people have been in jail. So they don't know, they still have their, their boundaries where I don't ,I'm not gonna let you in and then you have those who bring their outside issues in here. Like I told a gentleman the other day, he was like, he had a, he went down this tirade about white people and I told him, I said, " Look" I said, " we all gotta get along in here" I said, " I've had good white people in my life, I've had bad white people in my life. I've had good black people in my life. I've had bad black people in my life" and its funny because the guy came to me he said, " we were having a problem, now we're cool" but see that's what happens when you come here, you realize what was out there you were fighting for survival. In here you don't have to do that. You ain't got to make sure your guard is up every five minutes, whether you're gonna turn me in or steal from me or take from me or or you're gonna stab me. Those are, that's out there

A: Right

T: They don't have to deal with that here.

A: Right and that makes all the difference.

T: Yes, so it makes them feel safe, you know

A: What about, I guess just the outdoor part of that term, Safe Outdoor Spaces. Do you have any thoughts about that?

T: I think it's, it's, it's bittersweet cause you know there are days that its hot but they have the freedom to go about as they please and also they're not confined.

A: right

T: Where sometimes organizations, you get in, you have to stay there

A: Or if you leave, you can't come back

T: It's a chance, or like, I remember when I thought about going to a shelter they had a lottery and they had to be there at, they say get in line at 4 and they did their lottery at 5. And I'm like ok god I get off work at 6, you know what I'm saying. So, going through all of that. You know breaking your neck to try and get in line, hoping

A: maybe you'll get in there

T: Right and here you have that. You didn't have to through, you didn't have to jump over walls and provide all this paperwork that you don't know where half your stuff is anyway. So, it's freed a lot of people and take out a lot of the stress and they can see clear and think clear now but that guy when he first came he was kinda all over the place. And then he settled and then he kept saying, " you know what Miss Theresa' he kept telling me , " I need to stop drinking. I need to stop drinking and I said yeah and I said pray and you know maybe you need to go to a meeting or talk to a therapist. I didn't beat him over his head, I just suggested things and so today when I came in, he told me, " I'm checking myself in to rehab" and his mom, her heart just went out.

A: Do you talk to his mom?

T: I met her, I told him, he didn't, no he wasn't here when his mom came and I told him I met your mom, she was so sweet. So, you know, one out of the bunch, that's a breakthrough, you know.

A: Yeah absolutely. Shifting a little bit to COVID, I know you weren't at SOS when COVID hit but you were in working in shelters. How have you seen COVID change your community and the homeless community, if you separate those two?

T: I think it slowed a lot of them down, kinda like, the nomad type, I'm gonna go here, I'm gonna go here, I'm gonna go here, I'm gonna go here, I'm just, I'm not gonna be still. A lot of them found peace in being still, you know. They're ok, I don't have to be at the park. I don't have to be over here. They're ok.

A: How did COVID do that?

T: I think because some of them saw people get sick. Some of them, you know, used their last bit of change to get a beer and you can't even get in, can't go. So now you're.. so they've learned to be at peace where they're at cause there's not a no here in the sense of you can’t come in or you can’t do this or you can’t do that, you know.

A: Yeah

T: So I think that, that COVID kind of helped them find rest and not be a nomad all the time

A: Wow, that's fascinating and did COVID, in what ways did COVID shape how you were perceiving your work and your position in these places?

T: Just loving on them, loving on them and just the hygiene part of the job cause they're human too, you know. If I like my house clean and I want my table wiped off, you don't need to sit at a table that's sticky, even if you left it there, doesn't matter, you know. So, that's kind of how I've always looked at it, even before COVID. You know, I treat those as you want to be treated and a lot of them are cleaner than some folks, you know. I've literally seen the before they, the shower trucks were back released, I've seen people take buckets and take a bath everyday out of a bucket, who change clothes, who take their medication and just really, you know doing what they got to do to survive.

A: And how, how do you think that Denver, the city of Denver or just, yeah, responded to COVID? I'm thinking of the sweeps, I'm thinking of the hotels and probably a lot more stuff you know about that I don't know. How do you think that response worked or didn't work?

T: I really believe it worked because before COVID, a lot of them couldn't get in. You had dry shelter and you had wet shelters. So you have those who had, for example, if you're not married, certain shelters you couldn't get in. If you have a pet, you cant get in. If that's the only thing I love in this world, who has my back, whose loyal to me is my dog, you have those and in the snow who couldn't come in cause their dog couldn't come in. Or vice versa there's time where the wife got in and the husband didn't get in. So they're being separated. So that's one thing I love about COVID because when this opened up, like a gentleman, he has a dog here. We have 1,2,3 couples now. So now it's not me against the world, it's us working it out the best way we can with what we have.

A: Finding a spot that works for our family whatever the family definition is, I love that. Do you have any thoughts on the sweeps?

T: It's bittersweet cause you have some people who they have their tents set up and it's not just chaos and then you have those who are not in their right mind who would literally take a plate, eat it, throw it on the ground, stuff everywhere, walk on it for a whole week. You have those who may nearly OD, throw up, leave stuff everywhere. So it's bittersweet because of that over there, these over here suffer.

A: Right, right, it's the grouping everyone into the same

T: Right, you know. So, it's like ok we're gonna clear out everybody cause nobody's gonna say that's mine and that's not mine and that's mine and sometime that's all they have is what's in the basket or in their backpack. So

A: And then it's gone

T: Yeah and they're starting all over again, you know

A: If you had the power or the resources, How would you

(Pause, front door rings)

A: Getting good at that ( laughter). If you had power or resources, well obviously you have power and resources, if you had kind of like city level power and resources is there anything you would do differently to support the homeless population, anything you'd do more of or less of?

T: Woo, goodness, I think a stable place, treatment versus arresting them all the time, you know, they go to detox for twenty four hours and they get put back out. I think it's a combination of the, looking at the issue of homelessness, the job situation where if you have a felony or whatever conviction you have, just finding something, cause there's things to do in Colorado. You know like one of the guys was saying some part of Park Hill there's trash, that could be a job for somebody. You know, just picking up trash. Cause I've seen, I've seen homeless people in the winter time use all their money to go get a shovel and go to a temp agency. I didn't even know that was a job. You know, just shoveling snow and it is.

A: Well it's kind of bananas you have to bring your own shovel.

T: Yeah, well, you'd be surprised and so that's what I'm saying, there's resources and there's answers out there, it's kinda getting it to them and showing them it'll pay off in the end.

A: I'm thinking when we first started talking you used the word prosperity, are those, those are things that contribute to the prosperity?

T: Yeah because it's like showing somebody the way and then they see the results, you know. Me working hard this is, this is what I can actually have, you know. I don't have to stay here. I always tell people when I used to work at the mission and I would check them in, I'd say look either the environment can change you or you can change the environment. Even though you're here that doesn't mean you have to adapt to them, you know. So sometime just explaining to somebody to get them to understand there is hope, you may have to put the work in but there's hope, ya know.

(door bell rings)

A: I'm glad it cuts me off and not you cause what you're saying is much more interesting than my question. I asked you this before but I just feel like your wisdom and like your ability to like stop people among all that chaos that is the mission....either your environment changes you or you change your environment and to really like mean it, I'm kind of just curious where you learned that, or got that, or...?

T: It's, it's

A: Not necessarily that phrase but how to be like that, which is a silly question, but...

T: It's just looking, observing them, like I had two guys who got a trucking contract. So, when they got down here, the trucking contracts wasn't gonna start for another three weeks. So, they were thinking if we come down here, we're gonna work a week, get a paycheck and get on our feet. So, they wind up being in the shelter for three weeks and I watched them literally continue to do what they had to do, shampoo their hair in the sink, bathe in the sink, get up and face the day. I mean, neatly make their bed. So, that's where, one of my favorite movies is *Cinderella Man*. I don't know if you remember that where the guy was a boxer. I don't know if you remember the scene where his dad went to the food stamp place, or the place for food and they had bologna and so him and his daughter were sitting there eating dinner and the little girl picks it up and he goes (taps hands on desk) even though we’re eating this don't lose who you are. And that's what I tell them, don't change. Like he likes to dress, don't change that, keep being you. Don't lose your identity. You know your identity is important. You know cause some of them I talk to, it just blows me away the knowledge and the education and the experience that they have, you know. And sometime they think that was for then, it's not for now. But you can take that from there and apply it. You may not be able to use it the same exact way but you could take all that intelligence and apply it.

A: Right, that's in you.

T: Yeah.

A: Wow, good details. If people were having a conversation who have never experienced homelessness before, what would you want them to know in order for them to have a more accurate conversation?

T: I think sometimes people need to go around it. And a lady asked me the other day, she said, " how could I make my child not prejudice?" I was at a garage sale. And I told her, I said, " Number one be honest with her. Number two take her around culture" I said,

 " Number three take her outside of Denver" and the same thing with homelessness. If the only thing I see is the news and the man on the corner, the news is saying " Don't give this man help because he gets in a Cadillac" How often is that? You know. But I, in my head, cause Im only looking at the news.

A: Right. You're only looking right and you're only looking left to the guy on the corner.

T: Right. I'm not looking at the overall picture. You know when I was unemployed, this was years ago in my twenties and in Houston they have a freeway. And on the freeway it's just Hispanic people who wait for a job all the time. And I think we had, it had rained like three weeks straight and I was in the cry crying. I said, " God I need a job, I need a job, I need a job" and I passed down 59, that's where they all hung out and I saw this truck pull up and they fist fighting to get in. So everybody's not lazy and it even dawned on me, my situation wasn't really that bad. Cause sometimes we think, " oh I need this. I need that" and God was showing me, three weeks, these are construction workers nine out of ten times. In three weeks they haven't had any income. They probably got families and everything. So, I think that sometime people have to get out and see for themselves to understand whether its race, color, being homeless, what part can I do. Sometime I tell people you have to ask God ," what small thing can I do to look at this differently?" you know. Like my kids, they know what it is to give and we didn't give nothing fancy. We just made some sandwiches, chips and cookies. But they saw the appreciation behind it. So they know how to appreciate. While you complaining about leftovers, you know. They're appreciating a sandwich and I remember my son telling me, "Mom, they're really enjoying that" and it made him so happy but he got to see, you know.

A: Right, well. Then kind of wrapping up here, unfortunately. This is an oral history project, right, so it's recording people's stories. In what ways do you see projects like this either this one or other ones where it is just trying to bring stories out, how do you see that affecting the community?

T: I think it's, I think it's awareness cause like when I came here in 2015, In Texas, homelessness is different. It's kind of scattered. So when I came here in 2015, I got lost and I seen like the blocks and blocks and blocks. It opened my eyes. I didn't realize that homelessness was that big in Denver. I didn't know that many people even were homeless. So it was an eye opener of the reality. You know, I'm crying about being in a hotel and God showed me the reality of homelessness. But you know what was amazing is that I felt when I got into this call in my life I would say, I would say God sent me to help them but they have helped me because you have some people who get up regardless of what they, whether they have plan, regardless if they have something to do that day they get up and still fight. And that's something that I learned from them, to get up not knowing where you're going, not knowing what you're gonna do and you still get up with joy. You know. You know { } in the Bible says " Be content where you're at" and they taught me that, how to be content. They're content even though “I don't know where I'm going” and I've seen couples who have been together for years and “hey we gonna do this together” and you have people who somebody loses a job or somebody gets cancer and they bail out, you know. So, I felt like I was there to help them but it was iron sharpening iron because they helped me look at life differently as well.

A: Just last question.

*(Doorbell Rings*)

A: Much delayed. Last question. If you were conducting this interview, what would you ask that I didn't ask?

T: I'm kind of open. I don't have any limitations and I, the one thing I learned when I first started working with the homeless is to be authentic and honest because if you're worried about how you're going to look at me then they're not going to be honest with you. If I can't be, I can't share my truth, they're not going to share their truth.

A: Can you say more about if you're worried about how they're gonna look at me? What do you mean?

T: Like sometimes in Christianity, sometimes you don't want to share your dirt because sometimes in Christianity people do shun you or how dare you? And if you're not honest about your stuff, whatever it may be, whatever it may be. But if I could look at you and say, "you overcame that" then there's hope for me and then I'm more open to share with you like one guy was telling me how he was held hostage you know trying to sell drugs to Mexico and he was saying that he felt guilty cause he couldn't, he couldn't, the girl that went down there with him, she loves the life and he had to leave her and he still loves her. But he had to be honest, I had to be honest to say that I was in love with a guy who did drugs and he chose drugs over me and it made him comfortable enough to say she chose that life over me. Some pain that was still there even though they had been separated, he hadn't dealt with it. So, just to be authentic with them, cause they see straight through you. You can say, quote every scripture, you could talk about your college education and your counseling certification, your degree and they will read you, read straight through you. So I always tell people be honest and be authentic with them.

A: Yeah wonderful. Would you want to add anything else?

T: No. (laughter)

A: Thank you so much.

T: You're welcome.