

Front Page Story Christmas Day - December 25, 2007

## Homeless for the holidays



**Paul W. Gillespie - The Capital**

From left, Nathaniel Slay, 43, Taylor Wilson, 59, and Eric D. Cook Sr., 59, spoke last week at a shelter provided by Gloria Dei! Lutheran Church in Arnold.

## Local veterans share stories of life on the streets

By [EARL KELLY](#), Staff Writer

Magnetic ribbons on the back of cars read "Support our troops" and hint at heroic struggles endured for a grateful nation. But the veterans living on cots in homeless shelters around Anne Arundel County this holiday season tell another tale.

In interviews over the past two weeks, *The Capital* listened to seven homeless veterans - six men and one woman - who served honorably in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. They were medics, security officers, supply clerks, weapons specialists and aircraft mechanics. They served, on average, five years, and their pay grade when discharged ranged from low-level enlisted ranks to the mid-level, from E-3 to E-6.

Their average age today is 48, and their slide into homelessness didn't come all of a sudden.

Rather, these people have spent years spiraling downward to where they are today.

Five of the vets were interviewed at Gloria Dei! Lutheran Church in Arnold, which is one of the churches that participates in the Winter Relief Program. Two others were interviewed at The Light House Shelter on West Street in Annapolis.

Most of the seven vets grew up in Anne Arundel County, and all of them now call its towns and communities home.

### **Thoughts of suicide**

"I just reached a point of no return, until I lost everything," said Ralph Fontaine, of Crofton, a trim man of 47 who served as a Navy Seabee from 1978 to 1984. He left the service as a petty officer first class. Since leaving the Navy, Mr. Fontaine has worked as a foreman on commercial construction jobs.

He was injured severely in a car accident 11 years ago, then he had "a mental breakdown from my job and my marriage," which ended in a nasty divorce.

"I got drunk on July 5, and turned on the car and ran a pipe inside, but an Anne Arundel County policeman found me passed out," he said. "I got drunk because I wanted to feel no pain when I turned that motor on and ended my life."

Mr. Fontaine survived that suicide attempt and three months later, in October, he found himself sitting on the guardrail on Route 50, where it crosses West Street.

"I sat there for two hours; I was ready to walk out in front of something," he said.

Instead of walking in front of a truck, though, Mr. Fontaine walked to Anne Arundel Medial Center, where he received psychiatric treatment.

Now taking two medications for depression, Mr. Fontaine is doing his best to hang on. But some nights, he said, he lies in his cot thinking about killing himself. He works out every minute detail of his death, until he falls asleep or the sun comes up and he can start another day.

### **A woman's story**

Down the hall from where Mr. Fontaine was staying at the homeless shelter being run this week by Gloria Dei! Lutheran Church, Christine Yirka also had a bed.

Ms. Yirka was an Army medic for four years, and reached the grade of E-4, or specialist. She grew up in Pasadena and calls Glen Burnie home.

Ms. Yirka was shot in the knee when another soldier's weapon fired accidentally. The injury ended her military career in 1993.

She can laugh at most of her hardships, even when telling about the excruciating pain she goes through every year when a doctor has to go into the knee "and scrapes all the glop out."

"I wasn't discharged a month, and I was on the streets," said Ms. Yirka, who has since been diagnosed as having bi-polar disorder.

### **Help for Vets**

- To learn more about the Veterans Administration' Homeless Veterans Program, go to [www.maryland.va.gov](http://www.maryland.va.gov) or call the VA center in Baltimore at 410-605-7000 or 800- 463-6295 or 410-605-7263.
- The Light House Shelter, located at 206 West Street, helps homeless citizens of Anne Arundel County by providing emergency shelter, transitional housing, eviction prevention, employment placement and financial support services. For more information about services or for making contributions, go to [www.annapolislighthouse.org](http://www.annapolislighthouse.org) or call 410-263-1835.
- For information about the Winter Relief Program, run by the Arundel House of Hope, go to [www.arundelhoh.org](http://www.arundelhoh.org) or call 410-863-4888.

Ms. Yirka said she was able to pull her life together at times, and even earned a paramedic's certificate from Anne Arundel Community College.

She said she especially enjoyed working in nursing homes and assisted-living facilities.

"I like working with the elderly, with people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia; it fills my soul," she said.

But, the bad times outnumbered the good times, Ms. Yirka said, and the former medic found herself homeless about eight times.

"My life took a bad turn, an abusive relationship," she said.

Ms. Yirka told how her boyfriend of six years made her quit taking her medications for depression, and along the way he started beating her. One day, he knocked Ms. Yirka's top front teeth out and stabbed her six times and "left me for dead." (He' now serving 20 years to life in prison).

Ms. Yirka laughed when telling about the boyfriend, and how he got so angry at being arrested for attempted murder, he smashed the window of the police cruiser with his forehead.

And she could even laugh, a little, when telling about her father, with whom she always had a poor relationship - the last time she called him, just a few days ago, he greeted her with "'I wish you were dead and in hell."

"I never knew my mom, never saw her," said Ms. Yirka, who lived in foster care from the age of 8 until she reached 18.

At one point in her narrative the tears started rolling gently down Ms. Yirka's cheeks:

"Yeah, I worked as a prostitute sometimes, just for a place to lay my head .... Some of the stuff I've done, I am embarrassed about ... Go ahead and write it, the world should know the truth."

### **Not war stories**

Every veteran interviewed had a unique story, but all were the same, too.

Lorenzo Smith, 46, is a former Marine corporal who receives treatment from the Veterans Administration for depression and drug and alcohol abuse.

He said he spends a lot of time "being depressed, feeling inadequate, like you are not good enough."

He is living at the Light House Shelter on West Street in Annapolis, and working at a Macy's warehouse.

He also takes a bus and the light rail to Baltimore, where he is undergoing counseling for alcohol and drug abuse and treatment for depression.

Mr. Smith graduated from South River High School and attended North Carolina A&T State University for a year. He wanted to become a radio or television sports announcer, but had to drop out of college when he ran out of money.

Mr. Smith still enjoys talking about how he made the college's basketball team as a walk-on point guard, and how he could shoot that ball.

"Top of the key," he said of his favorite spot on the court. "I didn't miss."

Mr. Smith has been homeless for two years, and at times has tried to hide the fact. (He spent one period living in a tool shed behind his mom's house off Muddy Creek Road, without her knowing where he was.)

"I had the cardboard, and the newspapers," he said of life on the streets, "and most of the time I would walk around in the night to get tired enough to sleep."

Part of his problem, Mr. Smith said, is that he feels that he should be a minister, but he can't tell for certain that that is God's will.

Meanwhile, he struggles, and prays, and looks for answers.

"I have quite a few churches I go to," he said of his days off from work. "It helps me a lot, just sitting there and letting God help my heart. Repenting and praying keeps me from having to beat myself up for things I have done."

### **Not just homeless**

Another Light House resident, John Dixon, 45, was the son of a Foreign Service agent who was rarely home and never gave him much attention.

"I love my father, I have a lot of respect for my father, but he was hard," Mr. Dixon said.

Mr. Dixon's mother left when he was 2 years old and he has never seen her or heard from her since.

Mr. Dixon dropped out of South River High School at 17, got into some trouble with the law, and joined the Navy, where he worked as an aircraft maintenance tech.

Just as he was getting out of the Navy in 1984, the airlines started slimming down, and he couldn't find work.

Mr. Dixon has spent years traveling around the United States, and working as a carpenter.

His health is failing, and he has been homeless for a year.

"Carpentering is off and on, hit and miss," he said.

To get money, Mr. Dixon pawned some of his tools, a radial arm saw and an impact drill, but he still pays interest in hopes of redeeming the tools of his trade.

He admits he's suffering from arthritis and can't work as a carpenter any more, but as long as he has the tools he can call himself a craftsman. Without the tools, he'd be just another homeless vet.

### **A prison sentence**

One of the seven vets to tell *The Capital* his story, Nathaniel Slay, 43, served honorably as an Army supply clerk from 1983 to 1990.

"When I got out of the Army, I was doing pretty good; had a wife and three kids, but I started getting into trouble," said Mr. Slay, who began drinking in the Army and now struggles with alcohol and cocaine addiction.

"I got locked up for attempted murder," he said, and "that messed my career up. For the last 17 years, it has been downhill for me."

A tall, fit-looking man, Mr. Slay is cheerful and sociable, but gets jittery and excited when discussing the 2 1/2 years he was locked up in a state prison in Hagerstown.

His crime was taking a baseball bat to a man who grabbed Mr. Slay's son and made some racist remarks. His punishment was having to live in a world of non-stop stabbings, beatings and rapes.

"It is constant, it is 24 hours a day, it is a different world," he said of the abuses in prison. Mr. Slay said staying out of prison is his number one goal in life, and his second is getting a good job and a place of his own.

Mr. Slay said he hasn't touched alcohol in six months, and drugs in a year. He has worked in various food warehouses at night to make a living, and now he's working for a car dealer in Glen Burnie, detailing cars.

He makes \$700 to \$800 a month, he said, and pays \$432 a month in child support.

"By the time April comes, I should have enough money to get me a little place of my own," he said.

### **Contented**

Eric D. Cook Sr. moved to Maryland from Delaware in 2000. Now 59, he served as an air security officer in the Air Force during the Vietnam War era, and "guarded whatever needed guarding" in non-combat areas.

After getting out of the service in 1972, he worked as an insurance salesman, but in 1977 he lost a leg in a motorcycle accident.

Mr. Cook has lived off a VA pension since 1993, and he's looking to get a Section 8 voucher so he can find subsidized housing in Anne Arundel County.

"I have been living on my pension, and as long as you get the housing, that is enough," he said.

Mr. Cook strongly resisted the notion that homeless vets suffer from emotional problems and drug and alcohol addiction.

"I have never been diagnosed with any freakin' thing," he said. "No drugs or alcohol (problems), nothing - that is one of the myths people have, that if you are homeless, it's drugs and alcohol and crazy, and that is bull----."

### **A lonely heart**

Despite Mr. Cook's protestations, there is an abundance of vets who do live up to the popular image of someone with problems.

One such vet is Taylor Wilson, who occupied a bunk about eight feet from Mr. Cook's bed.

Mr. Wilson went into the Army Infantry in 1972, the year Mr. Cook got out of the Air Force. He was a weapons instructor until he left the military in 1976.

"Then, I just moved from job to job," Mr. Wilson said. "I just wasn't happy, I just needed to fill a void."

Now 59, Mr. Wilson is homeless and suffers from emphysema, alcoholism and depression.

"At my age, who would want me, and I really can't think of anything I want to do," he said of employment.

Mr. Wilson lives off of \$637 a month, which he receives in Social Security Disability Insurance benefits.

One night this week, Mr. Wilson was sitting on his cot at Gloria Dei! Church, looking at a Hot Rod magazine that featured scantily-clad women sitting on the hoods of cars.

"When the weather gets warm, you get that wanderlust," said Mr. Wilson, who described himself as "a loner" who sometimes finds the "freedom of homelessness very attractive."

"Last year, I built a tent off Furnace Branch Road," he said of his living arrangements. "Being an old grunt, I know how to do that."

"I can't blame this on anybody, it is a combination of things," Mr. Wilson said of his homelessness.

"I sometimes feel like I missed my window, that I don't belong anymore. It seems I've lost my sense of direction," said Mr. Wilson, who has never married and has no close family. "I would like to feel like I belong to something."

Then, as the light danced off Gloria Dei!'s stained glass windows, Mr. Wilson looked around the shelter and said in a lower voice:

"My biggest fear is being alone .... Everybody wants to belong to somebody."

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For more information on homelessness in Anne Arundel County and the services of the Light House, please contact Marilyn Baker at 410-349-5056.