HUMAN TOUCH

THE STORYTELLERS NETWORK PUTS A FACE, AND A STORY, TO HOMELESSNESS IN DENVER.

WORDS BY LAURA BOND • PHOTOS BY FLOR BLAKE
Dee Clark never expected to have a story of homelessness to tell. She was a wife and a mother. She and her husband had always been able to provide for themselves and their four children. Dee worked full time at United Airlines; her husband had income from a disability benefit. They had a house, food, clothes, and enough left over to support a stable, happy life.

“We had no savings,” says Dee. “The question was: Would we be ready? And the answer was: No.”

When the 30 days were up, the family faced eviction. Some suggested they split up, to make it easier to get into shelters. Eventually they decamped to a relative’s unfinished apartment, one gutted room with no running water or heat. Because she worked full time, Dee was not available to make the 4 p.m. lineup that many shelters require.

It was exhausting, and Dee’s performance at work suffered because she was often late.

“It was around that time that we started to feel afraid,” says Dee. “We started to feel destitute. We started to feel homeless.”

“Homelessness is hurtful. It’s painful. It’s stressful, and it’s humbling,” she continues. “But it was not a judgment on our responsibility as parents. It just happened.”
Through her manager at work, Dee and her family were connected to the United Airlines Employee Relief Fund, which provided money to help cover rent and deposits. Dee gratefully recalls the day her co-workers showed up with heaps of prepared food and clean clothing. Gradually, the family transitioned back to a life more like the one they had known. “We were blessed,” says Dee. “We got out from under it.”

Motivated by the experience, Dee enrolled at Colorado Women’s College at the University of Denver and graduated in June of 2016. By then, she had joined The Denver Foundation’s Nonprofit Internship Program. There, through a presentation about the Foundation’s Close to Home homelessness awareness campaign, she heard from others whose experiences were familiar.

“Up until then, I never really thought my story was valid,” she says. “I had this mindset that I was never really homeless until reading that homelessness means not having a safe place to call home. There was a shift in my mindset.”

Now, as a member of the Close to Home Storytellers Network, Dee tells about the experiences she never expected to have. She and her fellow Storytellers speak to groups in community centers, libraries, and places of faith and service. They show up to early morning coffee groups, afternoon committee meetings, community dinners, and other places people gather to learn about issues and work toward solutions.

“Sharing your story can lead to a change of awareness for people who don’t know how [homelessness] can happen to other people,” says Dee. “Storytelling is validating for people going through homelessness, too.”

The Storytellers Network has become a pillar of Close to Home, a five-year effort to build public will and galvanize action around homelessness. Storytellers are paid as professionals, and each receives coaching and mentor support to develop their presentations. They help move toward the pivotal goal of helping residents who have experienced homelessness view themselves, and be viewed by others, as valuable members of our community.
There’s nothing more convincing than the experience of someone else.”

“I was very motivating to hear my story—myself,” says Marsha. “As people who have experienced being homeless, we’re helping people understand ‘We’re all people. This is serious. This is livelihood. We should have some form of understanding.’

As the experiences of the Storytellers illustrate, losing a home can happen to anyone, especially those who live close to the economic edge. For many, an unexpected change in circumstances—job loss, unemployment, low wages, accidents, illness, divorce, the death of a family member—can strain resources that are already limited.

The Storytellers help to humanize a phenomenon that is both increasingly common and somewhat invisible. Most families and individuals without a stable, safe place to live seek temporary refuge in short-stay motels, transitional housing or shelters, or even in their cars, out of sight of mainstream view.

Over the past decade, the number of children experiencing homelessness across Metro Denver has increased by 300 percent. Skyrocketing housing costs have intensified the risk of displacement for many vulnerable people, including seniors, women, and youth.

“The Storytellers are credible, powerful messengers, and we find that people are eager to learn more about the circumstances that led them to lose their housing, and what it took for them to move back to safe, stable housing,” says Julie Pattiño, who leads the Close to Home Campaign as The Denver Foundation’s Director of Basic Human Needs. “We’ve learned that many people have limited information and misperceptions about homelessness. Who it happens to,
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where it happens, and why. Nearly half of those homeless across the seven-county region are families.

“Our goal with the Storytellers Network is to create awareness that leads to changes in those perceptions,” Patiño continues, “and that moves people to speak up and take actions that make a difference.”

These actions may include volunteering at local shelters or food banks, donating cash or clothing to local organizations that serve the homeless population, learning and speaking about issues to elected officials and policymakers, or simply taking the time to stop and listen to people they might not otherwise notice.

Many of the Storytellers describe the process as healing, motivating, and empowering. In the Storytellers Network, they feel part of a fellowship with others who have faced—and overcome—very difficult times in life. “I needed to tell my story,” says Lisa Marie. “It helps to just talk about it. It helps to know other people have been through the same thing.”

Now many years clear of her own experience with homelessness, solidly on her feet, and committed to helping others, Dee agrees.

“Telling stories helps people see that homelessness has many faces,” she says. “There’s nothing more convincing than the experience of someone else.”

To learn more, or to book a speaker from The Storytellers Network, visit closetohomeco.org. The website contains many ideas for how you can take action to end homelessness, starting with taking an online pledge.

AFTER MEETING DEE CLARK, JEANNINE MONTGOMERIE MOVED HOMELESSNESS TO CENTER COURT.

Soon after meeting Storyteller Dee Clark, Jeannine Montgomerie discovered that they have lots in common. Each has been married for more than 40 years. Each has four children. And although they have different connections to the issue of homelessness, both Dee and Jeannine are working hard to end it, using storytelling as a tool.

Sometimes, however, Jeannine does this while wearing a tiara. She’s the reigning Ms. Colorado Senior America, a title that provides her with a platform to raise awareness about the realities of homelessness and those it affects. It’s a platform she sometimes turns over to Dee.

As a Storyteller, Jen McDonald shares her experiences of homelessness with the community as well as others who have gone through it.
“Dee is a person of such dignity and grace, and you see that come through in her story of struggle,” says Jeannine. “She speaks so wonderfully about homelessness. When a person is willing to open up, to let someone else in, there’s an aha. You realize it’s so much bigger and more personal than you knew.”

Dee and Jeannine first met in July at a meeting of the Optimist Club at Heather Gardens, a senior living community near Cherry Creek State Park. Dee was there to share a personal story of homelessness on behalf of the Close to Home Storytellers Network; Jeannine was in the audience as the club’s president. As Dee spoke, Jeannine realized Dee’s story could have been her own, or the story of any of the women she knew and loved.

“Meeting Dee has been key to my journey,” says Jeannine, who moved to Denver with her husband in 2015 to be nearer to their grown children and grandchildren. “When you move somewhere, it takes a while to find your footing, to find your place. I felt a connection to Dee that led me to figure out where my voice was needed.”

Which brings us back to the tiara. In May, although still a newcomer to our state, Jeannine won the annual Ms. Senior Colorado America pageant, which she’d entered somewhat on a whim after new friends encouraged her to step into the spotlight. A former nurse, she’s volunteered in prisons, hospices, and among impoverished communities in rural Appalachia; she also has a background in public speaking and musical theater. That life experience, combined with a big smile and a warm personality, earned Jeannine the crown—and opened up opportunities to talk about homelessness with audiences across the state.

Jeannine has invited Dee to speak to her church and to the Cameo Club, a group of former Ms. Senior Colorado contestants and winners who come from all over the state. She also made raising awareness about homelessness part of her bid for Ms. Senior America; the pageant was held in Atlantic City in October. According to local pageant organizers, Jeannine is the first to bring such a clearly defined, community-centered approach to the role of Colorado’s senior queen.

That approach was sparked by a story. To Dee, Jeannine’s experience—of being moved to take personal action to help end homelessness—embodies the spirit and goals of The Storytellers Network.

“We have a commonality, in that we both have a platform,” says Dee. “We’re both sharing stories to spread awareness to people who don’t know how homelessness happens to other people. I appreciate that: in her. And as a Storyteller, I’m also proud of myself.”