Bridging the gap
Exploring the complex issue of family homelessness in Pierce County
Everyone knows who the homeless are. It’s the guy living under the overpass. The man holding the cardboard sign at the stoplight. The bearded dude with the camouflage jacket asking for money outside the retail store.

To an extent those perceptions are true. However, most of the homeless in Pierce County are hidden. Out of sight and too frequently, out of mind. Many are under age 18, tucked away in a shelter with their mothers. Others are hopping from couch to couch. Some live so far off the grid, no one knows they exist.

It’s as if these families in turmoil are almost invisible. Until now. Here are some of their stories. »
EVERYONE COUNTS
IN PIERCE COUNTY,
KNOCKING ON DOORS
WITHOUT AN ADDRESS

BY JEFF BURLINGAME

IN DOWNTOWN PUYALLUP — NEAR A SCHOOL,
a busy avenue and a park fronted by a statue of the city’s
prosperous and popular founding father — lives the quick-
to-cry daughter of two Boeing employees.

She’s 30 years old, shares her place with a boyfriend her
parents don’t like, and cuts hair 16 hours a week for minimum
wage and gratuities. She’d work more, she says, but her doctor
told her not to. The heart attack she had six months ago means
she needs to take it slow.

When it has gasoline, the woman’s home is mobile. When it
doesn’t, it’s just an unremarkable extended-cab pickup stranded
in a public parking lot. During the night, the truck’s front seat
is stacked with belongings so its residents can sleep in the
back seat. During the day, the truck’s back seat is stacked with
belongings so its residents can appear normal to anyone who
might catch a glimpse inside.

TWO MILES UP THAT BUSY AVENUE, MERIDIAN,
in South Hill — where the average household income hovers in
the $60,000 range — there’s a 62-year-old veteran who lives in his
motorhome (in this case, a misnomer) in the parking lot of a retail
shopping center. The smell of cat urine inside his home is toxic.
The man’s broken right foot is swollen and in need of medical
attention. His cancer is, far as he knows, in remission.

He’s writing a book:
“The stories I have will blow your mind.”

PARKED BEHIND THE MAN IS A SMALLER MOTORHOME
(another misnomer) with windows secured by Great Stuff sealant —
the yellow, infuriatingly sticky kind that comes in a spray can
with a soon-to-be-clogged straw. The vehicle’s roof is covered
with a blue tarp; its uncarpeted floor is waterlogged. A battery
and an alternator — or one long jumpstart — would make the
vehicle operable. A transmission with a working reverse gear
would make it semi-practical.

Inside lives a 28-year-old man and a 31-year-old woman. She
wears a light-colored stocking cap with ear flaps:
“I just cut my hair and sold it to buy this place.”
He wants work:
“I’ll do any job. But I can’t find anything. I don’t want
a handout.”

Three sad stories, one long day. Late January 2013.

Pierce County’s homeless are hard to find. Most of them aren’t
trenchcoat-wearing stereotypes standing outside downtown
libraries each morning waiting for the doors to unlock so they
can pretend to read Entertainment Weekly while they snore
away the drowsiness from last night’s cheap-wine-induced
wakefulness. Rather, most of Pierce County’s homeless are
women with children who have been abused and sheltered,
veterans with mental issues who have no desire to be discovered
and families hit hard by recession.

“Now more than ever there are families who are experiencing
homelessness because they have the misfortune of not having
a support system,” says Janne Hutchins, executive director of
Living Access Support Alliance, or LASA, in Lakewood, an
agency focused on homelessness prevention. “Yes, people make
bad choices but all of us have made some bad choices in our
life. We now have more working poor than ever before. Whenever
we go to a fast-food restaurant or other place for service there is
a chance that person waiting on us may actually be homeless.
The old idea that it was just single men that chose that lifestyle
is gone.”

Numerous organizations are looking to help. Some want to
provide food, shelter and services. Some have lofty goals to end
all homelessness.

Some want to conduct a count.
To do so, sometime during the last week of every January,
dozens of volunteers armed with stacks of a one-page survey set
out to search the 1,806 square miles of Pierce County during one
24-hour period. Their mission has a name — Point-In-Time Count
— and it wouldn’t be an easy one to accomplish were it supported
by 100 times as many people. What they’re looking for, according
to the Washington State Department of Commerce, are:

“… persons living in emergency shelters (including
motel/hotel vouchers), transitional housing, or unsheltered
(in places not meant for human habitation, such as cars,
parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings, on the street) ...
Persons living in a dwelling lacking any of the following
should be considered homeless: drinking water, restroom,
heat, ability to cook hot food, or ability to bathe.”

In other words, these volunteers are on a homeless hunt. Like
many hunts, there’s an element of sustenance involved. But here
it’s not for the hunter.

Toting toiletries, nonperishable food, bottled water or other
small-time incentives, they flock to meal sites, encampments —
even Puyallup parking lots — to gather fractions of an import-
ant final number. In 2012, that number was 1,997. In 2013, »

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in Washington state. seattleu.edu/artsci/communication/csc
FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN PIERCE COUNTY

it was significantly lower, 1,303, but mostly due to a county-wide housing reclassification that disqualified hundreds from meeting the technical definition of homelessness. (The reclassification was to correct housing that always had been permanent but previously had been counted as homeless housing.) The numbers did decline from 2012 to 2013, but not to the extent it appears on first glance.

This daylong snapshot, as mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), qualifies counties to receive federal funding to battle the often-misunderstood social issue. In 2012, Pierce County received roughly $3 million in HUD dollars for this fight and, despite the decline in official homeless numbers, expects to receive the same amount in 2013. The count also helps determine where the funding should be spent.

More documented homeless, more potential funding.

Those associated with the Point-In-Time Count know it is far from perfect, including those whose clients ultimately stand to benefit most from the survey. Rae Anne Giron, who helps coordinate Point-In-Time Count volunteers through her job at Pierce County’s Department of Community Connections, is one such person.

“The Point-In-Time survey is just a slice in time,” Giron says. “We are to provide an estimate of those individuals that are homeless on one night in January. In no way is this [count] scientific. While we do our best to survey each individual, not all individuals that are homeless are willing to share information or make themselves available to be surveyed.”

Giron is right. Many times, the homeless don’t want to be found. Some don’t trust others — especially those in service for the government — and hide from society and the volunteers. Others, when they are spotted, refuse to fill out the six-question survey. Some even may be running from the law or debt collectors.

Part-time homeless often aren’t on the streets when the count takes place, either, particularly because it’s conducted at the end of January. If a person or family experiencing homelessness has any housing options that don’t involve the great outdoors, the middle of Western Washington’s winter is the time they would be most inclined to use them.

Giron and her volunteers understand this.

“It is much easier to capture data for individuals that are housed in our shelter system than to capture information of those that are unsheltered,” she says, and the numbers back her up. Of the 1,303 homeless counted in 2013, 1,183 of them were in that shelter system, meaning they were residing in emergency or transitional housing. Only 120 were unsheltered — on the streets.

Patti Spaulding-Klewin, Veteran Program team lead of Catholic Community Services/Phoenix Housing Network in Tacoma, also understands the data collected by the Point-In-Time Count aren’t all-inclusive.

“It’s challenging to count people in one day,” she says. “[The count] doesn’t pick up the people who are newly homeless sometimes. It does not capture everybody and there are some folks who just don’t want to be counted. We run into that, or they don’t want to be in a database, they don’t want to be part of anything. It’s not the most accurate data but it is data.”

HUD’s definition of homelessness is narrower than that of many other government agencies and advocacy groups. HUD’s definition does not include those “couch-surfing” or doubled up in homes with relatives or other families. Add only the doubled-up individuals to the Point-In-Time Count, the National Alliance to End Homelessness suggests, and the homeless numbers increase fivefold. For example, in 2012 — the last year for which complete state numbers are available — the Point-In-Time survey revealed 20,336 homeless people in all of Washington state. Yet the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction alone reported 27,390 homeless students attended its schools during the 2011-2012 school year. The Department of Education’s definition of homelessness, obviously, is broader than HUD’s and includes those who are doubled up. HUD’s definition, many education experts say, frequently excludes families, children and unaccompanied youth.

The numbers in Pierce County seem to support that theory. Some 464, nearly 36 percent, of the 1,303 people tallied during the 2013 Point-In-Time Count were under age 18. But 462 of them were living in either emergency or transitional housing within the county’s shelter system. Only two were found unaccompanied.

“We rarely identify families with children unsheltered, as they are harder to locate,” Pierce County’s Giron says. “We mainly do our survey during the daylight hours and in service locations — hot-meal sites, health clinics, day shelters. Schools provide information on families with children but the information is often incomplete for HUD requirements. [Schools] operate on the looser definition of homelessness through McKinney-Vento.”

MCKINNEY-VENTO: THE GOOD WITH THE BAD

The McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, part of the better-known No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires states to “ensure that each homeless child and youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as other children and youth.”

Districts, whether or not they receive McKinney-Vento dollars, must designate a liaison to work with homeless students. Those liaisons assist the students in nearly every way. They make sure
their immunizations are current. They partner with community agencies to find services he or she may be lacking. They make sure the student receives free meals at school. They even help find clothing when necessary.

McKinney-Vento’s looser definition of homelessness is the same as the Department of Education’s and also includes those students who qualify to be counted during the Point-In-Time Count as well as those who are doubled up. During the 2011-12 school year, Tacoma Public Schools — the state’s third-largest district with 28,000 students — had 1,247 homeless students. More than 600 of them were doubled up. Only 36 were the stereotypes, unsheltered street kids the public may see pan-handling on sidewalks, loitering in parks or curled up at night in a sleeping bag in the doorway of their favorite espresso shop.

One of the more controversial of McKinney-Vento’s mandates involves transportation. Lack of it often is thought of as the biggest barrier between homeless students and regular school attendance. To eliminate that hurdle, school districts must provide transportation to homeless students who are forced to temporarily move within 50 miles one way of their school of origin.

If, for example, a homeless student begins her year at one Tacoma neighborhood school and then moves to a different part of town, it is the responsibility of Tacoma Public Schools to provide transportation to get the child to her original school each day if she chooses to remain there. If, however, the homeless student begins the school year in Tacoma and then moves to a different district, say rural Orting, it then becomes the responsibility of both districts to agree upon and fund a way to get the student to her original school, and back, each day. That can mean the use of district buses, public transportation or even a cab ride.

HUD dollars don’t fund such transportation, which makes the mandate an expensive one for districts. Pierce County school districts spend roughly $1 million a year on such transportation, the goal of which is to keep students’ educational life as close to normal as possible, even if their living situation is unstable. Keeping the same classes, friends, schedule and teachers, the theory goes, is far better than forcing another life change.

Tacoma has for decades had programs in place to assist homeless students. One of the district’s most prominent programs began in the late 1980s. It was called the Eugene P. Tone School and was the district’s acknowledgement of the then hundreds of homeless school-age children that existed within its boundaries. Each day, homeless students in kindergarten through eighth grade were bused to Tone, where they attended class and had access to counselors, social workers and nurses. Tone’s entire student body was homeless.

Tone School proved highly successful and served as a model for other districts across the country. In 1996, the school was even a finalist for Harvard University’s annual Innovations in American Government Award. However, the school closed in 2001, following the passage of the McKinney-Vento act. Tone School became Tone Center, which today provides services to homeless students at their individual schools rather than at one centralized location.

Another successful program is under way in Tacoma’s impoverished Hilltop neighborhood. McCarver Elementary School’s Pilot Housing and Education Program, a partnership between the school, the district and the Tacoma Housing Authority, provides rental assistance and social services for up to 50 students. To qualify, parents must agree to keep their students enrolled at McCarver through the fifth grade and also actively participate in their child’s education. »
Several homeless subpopulations also were recorded by the 2013 Point-In-Time Count volunteers. Among the 1,303 total homeless were:

- 3 with HIV/AIDS.
- 62 chronic substance abusers.
- 131 chronically homeless (20 of which came from five families).
- 157 victims of domestic violence.
- 162 severely mentally ill.

There also were 93 veterans. If one number alone could underscore what many believe are the shortcomings of the Point-In-Time Count, this one might be it. The state Department of Veterans Affairs — which operates several outreach programs aimed at helping homeless veterans — believes there are more than 8,000 honorably discharged veterans in Washington who are homeless, roughly 3,000 of which live in Pierce County or somewhere else in the Puget Sound area.

“I think the number is much larger [than 93],” says Larry Geringer, the homeless veterans representative for the Tacoma Rescue Mission. Off the top of his head, Geringer can list sites in the county where some 200 homeless veterans are sheltered. The mission itself, he says, has an active roster of some 35 to 50 homeless veterans and he expects that number to grow as the military continues paring its ranks. Geringer believes more help is needed.

“The biggest gap we see is the lack of emergency housing in a location run for and by veterans,” he says. “Emergency housing is now only available at homeless shelters for all individuals. There may be hundreds of veterans sleeping in cars and on basement couches who will not go to a homeless shelter.”

Home to some 90,000 veterans and 33,645 active-duty soldiers at one of the largest military bases in the United States in Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Pierce County has countless programs in place to assist homeless veterans. Strongest among them may well be the local Heroes to Hometowns chapter.

Heroes to Hometowns (H2H) was created in 2006 by a partnership between the Department of Defense and the American Legion to help military communities such as Pierce County assist injured veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. That assistance typically includes help with housing, childcare, finances and even the running of basic errands. Pierce County’s H2H chapter takes the national program one step further by helping all veterans, not only those who have suffered injuries.

Pierce County’s H2H chapter is led by Pat Steel, a gregarious retired Army colonel who began his military career at Fort Lewis on a rainy spring day in 1953 and ended it on the same base on New Year’s Eve some 27 years later. In between were several stops, including Korea, Germany, Vietnam, and a four-year stint at the Pentagon. Steel is a soldier’s soldier if ever there was one, and one who especially cares about those discharged at the Pierce County base he calls home. “I will always miss soldiers,” is one of Steel’s catchphrases.

Steel’s H2H essentially is a group of groups. More than 210 individuals and organizations from Pierce, King, Thurston, Kitsap and Snohomish counties are members, creating an expansive network with a common goal of serving those who served. Once
a month, representatives attend a two-hour roundtable at Tacoma Goodwill to share ideas, solicit opinions and show off recent accomplishments. Patriotism abounds: each meeting begins with an invocation and a moment of silence for the fallen, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. Homelessness is just one part of the business that follows, but it’s a vital part that tugs at Steel’s flag-waving heart.

“Homelessness is a serious problem in Pierce County for veterans and their families and will continue to be for the foreseeable future,” Steel says. “Housing, jobs, food and a sense of respect and dignity are basic requirements for all veterans who were asked to serve this great nation. To provide any less than that is a disgrace, and something that we who are working so hard to support the veterans will not allow.”

Steel has plenty of related stories. One he likes to share centers on a veteran-headed family that had 24 hours left in a hotel room but didn’t want them to go homeless. They called Steel to see what he could do. “I did a quick survey of several organizations and was not able to raise the money,” Steel says. But, true to his character, Steel didn’t give up. “I contacted a donor, and she and I went to the motel. Both of us paid for the family to stay there for the additional two weeks, which was what they needed.”

Even Steel admits that for every success story he sees or is part of, such as the one above, he also sees several failures. They seem to happen most when families are involved. “Single homeless vets can find some housing at the local mission, Associated Ministries and some other places, but families are harder to place,” he says. “There are still many families living in cars or worse.”

UNDER LOCK ON THE KEY

Key Peninsula always has been a world unto itself.

Getting there from the more metropolitan parts of Pierce County involves crossing two bridges: one heading northwest over the Tacoma Narrows to the Gig Harbor Peninsula and then one heading west over the Purdy Spit. Crossing the Narrows Bridge requires a toll tinged with unintended, yet still gloomy, symbolism:

It’s free to get to Key Peninsula, but it will cost you $5.25 if you want leave.

Such isolation once made the 16-mile-long, key-shaped body of land a perfect spot for anarchists, several of whom moved there in the late 1880s to develop a utopian community that allowed people “the personal liberty to follow their own line of action no matter how much it may differ from the custom of the past or present, without censure or ostracism from their neighbor.”

The author of those words, Oliver Verity, chose to pursue his “own line of action” on a spot filled with old-growth trees on the eastern peninsula called Joe’s Bay. He named his new town the Mutual Home Colony Association — Home for short. A judge’s order dissolved the association in 1919 but its independent-thinking ideals remained for decades. In 1946, historian Stewart Holbrook wrote that Home once was “one of the most celebrated or notorious spots in the United States” and that “even the evangelical churches have given it up as a Sodom fit only for the fires of The Pit.”

Today, there are a handful of churches in the area surrounding the 1,300-resident unincorporated town. There’s also the remodeled 1924 Lakebay School building that’s home to Key Peninsula Community Services (KPCS), a combination food bank/senior center/bread closet/community center and, recently, site of a free monthly health clinic serving those lacking a primary-care provider or health insurance. The organization’s service area spans 66 miles, from Purdy to the north to the end of the Longbranch Peninsula to the south.

Weeks before the 2013 Point-In-Time Count, KPCS began advertising itself as a reporting site for the survey. Come here to be counted. The message was written on the agency’s reader board next to busy Key Peninsula Highway, the only north-south road that stretches the entire length of the peninsula. The message also was advertised in the Key Peninsula News, a free publication that reaches more than half the peninsula’s 17,000 residents.

Those actions didn’t seem to help lure the homeless from wherever they were to stand and be counted.

“For my location, we counted three [homeless individuals] this year,” says Penny Gazabat, executive director of KPCS. “I think we had 11 the year before. And we make it [getting counted] as appealing as possible. We have gift cards for the stores, and if they’re willing to fill out a survey we will give them a gift card. They don’t find that out until later. It’s kind of in appreciation.”

Gazabat believes the numbers recorded at her location severely minimize the real homeless problem in her region.

“My very best guessestimate is probably that we have about 100 [homeless individuals], and that includes the families that the school district is working with [and] people who have squatted out here,” she says. “But it could be way more than that. It could be me just not wanting to think that there’s that many people. When people don’t want to be discovered this is the best community for them. There are a lot of vets out here that won’t come out of the woodwork so much [but] they’ll come into the food bank occasionally. There are a lot of barriers, a lot of reasons for not getting into that count.”

Some of Key Peninsula’s homeless live there out of fear, fear that they will be injured if they are thrown to the homeless wolves in Tacoma. For them, Key Peninsula is the perfect spot. They call the area’s woods home. Some shuffle their cars, families and belongings back and forth between campgrounds at Penrose Point and Joemma Beach state parks. Sometimes, those homeless lie to their children and tell them they’re camping.

Gazabat’s agency doesn’t receive federal funding in conjunction with the Point-In-Time Count and doesn’t request any. Pierce County’s paperwork is too extensive, she says, and associated federal funds usually go to organizations that have homeless-assistance programs in place. KPCS doesn’t have any such programs. “That’s not to say that we couldn’t apply,” Gazabat says. “We typically pass because we do not have the infrastructure or resources out here to accommodate that type of program.”
The creation of Access Point 4 Housing was part of Pierce County’s Strategic Plan to End Homelessness. The plan actually is three plans: one calling for an end to chronic homelessness by 2018; one seeking to cut all homelessness in half by 2016; and one looking to cut family homelessness in half by 2021.

Experts say so far the plans have had mixed success. The plan to end chronic homelessness focused on street homelessness, says Troy Christensen, former administrator of Pierce County’s Homeless Program and current chief of operations and strategy for Tacoma’s Metropolitan Development Council.

“There have been significant developments in housing technology for this population, and [there are] several organizations — led by Greater Lakes Mental Healthcare, Metropolitan Development Council and Catholic Community Services — [which] has resulted in a commensurate reduction in street homelessness,” Christensen says. “The one-night Point-In-Time Count has shown an 84 percent reduction in street homelessness in eight years, from 727 to 126. This is one of the best gains in the country.”

Looking at Point-In-Time Count numbers, the state-mandated plan to cut homelessness in half by 2016 doesn’t appear to be on track. That appearance is misleading, Christensen says.

“There are several reasons for this,” he says. “Transitional housing has been the main intervention, and HUD still counts this as homeless (because, by definition the housing is transitional). So a lot more individuals and families came off the street, but are not yet in permanent housing.”

Prompted by Building Changes and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the plan to end family homelessness is the newest of the three county plans. “There are some amazing things that are happening with rapid rehousing, and conversions of transitional housing that will result in countable results in the next year or two,” Christensen says. “This will also drastically impact the overall plan to end homelessness required by Washington State.”

If you’re homeless, you can grab a free dinner five nights a week at the Washington National Guard Armory in Puyallup. You have an hour to eat, then you’re outside again. Don’t think about hanging around. The neighbors have complained several times. They won’t stand for it.

For parts of the year, you can take a post-dinner walk to that night’s pick-up location and catch a ride to one of 10 area churches that take turns hosting you for the evening as part of the Freezing Nights program. Enjoy a snack, watch a movie, sleep, eat breakfast. Then you’re on your own for the day.

If you walk five blocks and cross the busy avenue, you can hang out at the downtown park near where a 30-year-old woman and her boyfriend once lived in a black pickup. If you head two miles up the hill, you can spend time at the retail shopping center where one stinky cat, two mis-named motorhomes and three people used to reside.

Last January, those three people were homeless like you. They stood, they were counted. Now, they’re just gone.

“Just One Phone Call...”

Access Point 4 Housing is Pierce County’s centralized intake center, where individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of becoming so can receive help and guidance. Call 253.682.3401

A PHONE CALL AWAY

Today, one phone call might be all it takes for a homeless person or family to receive help in Pierce County.

As recent as three years ago, those searching for a safe place to sleep indoors on any given night were forced to call individual shelters. That is, if they knew what those shelters were, and had contact information and the means to make a phone call. With only hundreds of beds available countywide and thousands of homeless people, the chances of finding a place to stay without making numerous calls were slim. Many didn’t bother to try.

But the creation of Access Point 4 Housing in January 2011 made getting help easier. An Associated Ministries program, Access Point 4 Housing is funded by Pierce County and designed to be a centralized intake and referral system for the homeless or those at risk of becoming so. One phone call could connect an individual or family with a shelter or housing program, help them secure benefits or hook them up with referrals to other services, such as those dealing with substance abuse, mental health or employment. During its first few months, Access Point 4 Housing averaged more than 1,500 unduplicated phone calls per month.

Yet KPCS still conducts a Point-In-Time Count, Gazabat says, “because we do have a population that needs resources even if those resources are not here. It is rare that they will go to Tacoma for services, but at least it’s an option.”

Transportation — or the lack of it — is a big reason Gazabat’s clients rarely seek services from Tacoma or anywhere in the rest of metropolitan Pierce County. Even after some recent major cuts, cash-strapped Pierce Transit still remains a viable transportation option for many urban homeless needing rides to places they can get help. But Pierce Transit doesn’t run on the Key Peninsula, one of the areas of the county where nothing is within walking distance. That makes obtaining those big-city services — or even the services offered on the less-populated side of the Narrows in Home, Key Center or Gig Harbor — difficult or nearly impossible for those without motorized transportation.

Peninsula Communities of Faith is one of the groups looking to help bring services to the underserved area. The nonprofit service organization operates a popular Food Backpacks 4 Kids program that provides hundreds of weekend meals to children in Gig Harbor and on the Key Peninsula whose families are homeless or in other ways struggling. It also runs the Peninsula Homeless Initiative, an effort geared toward helping the area’s homeless.

South Sound Outreach is another program available to Key Peninsula’s homeless population. The nonprofit agency offers assistance with a variety of issues, including housing, through its countywide connection centers. The one on Key Peninsula is in Key Center. “[They have] the capacity to assist up to six families with children to three to six months of rental assistance,” says Pierce County’s Giron. “Very small, I know, but it’s a start.”

“My very best guesstimate is probably that we have about 100 [homeless individuals] ... But it could be way more than that. It could just be me not wanting to think that there’s that many people.”

SPECIAL REPORT FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN PIERCE COUNTY

SPECIAL REPORT

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It's an unusually warm spring day at Wards Lake Park in Lakewood and Katie's kids are thirsty. Raymond, 4, whines about this to his mom and pulls at the black leather purse hanging from her shoulder.

"I don't have nothing to drink," Katie, 27, says, looking into her purse while her son squeals. Mom pulls out a cherry-flavored Starburst and tears it in two. She hopes it will distract both kids for a while. Raymond, outraged that he has to share, takes his half and runs off. Alyssa, 3, crawls on the picnic table and savors the chewy red candy for a good five minutes.

Katie's life story used to include another person: the man she loved. There was romance, then a family, then a home that soon became a dark place.

"He was amazing with [the kids], he showed them all the love in the world," Katie says of her ex-boyfriend and her children's father. "That's why I pretty much stayed with him, because I knew that there was a good person in there and that something was just the matter. But I couldn't do it after a while. His excuse was, 'If I didn't love you, I wouldn't hit you.'"

Katie met her ex at a truck stop in her home state of Oklahoma. She worked as a cashier there. Friendship soon became romance, and the two fell in love. Born in early 2009, Raymond was their first child. At the end of that year, the young family boarded a Greyhound to Washington. A relative was sick with lung cancer. The young family was on its way to Spanaway to move in with the relative to help provide care.

Alyssa was born shortly after the move, and Katie's ex got a good job building houses. Katie says he had begun physically abusing her back in Oklahoma when she was pregnant with their son. But when the relative's condition worsened, her ex's behavior grew increasingly violent. "What was his was his and what was mine was his and if I wanted or needed something I had to ask for it, and at that I'd be lucky to get it."

Katie put up with the abuse for four years until she called police. A no-contact order was issued; her ex went to live with friends. Katie and the kids stayed with the relative until he died. Shortly after, they moved into an apartment. Rent there soon proved too expensive, but Katie's ex was financially helping her out. Then one day — out of the blue, Katie says — he quit doing so. Katie was evicted in June. She and her two young children became homeless.

Katie scrambled to find her little family a place to sleep. Her family-preservation counselor was able to get them into a housing unit at Living Access Support Alliance (LASA) in Lakewood on the same day they were kicked out of their apartment. Katie was one of the fortunate ones.

"It's just a matter of luck," said Janne Hutchins, executive director of LASA. "Sometimes it works out well like [Katie's case] and sometimes it can be weeks."

On a typical night, 25 to 30 families are in line for a spot at LASA. Countless others wait for openings at emergency housing shelters elsewhere in Pierce County. LASA is not a domestic violence shelter per se, but does help house victims who are not in direct danger. LASA also works with families who were barely getting by until a health problem, accident or unexpected job loss sent them over the edge they were teetering on.

"More and more people are living on the edge every year," said Hutchins. "We need to be aware of how fragile our families are."

Katie may have been lucky to land at LASA, but that didn’t
mean she wasn’t scared.

"I thought of a shelter as, you know, how you see on movies: one big room and all these people,” Katie said. “I was afraid of that. … I don’t know who these people are. I don’t know if they’re good people. My kids are going to be here. My kids are going to be part of it. How is it going to affect them?”

Katie’s stay at LASA wasn’t the frightening experience she envisioned. She was placed in a two-story, four-bedroom home with three other women and their children near Wards Lake Park, where her children can run, swing and get upset over shared Starbursts. After a week in the home, she already had plans to transfer to another LASA program which will move her to her own two-bedroom apartment. But the first move left her with little more than the clothes on her back.

"[I’ve gone] from having everything to having nothing," she said. "I have absolutely nothing now." When her thoughts shift to her children, Katie’s eyes tear up. "I need clothes, I need clothes for [my children]. I feel sad because they lost everything, all they got to take was a backpack with a few Hot Wheels cars or something in it and a bag of clothes and that was it. I had nowhere to put anything else. I had nowhere to store anything. I didn’t have the money to get a storage place."

Katie’s only income comes from her $280 monthly welfare check. She has applied for several retail jobs. No one has called her back.

Raymond and Alyssa often ask where Daddy is. Katie tells them they can’t see him right now. Truthfully, she says, he is in prison for continuing to break his no-contact order. Now in an environment she had been deprived of for years — a safe one — Katie has started to heal. She still worries about the day her ex is released but she’s moving forward with her life and finally accepting everything she’s been through.

"There was a lot of things I was afraid of," she says. "I was afraid of counseling because I was afraid of talking about it … because I get upset, I get sad, I get depressed. But after I started going to counseling and actually talking and not flaking out on [the counselors] and stuff, it feels good. The best thing to do is talk about it or it will eat you up."

Back at Wards Lake Park, the daring boy Katie calls “Houdini” because of his frequent disappearing acts runs on the grass and flirts with the idea of sticking the only shoes he has in the lake while his mom ponders life. “I like it here,” she says. “I love it in Washington, I just regret who I came here with. I don’t regret it because I have my children. I just wish it would have been different.”

Daughter Alyssa, still exploring the picnic table, says she likes painting pictures and watching “Strawberry Shortcake,” a movie about a girl who travels to a land of dreams where there are rows of fresh berry bushes for everyone to share.

It’s the only movie she owns.
Craighead eventually was able to get a job working for a small-engine repair shop off Pacific Avenue in Parkland. Yet after just one month there he got into an altercation with the owner and quit. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t shake his funk.

He remembered “calling the veteran’s crisis line, pouring my eyes out to them and having them tell me, ’It’s going to be OK, Mr. Craighead.’ Really, tell me how it’s going to be OK? Tell me what you’re going to do to make something different for me that everybody else has said they’re going to make different and they haven’t. Tell me how you’re going to explain to me that the $1,064 I’m currently making off a pension, because I’m retired, pays my rent and then I have $64 left over. So that $64 is going to get me through the entire month for food?”

‘A TRAUMATIC STRAIN’

Craighead’s story — save for perhaps the pet pig part — isn’t as unique as it should be. During an average month, more than 4,000 people exit the U.S. military. Some 500 of them exit through Joint Base Lewis-McChord, one of the biggest military installations in the nation and Pierce County’s largest employer. Many of those soldiers struggle re-entering society. Many are battling monumental hurdles due to injuries, both mental and physical, and have families that need their support.

“Poverty is a huge issue in our community, on top of that you get somebody from the military who has PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), who has a traumatic brain injury, military sexual assault … and they’re coming out of an environment where they’ve been told what to do for anywhere from a year to 23 years or longer,” said Patti Spaulding-Klewin, Veteran Program team lead of Catholic Community Services/Phoenix Housing Network. “Some folks make the transition easily and some folks don’t.”

Craighead says he’s one of the many who suffer from PTSD. He also worries about the long-term effects being homeless might have on his stepson.

“Growing up in a rough-environment childhood, I would say that in some way, shape or form my youngest son has a form of PTSD,” said Craighead. “Nobody knows it yet because he’s only 18 and it hasn’t had time to come out. Because there is a traumatic strain of your parents being homeless, you being homeless — you’re staying with relatives — they don’t know what’s going on. You’re tired of traveling around.”

“I chose to stand up for my country and do what was right according to their standard and now I’m wounded, I’m hurt, I’m down.”

MILITARY LEGACY

Craighead’s stepson Jonathan, now 18 and a high school graduate, said the simplest things presented the biggest obstacles when he was homeless.

“Getting to school, worrying about where I was going to live,” he said, “it was really hard on me and my family in general. But we overcome.” Like many other students who spent part of their childhood homeless, Jonathan didn’t tell his classmates what he was going through. He wasn’t ashamed, he said, he just didn’t feel the need to share his family’s struggles with the world.

This fall, Jonathan begins training to become an Air Force pararescueman. He said his stepfather’s struggles after retiring from the military didn’t sway his dream of serving his country.

“In his case the military wasn’t as, I guess, fruitful for him but I don’t feel as sorry that it will happen to me or that it will happen at all,” Jonathan said. “I did what I needed to do. I went through school, that was basically it. I did everything I could to better myself, to get myself to where I wanted to be.”

A HAPPY ENDING

Eventually, Craighead got help securing a deposit on a South Tacoma home. Since then, he’s started his own business and Penny the pig sleeps at the foot of his bed. Some people still recognize him as the guy with the pig from his days with Penny at the park. He’s OK with that. While he was homeless he got a call from a meat shop about an 893-pound boar that was dropped off unexpectedly and needed rescuing. A friend of a friend of a friend who knew Craighead from the park said he might take it. Then, Craighead started getting more unexpected calls from people about pigs that needed rescuing. One call was about two African pygmies shipped to Sea-Tac airport that were never picked up. Craighead saved them all, as well as five others that now live on a Spanaway farm. He pays for their food and care.

These pigs he cares for were once pets, and then, for whatever reason, were pushed aside. Homeless. Forgotten. But not by Craighead. He gets it. He wants people to know what it was like to come back from war and struggle on native soil.

“One of the first things they teach you when you’re going through basic training is, ‘What makes the green grass grow?’ The answer is blood, drill sergeant, blood makes the green grass grow.’ We are taught to kill, we are taught to maim, we are taught to be soldiers, to do a job that no one else wants to do. And for that, you’re going to have some type of traumatic stress.”
Anthony Haynes is a talkative ball of energy. Social and full of good-natured humor, the 9-year-old fourth-grader is doing well with his individualized learning plan at McCarver Elementary School and spends time after school at the local Boys & Girls Club. He’s well adjusted and precocious — a regular Tacoma kid.

But that’s not the way all Anthony’s classmates view him. “Some people call me mean names,” he says, retreating into his mother’s arms. “I don’t want to repeat them, because they’re rude ones. Someone called me a mean one when they put their middle finger up in my face!”

Anthony says those teasing peers somehow have uncovered a few of his secrets. Some know he’s fatherless and was abandoned by his stepfather, the only dad he ever knew. Some know he has a biological father who’s never really been in the picture. Some know he recently was homeless.

An uncomfortable silence hangs in the room as Anthony relates his school experience. His 30-year-old mother, Kristina, cringes as she hears what circumstances have done to her son. She’s single, working part-time at T.J. Maxx to help pay rent and clothe him. She says she and Anthony were living on a military base when Anthony’s world fell apart: “There was a more structured environment and then all of a sudden we were living with my sister, not involved very much with [her ex-husband], who he considered a father and [her ex-husband’s] kids, who he considered brother and sister.”

That ex-husband is active-duty military, stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. After he and Kristina divorced, she says, he bought a new house while she and Anthony became homeless. Mom and son hooked up with Catholic Community Services’ Phoenix Housing Network shelter program and spent the night at various churches, rotating sites once a week. Through her connection with Phoenix Housing Network, Kristina soon was given the opportunity to move into the Guadalupe Vista Apartments.

“[Had that not happened], I probably would’ve committed suicide, honestly,” she says.

**RISING, THANKS TO A PHOENIX**

Located in the Hilltop district of Tacoma, Guadalupe Vista is a collection of subsidized apartments for formerly homeless families and individuals or couples who are earning up to 30 percent of the area’s median income. Guadalupe Vista works intimately with the Phoenix Housing Network to provide a support system and permanent living situation to struggling families. Thirty-eight of Guadalupe Vista’s 50 units are set aside for formerly homeless families. The housing is considered permanent, but that does not mean those living there are in the clear.

“I’m only bringing in $90 to $120 per week [and] I have to decide what’s more important,” Kristina says. She now pays $97 of the $895 monthly rent on her apartment. Tacoma Housing Authority covers the rest.

Amelia Boyles is one of two resident case managers working with Guadalupe Vista clients. She’s been at Guadalupe Vista for two years and never intended to make social work her career. Now she cannot imagine doing anything else. Boyles holds weekly meetings with her families to discuss their long-term goals and suggest ways they can continue to grow. “Some families come to us with nothing,” she says. “They have run out of people to go to because they have overstayed their welcome or have been in the same situation for so long people have given up on them. Some families come to us heart-broken from a divorce or break-up that either recently happened or happened years ago, [yet they] still struggle to find ways to support themselves.”

Boyles often struggles herself in trying to convince people of the benefits her agency can provide. “It is difficult to comprehend that some families do not see this as an opportunity,” she says. “Sometimes, families avoid or withhold information. In these situations, it is hard to know where I can be of help or what resources they could benefit from.” Not telling the truth — even lying by omission — places limitations on benefits, driving individuals deeper into whatever hole they’re in instead of pulling them out of it.
A HOME OF HER OWN

Now 26, Jennifer Frazier says her tainted past is what brought her to Guadalupe Vista. When she was 18, she says she unknowingly drove a stolen vehicle. “I was at a friend’s house,” she says. Someone she knew as a friend showed up “… in this white car with a friend from Federal Way … I drove maybe a block from where we were and got pulled over immediately. And I’m wondering why [the police] have their guns out. Apparently, they had stolen the car out of a 7-Eleven parking lot. A man had left his car running, and they had changed the plates and came to Tacoma.”

Frazier says her sentence was deferred and she was ordered to pay $150 a week in fines. But because she was on welfare and unable to pay, she says, the judge revoked the deferment. The crime was a felony. No one would hire her after that, she says.

Frazier says she struggled as the single mother of an infant whose father was in and out of prison. For five years, welfare helped her hold her life together. Once her benefits ran out, she found herself homeless, and bounced from relative to relative. A year ago — at 8½ months pregnant with her third child — Frazier decided she’d had enough. “I’m not going to be the burden anymore,” she thought. “It was embarrassing: I’m pregnant, still have no job, no [welfare].” Frazier called 211 — Washington state’s designated number for health- and human-services aid — and began the process of becoming accepted into the Phoenix Housing Network’s shelter program. She and Kristina Haynes once were together, moving from church to church.

Joy McDonald, shelter case manager for Phoenix Housing Network, pushed Frazier to get a job. If for no other reason than to get the woman off her back, Frazier applied at a Home Depot in Tukwila. She got hired. That job and the consistent income it provided qualified her for acceptance into Guadalupe Vista four days before she gave birth to her son, Jordan. “That was my main goal,” she says. “I wanted to have an apartment, where I’m in a home. I couldn’t imagine getting out of the hospital, having a baby and having to go from church to church.”

Frazier says things are slowly moving in a positive direction. She recently was promoted to head cashier at Home Depot. Her 9-year-old son, Nathan, and 4-year-old daughter, Sa’moan, both are doing well in school.

‘HOPE IS ALL YOU HAVE’

Frazier sees a future full of possibilities. She hopes to continue climbing the Home Depot ladder and become a department head. She wants to begin taking one class a quarter to add to the eight college credits she currently has, and continue to build her savings.

Kristina Haynes is doing equally well. She’s returning to school and training to become a supervisor at TJ Maxx. She has done some small-time public speaking on behalf of Catholic Community Services, and wants to share her experiences with a wider audience. Her main theme is one she hopes resonates: “Definitely, [don’t] lose hope, because really hope is all you have at a single point. Realize that you are stronger than you think you are and to accept the help that people offer. And then turn around and give back.”

Frazier has a similar message for those struggling with homelessness: “Don’t settle. Don’t settle with living at your friend’s house or living in your car. You have to push yourself and keep your goals up. If you try as hard as you can, you can end up somewhere that is good. It doesn’t matter how low you are.”

BONUS COVERAGE ONLINE To view more on the issue of family homelessness in Pierce County, visit southsoundmag.com. Online-only content includes interview footage, interviews with the authors, additional photographs and a video for the original song, “Hopes and Dreams,” by Jackie Mitchell. The song’s video was filmed by Andrew Horton and Chad Barker. Both song and video were created exclusively for South Sound magazine’s family homelessness coverage.