

NO CALL FOR PITY



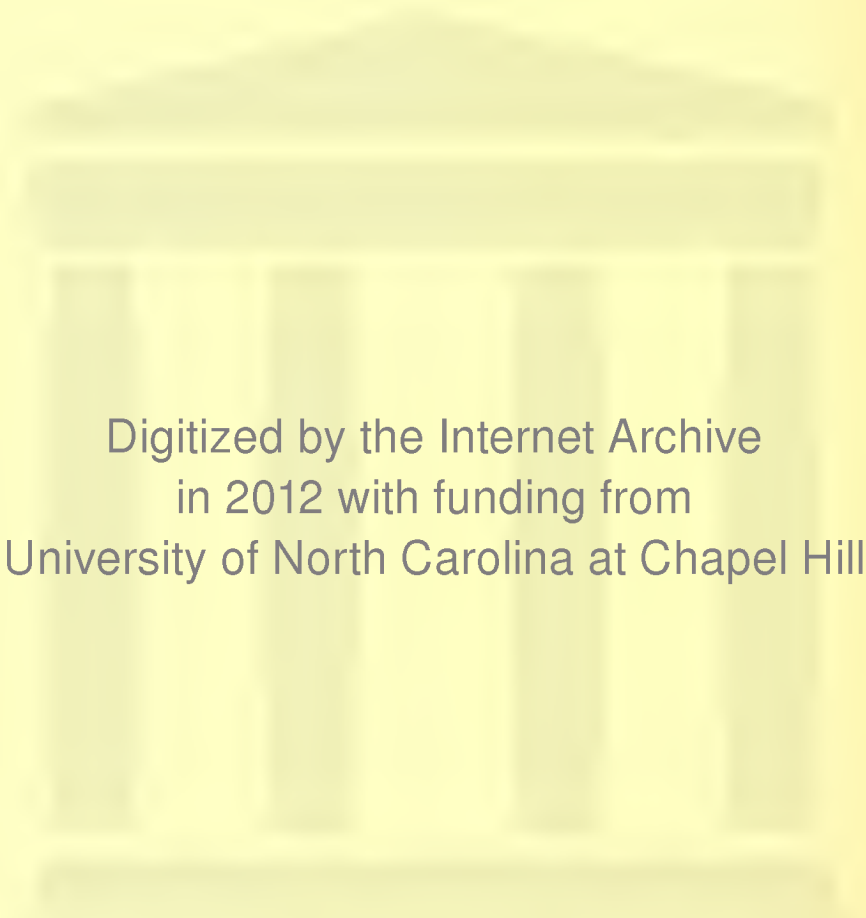
CANDID VIEWS

of
homeless
& formerly
homeless
people



Interviews,
Essays &
Portraits

Edie Cohn



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NO CALL FOR PITY

*Candid Views of Homeless
& Formerly Homeless People*

Interviews, Essays & Portraits

Edie Cohn

This book isn't about homelessness. It's about people who happened to be homeless. The people whose stories and faces are presented here don't ask for pity. Understanding, yes, but not pity!

Forward

It's the eyes that most demand our attention.

Some look downward, a very few look vacant. Most look directly at you without malice or self-pity or hopelessness—all sentiments that could be justified.

Edie Cohn's charcoal drawings of homeless people present us with portraits that are overwhelmingly ordinary yet exacting in their detail. The man with a thin face and eyes that squint as he smiles slightly is wearing a pullover sweater. He might be a student at the university. The toddler in a jumper with her hair tied on top could be the precious child of a family in Suburbia, U.S.A. Or the man with the hooded cap and wide glasses; he looks like the man who bagged my groceries last night at the Kroger.

There is really very little to tell us that this group of primarily African-American men, women, and children were homeless when

these drawings were made. The artist has not imposed any stereotypical images. She simply recorded what she saw: faces holding sorrow and resignation, yes, but joy and delight as well.

Looking at the range of portraits, a viewer can easily imagine one's own portrait among them. This brings one to an intimate truth: the homeless are closer than we realize or perhaps feel comfortable with. When a group of us decided years ago to put a collage of Edie's drawings on a T-shirt to sell, I bought and wore one right away. To have the faces of the homeless there on my chest above my heart was a wonderful metaphor, but it was difficult. I felt uneasy constantly remembering how fragile life is, how easy it would be for a string of events to come together in such a way that I could be standing there hoping someone like Edie would do my portrait and pay me five dollars.

I was serving as the director of the homeless shelter when Edie began this project more than ten years ago. It seemed a simple enough process. She would sit, listen, draw, comment, and return some days later with a portrait for the homeless person. It was simple. Simply profound.

I watched and listened as the shelter residents who served as subjects would gleefully show off their drawings. Many were childlike in their excitement, while some would try to mask their emotions, via lessons learned from living on the street. Yet their eyes would always give away their exhilaration.

They were important enough for somebody to draw! Their faces and stories were significant enough for someone to render! Too often, they lived as if their presence really didn't matter, as if their lives were of little value to someone else. The portraits

became an immediate and powerful medicine for an illness that had seeped into the soul.

Now, with the publication and exhibition of these stories and portraits, Edie Cohn invites us to see who she sees. We have an opportunity to clear away what we think we should feel and think about homeless people, and allow them to sit with us, a simple enough process.

—*Terry Allebaugh*

Director, Housing for New Hope
October, 2001

Introduction

I started this project in 1991. I was an artist looking for a cause that would help others as well as my career. For three years, one day a week, I drove downtown to the Durham Community Shelter for H.O.P.E., determined to render portraits of residents that captured not only their images, but their spirits as well. At the end of each drawing session, I paid the resident five dollars. I kept the original drawings and brought the person a print of the finished portrait within the next few weeks.

Early in the project, I consented to draw a persistent young man who kept asking me, in whispered tones, to draw him. He had AIDS and wanted the portrait for his mother. I didn't know whether or not to believe him: everybody at the shelter wanted a drawing and everybody had stories. But as I said, he was persistent. As I drew him he started telling me about his weekend. He had tried to kill himself but the medics had arrived too quickly, had saved his life and even put him up in a nice hotel afterwards. He was quite

embarrassed about the whole thing. Besides, he had felt too lousy to enjoy the hotel.

Until that point I hadn't asked questions of the people I was sketching. I just wanted to draw them for an exhibit; their lives were their own business. But if someone tells you he tried to commit suicide recently, you have to respond. So as I scrutinized this man's face for shadows and highlights, I asked about his symptoms. He told me he didn't have much bladder control and that he often wet his bed, something other guys at the shelter teased him about.

This man did send his picture home to his mom. I began to think about what it would be like to be dying and unable to go home to one's family. I wondered if my own son and I would ever be in this situation. I started to wonder about other stories, whispered or left untold. I decided to expand the scope of the project so that others could hear the voices of the people I was drawing. I bought the best tape recorder I could afford and began taping stories as I drew. I also discovered my own

voice through writing as I tried to make sense of the turmoil the project had unleashed in me.

I tried not to discriminate in choosing whom to draw and interview for this project. I tried not to look for the person with the most God-awful story. I didn't want to turn the project into a soap opera about homelessness.

Most of the people I worked with were African Americans, making the project a general reflection of Durham's homeless population. (For the record, the majority of homeless people in the United States are white.)

Primarily I drew people at the shelter, but I also drew some families at Genesis Home, a Durham facility providing transitional housing for homeless families.

To the people I met, the shelter seemed more like a temporary stopping-off point than the end of the world. Most were in transition. They had made mistakes, were trying to leave some part of the past behind, or wanted to move from their home situation and couldn't afford anywhere else to live. Some had been victimized and were reevaluating

their lives. Many were working on moving out. A few, deep in alcoholism or drug dependency, didn't care to leave. Some had left and come back.

A recent grant from the North Carolina Humanities Council enabled me to reinterview and redraw people from the original project. I found only a few of the sixty-five people with whom I had worked. None of the five people whose stories appear in this booklet are now homeless, and their stories may or may not be typical of the original group of participants. Two of the men pictured on the cover of this booklet have died. Others I have simply lost track of. Some leads stopped when people didn't return my phone calls. Maybe these people weren't doing so well and didn't want to be reminded of it or perhaps they didn't want the world to know about their past.

So keep in mind as you go through this booklet that, yes, there are people who have turned their lives completely around. But they may not be the norm. This is just a small sampling.

—*Edie Cohn*



I have no place to go. I don't have any relatives here, other than my mother. And me and my mother don't get along. I can't stay at her house. She put me out.

I dropped out in the twelfth grade. I was accepted at A&T University through my SAT scores, but I never went. I was trying to be with the "in crowd." Now I find out that's not the crowd I should have been with. They never went past the tenth grade.

My last job, I worked at the McDonalds on Chapel Hill Boulevard for two years. I got pregnant, so I stopped working there. And then I started receiving AFDC [Aid for Families with Dependent Children] for my kids, so I got lazy—I found out I didn't have to work. But I'd rather work now because that income was not enough. And plus, I got on drugs.

I used to use crack every day. *All* day. I would wake up in the morning and have

one hit. That would give me energy for the rest of the day, and then I would go out and get more money any kind of way that I could to get some more. Because it makes you want more. And once you used it so long and you don't get it, you don't have any energy. That's why I'm in treatment.

At first, I was sleeping fourteen, fifteen hours a day. That lasted about a week and a half. Then I would have a set-back reaction: get the taste and the effect, even though I hadn't had any. And my brain would say, "Oh, I'm going to get some." It only lasts about thirty seconds, so they told us just to sit there and mash our legs to the floor so we wouldn't move and go get anything. And it worked. It has to be a mental thing, too. If somebody tries to make you stop, you won't stop. You have to want to stop.

I stopped because it came between me and my kids. I had a little girl at that time. I just had a little boy three months ago. My daughter is with my mother and my son is with his father until I find a place to stay.



Sharyn Jordan
1993

Durham Community Shelter for H.O.P.E.

I had an apartment. I had met some guys who had a lot of cocaine, and I let them set up shop in my house. And that means I could get hold to it anytime. I could keep hollering for it all day because they didn't want you to kick them out onto the street with all their cocaine. So they supported my habit so they could stay at my house until they sold out.

"You have to fall and bump your head so many times! It don't take just one time for something bad to happen to you, for you to want to stop."

I got arrested a couple of times. I couldn't depend on my mama. She'd say, "You shouldn't of did it!" But I call my father,

he come and get me. He did give me a stern warning. He said, "The third time, you're on your own!" But he at least came to get me before he told me I'm on my own.

And then I went the third time. They arrested me for maintaining a dwelling for the guys who was selling cocaine out of my house.

You have to fall and bump your head so many times! It don't take just one time for something bad to happen to you, for you to want to stop. It's a series of accidents that happen. And I figured that the last straw was my kids—I have to have my kids.

I wish I had half the money now that I spent on cocaine. I'd be in a mansion somewhere. Too late now. Too late now.

I just look at it as something that just used to be, like a memory. So it's really not a problem anymore. But they say I can always go into remission. I can always set back. That's why I'd just rather not be around it.



Sharyn Jordan

1998

Since the last time we talked, everything stayed the same until I started to get clean. I was in and out of the shelter, trying to find places to stay in abandoned houses, staying with God-knows-who else, who had a room for a night. Struggling to find a meal through the course of each day.

The things I had to do to get my drugs: I prostituted, I stole, I even tried to sell some so I could keep my habit going. I stayed in the hospital for two days because I had been stoned. Actually stoned, with bricks. Suffered severe lacerations. I had staples put in, in one, two, three, four, five, six different places. If I didn't have hair, you'd be able to see it.

"This is the place for
second chances."

I'll never forget it—like it was yesterday! I'd been helping this girl and her crew make money. That night she said, "I need my fifteen dollars." She gave me a time limit

and I didn't get it. I said, "Wait a minute, why is she so hot about fifteen dollars!" I stood there and didn't think that my life might be in danger. She came back with three more girls with sticks and bricks and I couldn't do all of them at one time. The one who initially told me that I better have the money—she got a brick in the face. But the rest of them came from behind.



So much has changed. Just like working here now at the shelter. I'm a residential services assistant. What I do is basically be here for the clients. The day that I came in for that interview, I don't know whether Miss Maggie remembered my name, but I knew she knew me when she saw my face! I said, "Oh, gosh, I hope I can still get the job. I'm not the same person anymore!" We sat down and went through the interview process, and she loved me. She was so proud of me. And it just lets me know if people see you trying to do the right thing, they don't hold you down. They try and help you as much as they can. This is the place for second chances.



From my perspective, TROSA, which stands for Triangle Residential Options for Substance Abusers, is a place to learn how to live life on life's terms. You get up in the morning, you prepare for work, you deal with different personalities, and you learn how not to use. You learn to set goals and grab dreams again. Like you used to when you was a child and people would ask you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

When I was in prison in the DART [Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Treatment] Program, they was teaching me about the shame and the guilt and all the wrongdoings I've done. So I wrote my mom a letter apologizing to her. I told her that I love her and that I'm sorry. And I'm going to work my fingers to the bone 'til my last breath to get my life in order. And I meant that, and I guess as time goes on she can see it, so it makes things a little bit easier, because she had been told so many times before and it never happened.

She calls me, I call her. When she brings my daughter over, she sits around with me. We laugh, we talk, we even reminiscence

about some of the things I used to do as a kid. You know, we're coming together like we used to be when I was real small. I remember a close bond with my mother then. But it seems like somewhere along the way I lost it. Because I was rebellious and curious. I was a "curiosity killed a cat"! But today I sacrifice. If there is something she doesn't want me to do, I don't do it. Just to hold on to that bond.



I love going around telling my story! I really do. We used to have guest speakers come to the jail when I was there. Some of them had been there doing time, and they come back and tell their story. And I remember what I felt. I'd say, "Man, look, they're doing it! I can do that! I can do that! They come back and they look so good and they sound so good!"

So that's what I'm going to do. So maybe somebody else will say, "Maybe I can do it, if she did it!"





Sharyn Jordan Holland

2001

Today, I don't have to worry about what the crowd is doing. I'm trying to take care of me. If you don't like me, fine! I'll be all right. I got me. I love me. That's what's important today.

But it took so long! I'll never forget the time I was sleeping in front of the Goodwill down here on Main Street, and it was cold outside. Somebody had donated a couch and had put a whole lot of clothes out there. So I covered myself up with clothes and before I went to sleep, I said, "This is getting kind of rough! I'm scared to go to sleep right here!" And I said, "Well, so what! I won't wake up. I won't have to worry about tomorrow." I just went on and went to sleep because I didn't care if I died.

There was this old lady who used to sit on her porch down here in the projects, right down the street. That was my stomping area. And I'd have been up for five, six days. Clothes are nasty, hair all over my head. And she'd sit on her porch and always speak to me. Because she knew my mother, she knew my father—she went to my mother's church.

And I was so embarrassed. Even though I was good and high, I'd try to sneak by without saying anything.

She'd say, "Hey baby! I see you! You know you can do better than that!" I'd say, "Yes ma'am." And I'd keep right on walking, because she was touching my heart, and I didn't want anybody to be able to do that. She'd always catch me! Like she kept looking out her window to see me coming!

"I'm trying to take care
of me. If you don't like
me, fine! I'll be all right."

She's seen me twice since then, and we hugged necks, and she was crying and she told me she was very proud of me. And I apologized for all those days I walked in front of her, disrespecting her.

Whewww!!! Jesus, I wonder if I'll get emotional for the rest of my life!?



I have my own apartment. I pay my own bills. I put my own groceries in my house.

People don't understand it. Because they did never go into a period where they never had a place to stay. They didn't wake up hungry in the morning and didn't know where their breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, whatever, were coming from. They didn't stay in abandoned, dark houses. So they don't know how good it feels to wake up and vacuum your rug, and sweep off the porch, or do your windows and look across and maybe just see a dumpster as your view, but, you know, it's yours!



Of course, I have trouble sometimes getting certain jobs because of my background, because of that felony that I do have on my record. If they do an extensive check, it shows up. But if they do a seven-year check, it doesn't show up. It's been that long. Some people tend to think you're still the same person. I just wish they could come spend a weekend with me at my home. I have a two-bedroom apartment. My baby, she has her own room, and my husband, we have our own room. A nice large living

room, furniture that is exquisite because we spent our savings for it. I live comfortable! And if they were to come into my home and sit down, I would serve them breakfast, entertain them, we'd watch TV, listen to music. They would see I'm not that person that made that mistake, made that bad decision.

Things do change. Some people who are in charge of positions in some hospitals and important businesses may read this and say, "Hey, there's that girl who came in and put in an application! Let me call her. Because she's doing something different today. She just might be an asset to my agency."

I don't hide who I used to be, because I'm so proud of where I've come. If someone says, "Well, Sharyn, what were you doing ten years ago?" I say, "Oh, girl! I was messed up ten years ago! I was in and out of the shelter. I was on crack cocaine. Drinking. Homeless. Children gone." I don't have a problem with it. I'll tell anybody. Some people don't care to know, but I'm still talking about it!





Sharing

After an interview, the man with whom I had been talking said, "That tape is worth a million."

"Why?" I joked. "You think you'll be famous someday?"

"No, it's because it's been a long time since I've opened up like this to anyone."

Something about this process does open people up, myself included. Even I find myself saying things that I normally wouldn't share with other people.

I am not sure why, but perhaps it has something to do with the drawing process—the undivided attention I give to the resident, or the finished drawing which may show them a window into themselves. Or perhaps it is the unfiltered answers I give to their questions while I draw—unfiltered because I am too deeply tuned into my drawing to watch what I say. And some-

times I don't react at all to some pretty troubling things they tell me. And even that, I think, at times can be a blessing for them.

I think there are times in anyone's life when they would like to be able to talk about a serious matter without facing a big emotional outpouring of shock or support from the listener. Sometimes people just need someone to be there, to listen, but not to react.

—*Edie Cohn*, 1995



My father was a kind of violent man. He was a mean man when he got to drinking! He was a good man now when he wasn't drinking, but when he got to drinking, he would as soon as shoot me as shoot somebody over yonder.

When he was drinking he killed my brother, and I was standing upside of him. Just gunned him down. Just shot him down. This was my next oldest brother. There were four brothers.

My dad was drinking that particular night. We lived in Oxford, but we went to Roxboro. My daddy got to drinking and all the way back home he was drunk. He done run up on a bank and all, he about turned the car over. My brother said, "Daddy, if you are going to drive all over the road, let me and my brothers and sister out. Just let us out, so we'll walk back home." He got mad about that, he'd been drinking and all.

He stood us up in line. He said, "I'll kill every one of you, you belong to me anyway."

Carl Green 1992

Durham Community Shelter for H.O.P.E.

Me and my brother standing side by side, the bullet passed by me and hit my brother and killed him just like that. I never got over that.

But, see, to myself, that wasn't my father at that time. See, if he'd have been his good human sense, he would have never did that. He cried many days after then. I overlooked him, because I know that that weren't himself.



The job I'm on now at Duke, I been there twenty years. This makes my twentieth year. Every day I'm on my job. I won't let *nothing* interfere me with my job!

I'm like this: anything that I get into, I learn how to put a handle on it. I tried drugs. I didn't let it get out of hand. But I have when I tried cocaine. That's what cost me. Because you got friends, "Lend me this, lend me that, and I'll pay you tomorrow." But I learned that after the cocaine's gone, you can't get no money and you're out of what you lent them. See, you can't be too free-hearted with cocaine and with your money. So I learned a lesson behind that. I went broke. But I learned a lesson.



I was listening to them the other night at the shelter when they said, "Vote for this man for this and this." And one of the guys said, "What they gonna do for the homeless?" So I said we got to try to help ourselves first. You just can't sit right down and expect as some people do! But if all of us showed that we want help, and need help, people don't mind helping you.

"It's a certain way you talk to people to make them feel like they're somebody."

See, if you came by here and gave me five dollars, ten dollars, when I say I want something to eat, and then you see me sitting out there under the tree with a wine bottle sticking up to my head, you wouldn't think anything but, "He didn't need my help, all he wanted is something to drink!" But I'm talking about really helping yourself, and trying to be something. If

you help yourself, somebody else will help you, too. For me, I try to help myself and give a little help to somebody else. If I came out of the ditch or the gutter, I would like to be able to show another person that it can be done.

Sometimes it's the way you talk to people. People don't care how low they is or how homeless they feel. It's a certain way you talk to people to make them feel like they're somebody. But you make a person feel like he ain't nobody, he's gonna act like nobody.



My goal is, when I leave out of here again, I want to live a normal life, a Christian life. See, I go to church, and I learn that you feel just as good in living a normal life and a Christian life as being out there on drugs.

You feel so much better because you can go where you want to, you can buy what you want to. I had it, but I lost it! I don't want that. I want to leave a good pattern for my children. I don't want to lead a life where they say, "My daddy went out in a homeless shelter!"



Carl Green

2001

I've talked to people that have said, "I can't get off drinking, I can't get off what I'm on."

I said, "What in the world are you on so bad that you can't stop it?" I said, "Anything I get on, I can stop it." A guy told me years ago, he said, "Mr. Green, you can't. If you get on this stuff, you can't get off it." I said, "Yes, I can!" He said, "Mr. Green," he got on his knees, he said, "Please don't ever put any of this in your mouth!"

He was on it bad! He said, "Please don't ever do this! Because you cannot stop!"

"Well," I said, "Well, I got a strong mind."

I said, "I may get on it, but it ain't gonna run wild on you, it ain't gonna run like diseases, crawl into and get into your body and you don't know it!" I said, "Anything you can put into your mouth yourself you can stop it. You know? It ain't like catching a cold and you don't know it's coming! You know it's coming because you put it in your mouth!"

"Mr. Green, please don't do it." He said, "I respect you."

I said, "I'm going to find a way to stop so I can tell my friend how to deal with it."

Well, it's something I've got to deal with the rest of my life. It's always there for you. Because if you think about that strong enough, you can get high in mind but not

"It's something I've got to deal with for the rest of my life. It's always there. You got to keep it out of your mouth first, then you deal with your mind."

in the head, so you just got to keep that blocked out. You got to think about something more strongly than that—block it out. You got to keep it out of your mouth first, then you deal with your mind.



After I quit working for Duke, I kind of pulled myself out and tried to find a way to do better, act better, serve people, you know, try to make a better thing out of my life. So I got this idea and found a new way of doing things, a way to help somebody. Me and a partner got a little clean-up kind of business. We go out and help older people, women that are staying by themselves that can't take care of their big houses.

"I'm so proud of my daughter! I can see myself in her, doing my dreams."

I like helping people. Just like when you first met me, I was working here at the shelter. I used to keep the floors looking good, keeping them clean. My hobby is cleaning and keeping myself busy so I won't get that lonely mind in there.

I liked helping the people that was here in the shelter—especially the younger

generation. See, everybody that comes here got a different problem and a different way that you got to deal with that problem. I used to set them down and talk to them and show them that somebody loves them. "All you got to do is get up out of here, stop moping around here like you are as old as I am, and go out there and find a person that loves you! When your family turns their back on you, somebody else can love you, too."

I got a lot of young people out of here, you know, by talking to them. You look around here, you don't see that many of them in here now. Just a bunch of older people.



I'm so proud of my daughter! I can see myself in her, doing my dreams. See, I had a dream for her. But you cannot dream for your child. You got to let them have their own dreams. But she has got my dreams. She's a drug counselor, then she works with juveniles and then she works with housing. She got three jobs! She got two kids and she got a new home. And she is doing fine!







My humble beginnings start in East Orange, New Jersey. My mother was a nurse. My father was an ace mechanic and a painter. I had a very comfortable childhood. I had everything I needed.

We moved to North Carolina when I was ten. As soon as I turned eighteen, I moved back to New Jersey. I lived with my Aunt Lucy, and she put me through prep school. I married a few months after I got out of school, had two children and got a job at a publishing company in New Jersey. I wrote lawyer's biographies for them for almost four years. I did a lot of traveling, interviewing lawyers. And still trying to raise a family. Luckily I had a good husband holding down the fort. He worked while his mother kept the children during the day.

We moved from Jersey to North Carolina in '86. The reason was my mother got sick, my father got sick and my grandfather got sick, and Grandma was taking care of everybody. So I packed up, me and the girls, took a leave

of absence from my job and came here. My husband joined me a couple months later.

I had Navra right about that same time. Eight months after she was born, my husband and I separated, behind the drug. He became addicted.

I think it was the change in environment. Taking him out of his setting. Coming here, he felt like he was alone. I was wrapped up in my family, and this was my home. He didn't have anybody to talk to.

I have told him that I'll take him back if he gets himself together. I have told him that, but he has no idea that one day he really will get himself together, I don't think. But I know that, I've seen it. See, I've seen him gray in my mind. I've seen him as an old man mowing the lawn. So that's how I know that it will come to be.

Me and my girls left our house to move into Grandma's house and take care of my mother and father. My mother died last March. I haven't worked a day since she died.



Tassie Johnson
1994

Genesis Home

When my father died it just kind of—I don't know what it did to my mind. I hadn't yet had a chance to grieve for my mother the way I think I should have. And then his death, and my paternal grandmother died, too, two weeks before my father. So that was like three major people! Right there at the same time!

“I have what it takes!

There is no question in
my mind!”

The end result was me clinging to someone to be my rock. And he was bad for me. What can I say? I finally woke up one day and said this is not me! What is taking me so long to pull myself up out of this pity pot, because that's what I was in, a pity pot. I was having a pity party. But it was time for me to leave that party.

That's what brought me to Genesis Home. I called the Help Line. I was at my wits' end. It had gotten to the point where the girls would come home from school and

ask, “Mommy, are you in a good mood?” I tell you, those kids have been through something with me! Through all of these seven years without a father, we have been through the dark, sometimes, when the light bill wasn't paid. We've been through the cold, we've been through the hunger, no food in the house.

Hopefully, I'll re-enter the job market soon so that we can get off the system altogether. I *need* the system—but I shouldn't have to. That's not my background.

We will soon have our own home again. I'm not going to have my lights off *again*. I'm not going to be hungry *again*. I might not have what I really want to eat, but we're going to have something to eat, and we're not going to be hungry and suffering when I know I have the ability to make a better life. I have what it takes! There is no question in my mind! I flash back a few years ago and I'm the women with the alligator pumps and the briefcase jumping on a plane! I can do so much better than welfare, and I'm tired of this.



Tassie Johnson

2001

I couldn't wait for 1993 to be over! I remember watching '94 come in with my girlfriend. I was at my grandmother's house and watching it come in with Dick Clark, and we were just crying, we were sobbing! Sobbing! That was the year my mother had died, my father died, my Uncle Jim had died, and my paternal grandmother died. We were so happy to see '93 leave! We felt like it just couldn't get any worse, '94 had to be a better year! And it was. It started out kind of rough for me, but it ended up pretty good.

We were in Genesis Home for three months. For my girls, that wasn't a really long time out of the whole. They really didn't get to feel the brunt of it and they never refer to it as "homeless." They always say, "When we stayed at the Genesis Home."

I raised my girls to be big and strong and proud just like my grandmother raised me. The same way. Especially being black. *Especially* being black! You want to instill a good self-esteem into being a black female! You want them to feel whole as early in life

as possible. You want to raise whole women so that they won't have to feel like they have to depend on someone else to complete them.

That is one of the biggest mistakes that black women make. We feel like we need a man to complete us. And then you take a woman that is fragmented and a man that is fragmented and you think that you can have a whole relationship. You have to be whole in yourself first.

"I raised my girls to be strong and proud."

My husband and I reconciled just in time for Destin's birth. He was there to witness him coming into the world. We found a lovely little home on North Hyde Park Avenue, and we just kind of fell back together after seven years of separation. Finally I had my husband back, the father of my children back, and the fact that Destin wasn't biologically his didn't matter to him. You know, they bonded just like—oh, you just would not believe how they bonded!



People gripe and complain about their jobs. I can relate to that, but not on this particular job. I love my job! I've worked hard! I am self-taught on the computer. I got a big fat promotion last year into this graphic designer position and I feel good about it and I'm enjoying it. But God doesn't bring us through just for us to say, "Whew! I made it!" The Lord brings us through in order to help others.



A few years ago a fire happened at our house and we lost everything except the clothes on our backs. Everything! It was a devastating day in the history of the Johnson family, but we didn't feel the pain that some families would feel because of that relationship we have with God. We didn't feel the fire, so to speak, even though we had lost everything!

Everything was handled, everything was taken care of. The Salvation Army put us up in a hotel and when we came out we were in our new house where we are now. Which is a fabulous house compared to the house we left. And donations were coming from all over town—the house was fully furnished

within a week's time. I mean, we wanted for nothing. Money! Food! Furniture! Clothing! Everything! Even down to a toenail clipper!

God took that tragic, tragic thing and turned it around into a lesson to let me know that I really can trust Him. To let me know how really big He is. I often tell people that that fire was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

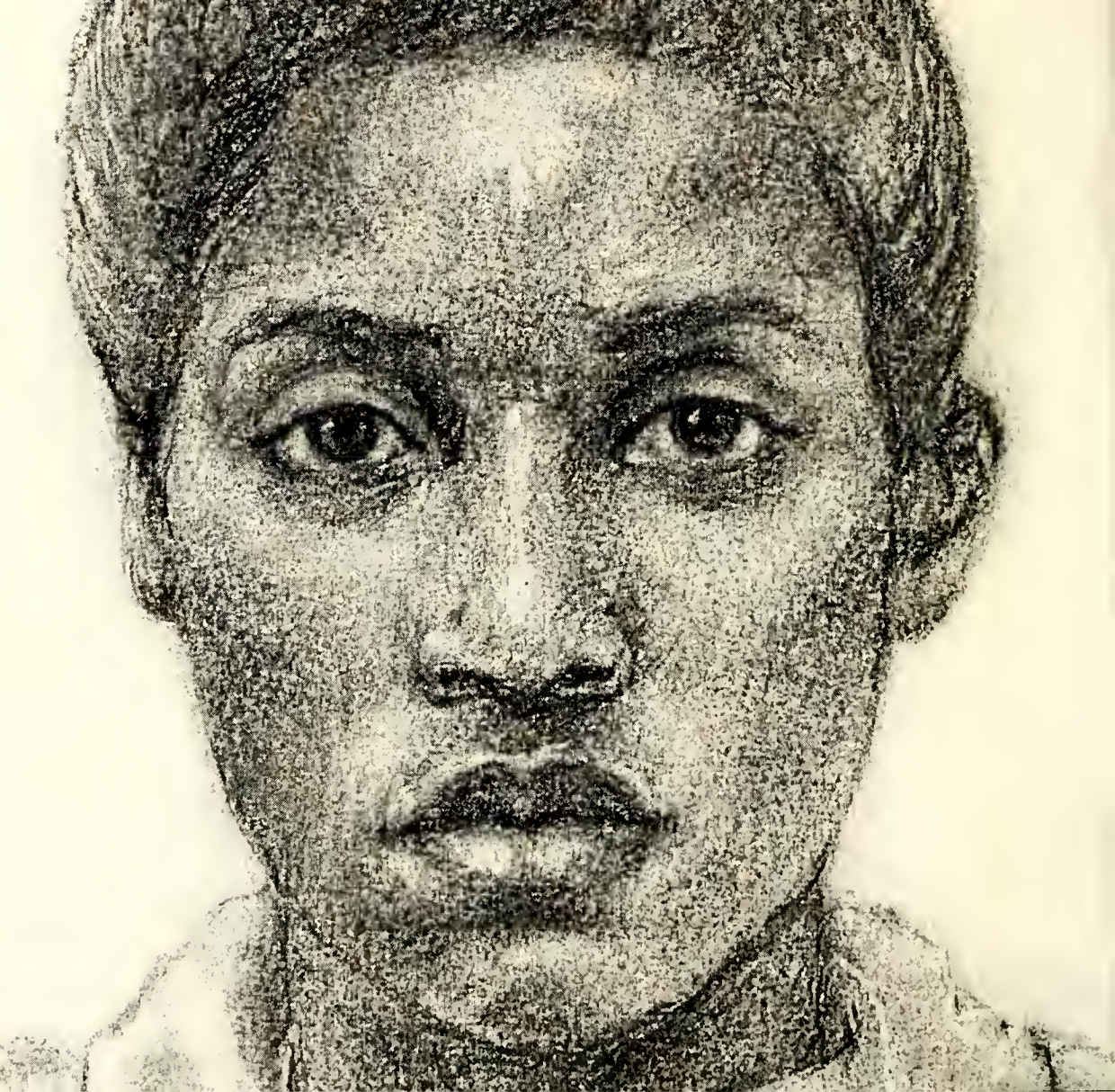
When you first interviewed me I kind of had a defeatist attitude. I kind of thought that the world was against me, because I was down. But you know, when you don't have God in your life, you just can't help but to see everything in a negative light. If I just take the same energy and apply positivity to it, it'll more than likely resolve itself much quicker and easier.

I'm not living in a pity pot anymore. No, I'm living somewhere half-way between here and Glory now!

That lady there, look at her! She's living high on the hog, looks like to me! She's one of those fat, jolly people. You could have shaved twenty pounds off the face, Edie!







Serious Portraits

Most of the drawings that I did on this project, especially the ones I did of men, were received in a similar way. The person would look at the drawing intently for a few seconds and then exclaim, "That's me! That's me!"

Sometimes I felt compelled to apologize for the seriousness of a drawing. The apology would almost always be met with an objection, something like: "I like it. That is the way I feel sometimes, especially since I've been here."

One time I brought a drawing back to the shelter to work on it more, because I thought it was too "heavy." It was of a woman who seemed to radiate energy. There was sadness in her life, but she still had an air of vitality about her. I wanted to capture that quality.

As I worked on her drawing for the second time, the woman gave me an update on

what was going on in her life. Along with her usual smiles and laughter, this session also produced tears. She had just found out that her family was in the process of trying to take legal custody of her children; she was a crack addict who was trying to get clean but who hadn't yet successfully done so. She talked about the anger, the hurt, and the fears she felt not only because of her family's actions, but also because she faced the very real possibility of losing her children. I felt her pain as I drew her—the pain I knew I would feel if someone took my children from me—but I kept my feelings at bay. I was out to capture her "lightness."

When I got the picture home, I realized I had failed utterly. The picture was more depressing than it had ever been. In fact, I still have a hard time looking at it.

—*Edie Cohn, 1993*



Families

A local group has commissioned me to design a collage for a T-shirt. It was my promise to include drawings of children in the collage that brought me to Genesis Home, a facility that takes in homeless families.

Working with families has turned out to be difficult in ways I hadn't anticipated. At the Durham Community Shelter for H.O.P.E., where I've been drawing and interviewing individuals for several years, I am greeted with enthusiasm, both by people I've drawn and talked to and by others who know me only by sight. But at Genesis Home, I am not met as warmly. So far, nobody has really opened up to me.

It is the mothers, in particular, who seem guarded. Perhaps it is because they know so little about me. Or perhaps they don't want their face, name and story in a book, broadcasting to the world that they and their children are homeless. Maybe their guardedness springs from a desire to protect their children. Being a mother

myself, I can understand that concern, and maybe I should respect it more. But it does leave me in a tough spot with this project.

I did manage to persuade a few mothers to let me interview their children in a group. When I chatted with the mothers in the kitchen just before the interview, I felt an undercurrent of anxiety from them concerning what I might put their children through. In particular, they didn't want me to use the word "homeless" when talking to their children. They coached me to say, "Now that you don't have your own house . . ."

Looking back, it seems their anxiety had to do not only with the potential impact of my project on their children, but also with how the children perceived their present situation and how they, as mothers, wanted the world to perceive their family.

All in all, I don't think the women liked the word "homeless."

—*Edie Cohu, 1994*



Well, before, it was different because we had our own place. It's not quite the same here because we have a bigger family living in the same household with us, and rules, and we share a room, one whole family. And it's also different because it's not a house of our own.

"Some people want to be rich to be greedy with their money. I want to help homeless people."

We lived in a lot of houses. We moved for a lot of things. Didn't like the house, the landlord, or we had to move for me to go to a new school. Different things. We moved about seventy-two times.

In New Jersey we moved twenty-seven times. Then we moved to Georgia. We lived in Decatur, Atlanta, Stone Mountain, all over

the place. After that we went back to New Jersey. After that we came here. I'm tired of moving. That's why I can't wait 'til I get older. Then I'm going to live my own life.

I have three jobs that I'm looking forward to. I'm trying to choose, because you never know which one I might be able to do. I have a lawyer, a pediatrician, and also I wanted to be a social worker. And really, there's a fourth: I want to be a private investigator. There might be more, I don't know. The reason why I want all those, you see, all these are "making money" jobs, except for the social worker.

Reason why I want to be a pediatrician is because I think children are our future. Because we were little babies, too. And why would we want for them to come into a bad environment? I don't want the world to be junky like it is, for them. Why would we mess it up, give them some kind of diseases and stuff, for when they come?

Some people want to be rich to be greedy with their money. I don't. I want to do the same thing Bertie [Jones, former director of Genesis Home] is doing, helping the homeless people.



Benjamin "B. J." Steele
1994

Genesis Home

When I get older, I'm building a big giant house—the biggest house you ever saw, bigger than a mansion! It's going to be in New Jersey, and I'm going to hire people who have about four vans riding around, picking up homeless people, take them back, let them settle down first, get them cleaned up. And then we'll get their names and stuff. I'll have social workers with their offices

"I made a promise to myself that I would never go to a jail. Only time is to visit or if I was a lawyer."

downstairs. Everyone who comes in is going to have a social worker, or counselor, who's going to help them find a job, help them find an apartment, workers like this right here.

And I'm going to have a big auditorium, like on certain days we'll have a meeting. And when they first come, we're going to be right

in there talking to them, and I'll be telling them our rules and stuff. And putting them in their rooms and giving them their counselors. That's why I want a big house, because like it is here, there's people that stay here, but there's more people that need to come. This is what I want to do. I can't wait to get older to be able to achieve my goal.

And then, like some people are on drugs, or drinking: we're not going to have that. If that's their goal, they're going to have to leave. Because if they're homeless, they should be worried about being un-homeless. Getting a job, have money, clothing, stop wearing the same clothing and have a place where you lay your head. A roof over your head. If you want my help, you can stay here how long as you need to. But you can't be lazy, you can't steal and stuff.

I made a promise to myself that I would never go to a jail. Only time is to visit or if I was a lawyer. And if I can't get my big house I'm still going to try my best to help out, every way I can.



Benjamin Steele

2000

I was an eighth-grader at Genesis Home. Of course, from there, eventually we had a place. And I went on to high school, to Hillside.

We always “had” from my grandparents. When it was time for my mother to take care of her responsibilities, in some cases I felt she didn’t do them in a good way. But I guess that motivated me, with the help of my family members, to push me on. Because I was scared that me and my brother would wind up doing drugs or alcohol, be homeless out on the streets, so forth.

So I felt that I wanted to get out and on my own after a while. I stayed with a family member in town for my tenth year in high school. From then I went on to different houses—I traveled, you know what I mean? I went here and there until I was happy. I mainly wanted that fantasy life of home, car, mother working, all that. And I had that, from the families I was staying with.

I graduated in 1998. I also went to Durham Tech Community College. And hopefully, pretty soon, I’ll be finished in that. I’m

taking business, communication and administration. Eventually I want to go back to school for biology and radiology. It may be a while, but that’s what I want to do. Now I’m working at Duke University Medical Center as a specialist in one of the offices there.

“I’m still motivated to push on, because it doesn’t stop here.”

So, my life has dramatically changed. I feel like I’m a grown-up now. I have a little girl, she just turned two. And I have one on the way. I’m engaged to be married. I have my own place, car, job—all my dreams and goals are beginning to come true!

My brother, who is deaf, moved on with his life, went to school, graduated, and now is about to attend a performance school of arts in New York. That pushed me, made me feel so good. And I’m still motivated to push on, because it doesn’t stop here.



I didn't have that set-up that a parent would instill in their children about school. I didn't have the structure to show me how to go to an interview. I had to venture it all on my own.

I have met people that have been through it, and the main thing I tell them is, "Never give up! If your parents are not going to go out there and do it, you can do it! You can be the backbone for the family." My brother and I, we've been through times when we said we want to commit suicide because we are going through all this trouble and we just want to give up. Just never give up!

In high school, my thing was jumping into organizations to keep me busy. My thing was to really get my mind off my past and moving onto the future. And to push me out there into different things I want to explore.

I was involved in ROTC—that's where I got most of my tricks from. Also the drama department. I feel drama was the best way to express how you feel. I worked with Wendell Tabb, the director. I got involved with his exchange program where we traveled almost around the world. We went all over the place! We went to Bermuda. We performed

in Peru, Brazil, West Africa. He's been a good role model in my life. A lot of advice I got from him, a lot of skills I learned from him. When you don't have the male figure in your life, you need someone.

I want my sister to have that childhood life I missed out on. And I want her to have the structure, because that is something I didn't have. I want her to have a better life where she's able to go to that four-year college. Graduate with honors. Be an attorney, or teacher, or doctor. I know you can't make somebody do anything, but that's my goal. I want to open a door for her, because nobody opened a door for me.

Coming from my aunt, everything is a circle. She calls it the "life circle." Everybody on the top will eventually fall to the bottom, and they have to work their way to the top again. That's one thing I always remember, because it seems like I'm always on the bottom. She's like, "You got to work your way up to the top. And when you're up there, and you have everything, you've got to maintain yourself on top, instead of falling back off again."



Edie writes . . .

Why We Write

Today I talked a bit with B. J.'s mom, Laura, as she smoked a cigarette on the front porch of Genesis Home. I had been feeling distant from her; she seemed unfriendly to me and rather peeved that I had not brought her a copy of the design for a T-shirt I was working on that featured her baby daughter blissfully asleep in the center of a group of homeless people.

I was tired. I had been on the porch trying to draw wiggly children as a crowd of opinionated, wiggly children watched. By the time Laura and I started talking, they thankfully had all disappeared and the porch was calm.

Laura said, "You've got to be able to concentrate to draw, don't you?" She went on to say that that was the way it was for her when she writes—she has to find a quiet time, like when her child is napping or late at night. She said she keeps a

journal and writes every day about things that happen to her. Sometimes she just jots down a few notes so she can remember later what she was thinking.

She said she had written about me. I asked her if she ever lets anyone else read it and she said, "No, it is just for me—no one else *ever* reads it." Then she went on to say that every January she reads over all that she has written in the past year and throws away everything except the pages that she enjoys. Those she keeps.

I told her that I had seldom written before this project and I talked about how much I liked doing it now. I said that whenever I was upset or didn't understand what was going on, I would write about it and all of a sudden I would see it better and sometimes I would be able to figure it out. She said it was like that for her, too.

—*Edie Cohn*, 1994



Like a Movie Star

Mark Dunford kept telling me that my portrait of him made him look like a movie star. For the life of me, I just couldn't figure out what he was talking about! The drawing looked just like him: a disheveled old man. His hair was dirty and he had bloody cuts and bumps on his forehead—no movie star there! He wore neither a pair of movie-star sunglasses nor a movie-star smile. He was in a wheelchair and had stumps where his feet used to be—lost in a fire, he says.

It wasn't until later that I realized he must have been referring to a sense of dignity that he could see in his portrait. A quality movie stars possess, but certainly not him. It just didn't make sense!

—*Edie Cohn*, 1993



My birth date is October 13, 1950. I was born in Newark, New Jersey.

Yes, I finished high school. I went one year to college at North Carolina A&T. And I came back pregnant—part of partying. I was glad to get away from home. That was an outlet for me—that was freedom—more than going to learn something. It was more of just getting away.

I started using after I had my daughter. I was about nineteen, not quite twenty. During those years my daughter stayed with either my parents or my first husband's parents. I guess out of all that time, she might have stayed with me maybe two good years. She might would come on the weekend, but then it was like I wasn't there mostly on the weekends anyway, so a lot of times she was there by herself or with some friends of mine. But the majority of the time, she lived with my parents or with her other grandparents.

Reneé Baker

1992

*Former Resident,
Durham Community Shelter for H.O.P.E.*

I've been married three times. I'm on my third husband; I just got married in November. I met this guy in treatment, in the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous. My first husband was also an addict and he was very abusive, but at the time I wasn't using. But after he and I broke up, that's when I picked up and started to drink real heavy, and then I started to use

"All the husbands I had except for the one I have now was always abusive and were addicts. The more they used, the more I used."

other drugs after that. And then I got married again, and all the husbands I had except the one I have now was always abusive and were addicts and they used. And the more they used, the more I used.



I came to the shelter twice. I was here two months, and then two more months. And that was in 1989 and '90.

After I left the shelter the last time, I still didn't get myself together. I stayed here and there and everywhere, not mainly on the streets, but just with anybody that would let me stay with them. I did that for about a

"From where I came
from, I would never
have thought I would
have ended up
like this."

year. And I got cleaned up—I went into treatment in 1991. The only reason I decided to do that was because the last place that I stayed, I got abused real bad and I didn't have anywhere else to go, so treatment was my only resort to get off the streets at that time. So that's where I went, and I stayed there for twenty-eight days.

When I left treatment, my parents decided they would give me one more chance. So I lived in their basement for about five months. And then it was just, I guess, by grace, because then I found a job. And the only reason I got the job was because I was an addict. And that's what they were looking for: somebody with an addiction to do the job. That's the job that I have now. I work at the health department. I pass out condoms and talk to people about HIV and AIDS. And that's a blessing, because, I mean, from where I came from, I would never have thought I would have ended up like this.



Reneé Baker

2001

I do remember my life took the change when I realized I just didn't have anything to offer. That here I am, grown, 40, and then I decided I don't think I can make another ten years doing it, I wouldn't live! And I've always been afraid of dying and where I might die at. I didn't want to die in some dirty old house. I didn't want to embarrass my parents. I'm already an embarrassment! *I really* don't want to embarrass them this way.

Now I feel that I can leave this world saying that at least I didn't take any more away than I gave. I had feared that I was going to die in addiction and not have contributed anything. I had never wanted to be what I was; I just didn't know what to do *not* to be it.

I'm working now as a rehabilitation counselor at the Duke Addictions Program. My clients let me see that I don't want to ever repeat that part of my life again. Because I can see the pain in their faces. That pain is so intense! It's awesome how God will allow me to see it, real vividly. It's like I can just touch it, like I want to just hug it out of them. I can feel when it's there. And I can tell when

they are trying to hide it away. Amazing! I say, gosh, just imagine, I used to be the same way!

"I had never wanted
to be what I was; I just
didn't know what to do
not to be it."

Before my mom died, I could see the aging in her face. And I often said to myself, how much of that did I cause her to have to come through? Just the pain in her face and how gray she had gotten. And it seems like overnight to me, because during my time of being in the streets and doing my thing, I never stopped once to really, really look at her! You know, just see how she was changing. I never looked 'til I got clean.

The blessing is that when she died, I was clean. They didn't have to find me. I wasn't living from pillar to post or they had to ask this person or that person if they'd seen me. I was there. And I was so grateful for that, and I got to make my amends to her.



I asked my daughter, "Was there a time in your life when you were really happy?" She said, "It wasn't until when you stopped getting high."

I didn't believe that! I said, "Shannon, what about before that?" She said, "You never knew this, but when you would leave me, I would run into the front door and try to bruise myself up, hurt myself, so that you would come back."

"I just wish it was possible for us to go back and just change stuff. But it's not."

I never knew that! I said, "Gosh, you know, what do you do with that information? What do you do!?"

That I still have not processed. Because she's only told me that these last couple months. Now, I'm not in denial that I caused her a lot

of pain. I'm not in denial about that. But I never imagined it was that intense.

I think it's a lot of the reason I spend so much time with her and my grandkids now, because I never got to enjoy her childhood. And now I see my grandkids during their childhood and I'm enjoying it as if it were hers. Because I never got to do that stuff with her! I go skating with them, and all the things I should have done with her when she was their age.

I'm a firm believer that people should not have children until they are healthy enough to have them. You know what I mean? Because it costs the kids so much! It really does.

I just wish it was possible for us to go back and just change stuff. But it's not. And my sponsor always tells me I have to not allow myself to always live in yesterday. You know, I've made my amends to my daughter. I made them verbally, I made them through the way that I live now, through how I am with her kids, how I am with her now. But I still don't think it's enough!







Edie writes . . .

Ahh, Pity!

I'm in the library at Duke, viewing a photography show of homeless people. The photos are huge! Stunning! Bright whites and the blackest of blacks: wrinkles, gray hair, textures of clothing . . .

People with stories in their eyes, vulnerable, but willing to pose. People who are not asking for answers. People who are allowing the photographer to violate their privacy for this one moment.

I read the photographer's commentary and am moved. I feel guilty and stupid for my inability to have the pity he has for homeless people and for my inability to describe their circumstances as he does.

But wait! I have worked with a number of homeless people over the past years, and here I am, feeling ashamed because I don't pity them! What is going on here? Why do I assume the photographer is right and I am wrong? Is it because his photos are more impressive than my drawings and

thus he must know more? Or is it because he is restating what everyone else has said all along: homelessness is pitiful.

This is not the first time I have encountered the pity issue, nor will it be the last. But why is it so annoying? I think it's because I *know* the people I interviewed never wanted me to pity them!

I think pity is a predator of pride and dignity: it feeds on those fragile qualities of which homeless people have so little. The photographer had invaded their privacy because he used their images to pity them. Maybe all people who try to elicit pity for their cause have their heart in the right spot, but I wonder, do they understand what they are doing to the people they are trying to help? Do they understand how terribly fragile pride and dignity are?

I'd like to leave "pity" out of this project. Empathy, yes. But pity—no.

—Edie Cohn, 1995

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The North Carolina Humanities Council is a state-based program of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council's mission is to bring North Carolinians together to make sense of this world we share. North Carolinians live in a world defined by more than geographical boundaries. The state's culture and heritage are alive in the diversity of its traditions, its people and places, its history and art, its stories and music. As expressions of culture and heritage, the humanities are all around us, in our conversations, in the different ways we see the world, in the many ways we shape our lives. More than expressing our lives, the humanities offers us ways to ask the most fundamental questions about the meaning of what we say and do, about who we are.



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