



Homeless youth find comfort on the streets

By Arthur Martori

"C'mon, man, hurry up, and stay low," says the dark shadow hunched a few feet from me on the far side of a small irrigation canal near Missouri Road in central Phoenix.

I look at the rapidly moving stream of filthy water that Webb, a 19-year-old homeless youth and my guide for the evening, is urging me to cross. The water swirls around two half-submerged, moss-and-mud-covered shopping carts and various pieces of lumber and branches strung together to form a piecemeal bridge across the canal.

It is a clear night. A bright moon reflects on the water, illuminating where I stand. Minutes earlier, Webb jimmed open a gate that prevented access to the canal bank so we could pass.

Beside the gate, a sign warns that we are on municipal property and subject to a number of unpleasanties. But now I'm more worried about the gymnastic feat Webb has just performed and that I must repeat.

He dances across the various pieces of garbage to scurry up the far bank as if he were a character in a video game. Then he leans from the sharply sloped bank, urging me to cross while shooting the occasional wary glance behind him.

I am following him on a tour of his beat in central Phoenix. Webb is a squatter, a Mill rat, a 19-year-old member of the homeless cast of characters who hang out on Mill Avenue. Although he spends most of his days in Tempe,

“

He dances across the various pieces of garbage to scurry up the far bank as if he were a character in a video game.

”

Webb said he generally crashes for the night in Central Phoenix.

He is attempting to show me one of his favorite squats—hidden locations where he and his companions can spend a night free of harassment. It is supposedly on the other side of the canal, behind a stand of trees that separate several large backyards from a path along the canal.

Webb is part of a large population of homeless youth that is most evident along Mill Avenue in Tempe. To some, especially merchants, these young panhandlers, street artists, drug dealers and dropouts are a scourge to the community—and bad for business. To others, they contribute to the unique character of downtown Tempe and should be left alone, if not helped.

The Arizona Homeless Coordination Office estimates the homeless population in Maricopa County at 12,000 and suggests that the number swells by as much as 30 percent during winter months.

The **Downtown Tempe Community**, a merchant organization, says that especially on weekends, there can be as many as 100 homeless people along Mill Avenue, drawn to Tempe by the mild weather and a relatively tolerant community.

Some come from other parts of the Valley; some hitchhike or hop on trains. Sometimes they are fleeing an abusive or neglectful home life. Often, as in the case of Webb, they are teenagers and have chosen street life over the custody of Child Protective Services or foster care.

The Tempe Youth Resource Center, located at 101 E. 6th St., just off Mill Avenue in Tempe, is one of a handful of organizations that offer services to homeless youth. It is staffed by a crew of young idealists who do their best to improve the lives of the youth they respectfully refer to as their “clients.”

One of the center’s youth care workers, Carl Blackstone—an articulate, 25-year-old ex-teacher who holds a master’s degree in education—says it’s hard to characterize the dozens of people who come to the center for meals, clothing, showers, first aid supplies, job counseling and other services.

“Some people want to be pushed, some want to be pulled,” he says. “There are some clients here who have a vocabulary that exceeds my own. There are some that can beat my ass in chess. One day they might be riding a train; the next they might be borrowing a shirt to interview for a job.”

While the center has provided daytime services for the homeless since 2002, until recently, there were no shelters. That changed in early February when the Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program started the first and only overnight shelter program in Tempe, using space at alternating churches to offer the homeless a place to sleep on weekends.

Other shelters are only a bus ride away in Phoenix, but, still, many homeless prefer to squat—to find a place where they can sleep hidden from passersby or police—rather than face long lines and mandatory screening at shelters.

Both Tempe and Phoenix have banned “urban camping,” or sleeping in public places, but that doesn’t keep hundreds of people from doing it every night.

Some head to the mountains flanking McDowell Road near Papago Park. Others sneak into the abandoned Hayden Flour Mill to spend the night. The penalty if they’re caught is just a misdemeanor citation, but unpaid fines can lead to more charges and jail time.

Takes all kinds

At the canal, Webb says the squat we are heading to was created by water eroding an area big enough for a person to sleep and then subsiding. He covered the squat with a large piece of plywood to keep the property owners from discovering it and filling it in.

I take a deep breath and edge towards the dubiously constructed bridge.

The first piece of lumber descends from the steep bank onto a shopping cart. I take a tentative step and begin shifting my weight onto the dry-rotted plywood. It breaks away from the dusty canal bank and splashes into the water. I slide right behind it. Fortunately, the water is warm and shallow—only about knee-deep—and I quickly, if awkwardly, hop onto a shopping cart and scramble up the far bank.

Webb's video game continues.

The trees are overgrown and spill into the canal, preventing our passage on the path. Webb grabs one of the branches and swings out onto the sharp slope above the water like a mountaineer, knees bent, feet dragging against the bank. He edges branch-by-branch about 20 yards down the canal, pulls himself off the bank and disappears into the trees.

I follow him.

Behind the trees bordering the canal, Webb and I are hunched low to keep our profiles within the shadow of a fence that lines the properties. A large, noisy party is in full swing in the yard next to us.

Bright floodlights pour onto the celebration, silhouetting the guests and creating a shadow behind the fence. I am creeping behind Webb, stooped low to keep out of view. On the other side of the fence, about 5 feet away, I hear voices in Spanish and the pop of a beer can being opened.

Webb and I squat in the shadow of the fence, directly behind the large dirt lot. He points to a spot in the dusty expanse beyond us.

"There, do you see it?" he asks me. "Right underneath that big board?"

I look over at the party. Several people have gathered near the fence, pointing our way and talking. I look where he indicates.

I don't see it; I see only shadows.

"Sure, I see it," I tell him. "Can we get out of here now?"



Josh "Road Block," from Green Bay, Wis., sits atop a newspaper stand in downtown Tempe, Ariz. Photo by Jeremiah Armenta

We make a noisy, hasty retreat from the squat and reach the bridge.

"You first," Webb says. He steps aside and waves me ahead. I take a deep breath and leap out onto the first shopping cart, nearly sliding off a slimy log, and claw my way up the bank.

I have run halfway down the path when I hear Webb calling out behind me. He has lost his footing in the canal bank and is trying to pull himself over the edge. I run back, pull him out of the canal and we notice that a large crowd has now gathered against the fence at the party, pointing and talking excitedly.

It's on to the next stop on Webb's tour.

On their own

Beverlee Kroll works for CPS Aftercare Services, managing programs the agency offers to youth who, at 18, can legally cycle out of custody. She sounds genuinely perplexed, if not a bit hurt, that kids previously in the care of CPS would chose homelessness over what she has to offer.

"There are, unfortunately, people who enter care and want to leave once they turn 18," she says. "They walk away. They saying thanks, but no thanks. They feel like somebody is telling them what to do."

Young people are free to leave CPS care once they turn 18. But if they do, they are no longer eligible for services, even if they want to return.

"Right now, once you leave, you can never come back," Kroll says, although CPS may change this rule.

Youth who stay can receive state-sponsored health care and a monthly living stipend of up to \$558. Plus, they are eligible for up to \$5,000 annually for education.

Many don't take it.

"I think what happens is a lot is that kids don't get all the information," Kroll says. "When people live out on the street for a while, they get this mentality where you can't do something if it involves an appointment and signing paperwork."

A homeless code

Before Webb showed me his squat by the canal, he took me to another one, in the parking lot of an apartment complex near the 1600 block of East Highland Avenue in central Phoenix.

Again, when he first points to the squat, I can't see it. Webb waves me closer, to a narrow space where two buildings nearly butt together but leave a gap of about 3 feet between walls.

““

You sleep in there? I am incredulous, and the thought of entering the small, dark crevice leaves my skin crawling. He grins, shakes his head and disappears into the sliver of space.

””

LENDING A HAND

Homeless youth don't have to be alone on the street. Many organizations around the Valley provide the homeless with food, shelter and clothing and also offer education or psychological help.

If you know anyone who needs help or if you'd like to volunteer, here are a few places to start.

"You sleep in there?" I am incredulous, and the thought of entering the small, dark crevice leaves my skin crawling. He grins, shakes his head and disappears into the sliver of space.

I exhale, trying to make myself as narrow as possible, and slide into the crack, my butt and stomach scratching against the uneven stucco of the walls.

We edge sideways between the buildings for about 40 yards before reaching an abrupt right turn.

After squirming around the corner, I follow Webb down a similar corridor which, after another 15 yards, mercifully opens into an area where the wall of one building notches back to leave a space about 10 yards wide and 15 yards long.

Spread across the ground are a large comforter and a suitcase—community property, according to Webb. He says it illustrates an important rule of squatting: "Never mess with stuff like this. It belongs to someone else."

Street families

Webb doesn't want to share his real name; that would hurt his trade. "Webb" is a name he got from other street youth, who often form informal communities or families with members serving as the father figure, the mother, big brothers, little sisters.

They sometimes travel together; they often watch out for each other.

Wraith, a lanky, 16-year-old, frequents Mill Avenue. She says she left home a few months ago because she didn't want any restrictions.

"I dropped out of high school," she says. "I'm getting emancipated now."

To become emancipated—or legally independent as a minor—youths must be at least 16 years old, not be under state custody and demonstrate financial independence. They also must show a plan to gain health care, education and job training or employment.

Wraith says she left her family in Mesa to begin traveling with Anubis, her road dog—slang for a traveling companion. She still sees her birth mother, who sometimes takes her and friends out to dinner—at Ruby Tuesday's on Mill Avenue the last time.

Wraith says she's better on the street; she's not as bothered by a manic-depressive condition that used to cause her nightmares and led her to mutilate herself.

"My dreams were getting more violent," she said. "I was getting more violent in real life."

HomeBase Youth Services

602.254.7777

Children's Action Alliance

602.266.0707

Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development

602.271.9904

Stand Up for Kids

800.365.4KID

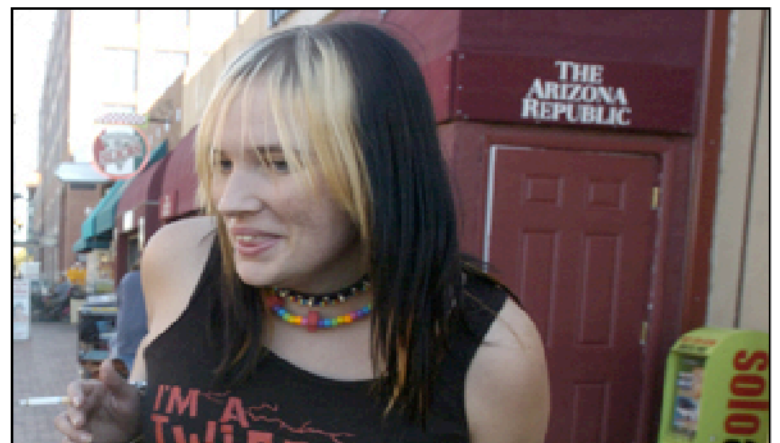
Educating Homeless Children

602.542.4391

Youth On Their Own

520.293.1136

—Stephanie Armenta



I was getting more violent in real life.

She rolls up her sleeve to reveal angry, pink scars that she says came from cutting herself with a razor.

She says she got her name from her road dog, a man who saved her from a car accident, took care of her for a while, then abandoned her.

"I think it's bullshit, because we took a blood oath," she says. "He was such an honorable person."

Wraith insists that she thinks about her future a lot. She keeps a journal of her dreams and jots down her day-to-day-observations. By the time she turns 30, she wants to be a best-selling author.

"I've already written 110 pages," she says.

Merchants, cops and pot dealers

The next stop I make with Webb has financial significance—a low-rent apartment complex on east Missouri Road in central Phoenix.

Webb leaves me in the courtyard of the complex and scampers up a staircase to buy a "dove"—a \$10 bag of marijuana. He says he usually buys larger quantities and divides it into doves for an easy sale.

After a few minutes, Webb is back. We leave the complex and he withdraws a plastic baggie that has been tightly rolled around a layer of marijuana about the thickness of my thumb.

"Ten dollars may not seem like a lot to you," he says. "But for me, it's a lot of food."

Webb says that the "hands-off" approach of cops on Mill Avenue makes it relatively easy to eke out a living selling doves.

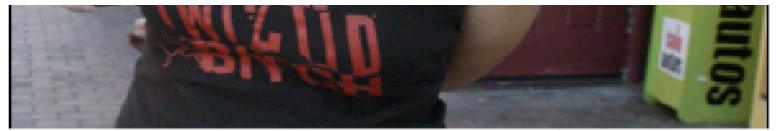
Later, within the span of one hour on a single day, Webb is approached twice by passers-by on Mill Avenue. He says they asked him for marijuana.

Police are aware that there's drug dealing on Mill Avenue, says Tempe Police spokesman Sgt. Dan Masters. Bicycle patrols routinely respond to reports of trafficking and police conduct occasional sting operations in the area, he says.

"It's definitely not out of sight, out of mind," he says. "We know it exists, but how prevalent it is, I don't know."

Drunken revelers, not homeless youth, cause the biggest problems on Mill Avenue, Masters says.

"Come by on Monday or Tuesday and look at our booking sheets for the weekend," he says. "The vast majority,



"Squeek," a former resident of Wickenburg, Ariz., lives on Mill Avenue in Tempe. Photo by Jeremiah Armenta

““ *They understand that we have a job to do. From a police standpoint, we need to show them compassion and empathy.*
—Sgt. Dan Masters

”

I'd say at least 80 to 90 percent, aren't homeless."

The homeless youth and Tempe police have what amounts to an understanding, Masters says. "They understand that we have a job to do," he says. "From a police standpoint, we need to show them compassion and empathy. It's a give-and-take. They know what they can and can't do."

.Despite the live-and-let-live policy that has evolved between Mill Avenue's mainstream and its homeless residents, there are a few sore spots that have been addressed by legislation specifically targeting the homeless in downtown Tempe.

The most controversial of these was a 1997 city ordinance that banned sitting on the sidewalks of Mill Avenue. Initially, it drew criticism and even demonstrations by homeless advocates. Now it is an accepted part of life in downtown Tempe.

Chris Wilson, a spokesperson for Ambassadors to the Street and the Downtown Tempe Community, says the "no-sitting" law is vital to keeping traffic moving smoothly on Mill Avenue.

"It's a sidewalk," he says. "Strollers and wheelchairs need to be able to traverse the sidewalk."

But he concedes that homeless youth do give downtown Tempe some of its charm. "We see them as part of the urban fabric," he says, echoing a term used by Masters. "It's hard to lump the homeless in one group. We're only concerned with the negative behaviors, like aggressive panhandling."

Back on Mill

John, a 45-year-old homeless man and Wraith's big brother on the street, stands on Mill Avenue with a variety of hemp jewelry laid out on a planter in front of P.F. Chang's, selling to passers-by.

He says he ekes out a \$20-a-day living by selling necklaces he fashions from hemp fibers and minerals he finds throughout southern Arizona, which he then cuts and polishes. While he queries the occasional passerby on Mill Avenue, Wraith works on a necklace.

John tries to get her to talk to him, but she seems uninterested. He asks her if she's been safe and if she's seen a boy they both know.

"Yeah," she replies dully without taking her eyes off the necklace.

After selling two necklaces, John asks Wraith if she wants something to eat or drink. He wants to know if she'd like a piece of banana bread.

"It's this thick," he says, spreading his thumb and forefinger.

John says he only made it through elementary school before choosing to live on the streets. He likes to talk about how he has hitchhiked all over the United States, always returning to Mill Avenue.



Graffiti covers a homeless youth on Tempe's Mill Avenue. Photo by Jeremiah Armenta

Most people, he says, choose homelessness because they are “socially unable to adapt to a normal lifestyle.”

“You can’t adapt to having a house or a car. And then you just go completely crazy,” he says. “If I wasn’t out here selling jewelry, I’d be selling your kids drugs.”

Last stop

Webb’s tour ends at Margaret T. Hance Deck Park by the Burton Barr Public Library in downtown Phoenix. He says it is a place where he comes to relax and hang out. He says the police usually do not venture there.

We sit for a while on a bench overlooking the broad lawn. Sprinklers pop up from the ground and layer the perfectly manicured green with a soft, white mist. Occasionally, laughter and shouts from far-off people roll across the grass and reach us.

Webb and I look at each other and laugh.

Cars on the bridge overhead pass by, but underneath them, we sit peacefully and exchange fragments of a disjointed conversation.

It is early morning, but still dark and, except for the gentle rush of traffic, silent.

“Man, it doesn’t get any better than this,” Webb says.” Look around.”



Former New York City resident Albert (left) smokes a cigarette and chats with his friend “Madrocks.” Photo by Jeremiah Arment