

## After 10 years, he's homeless no more

Saturday, June 20, 2009

By [Lorraine Ahearn](#)

Staff Writer

### Accompanying Photos



Joseph Rodriguez (News & Record)

Photo Caption: Clara Ellis (from left), Mark Hoffman and Mitch McGee.

We're never given more load than we can carry, it's said.

But is that true?

On the first Sunday morning in June at Centenary United Methodist Church, a young family gets up to change pews.

They move from behind where Mark Hoffmann, 51, the city's most high-profile street person, sits every Sunday. They walk all the way to the other side of the church.

Later, a white-haired church elder in a suit, part of the team that three days earlier helped Hoffmann move into his first apartment in 10 years, leans over to explain.

"It was too much for them," George Cranford tells Hoffmann, referring to the odor of Hoffmann's black down coat. Hoffmann has worn the coat daily for a year, be it 10 degrees or 90 degrees, and refuses to let it out of his sight, even to be laundered.

Hoffmann — eyes fixed on the altar, lips moving silently, either in prayer or in conversation with voices no one else hears — gives Cranford a nod.

Step by step, this is a journey back to life, Lazarus-style, of a man whose estranged siblings had him declared legally dead in 1996 in an effort to settle an estate back in Maryland.

Little did they know that Hoffmann had wound up in Greensboro, 328 miles away, via Kansas, keeping a mysterious vigil on a park bench near Friendly Center. A year ago he left without explanation, road map in hand, walking and hitchhiking home to Maryland, then returning here this spring the same way.

He spent his last night outside June 3, when a flooded Buffalo Creek rose as high as the Lake Daniel park bridge where Hoffmann was known to camp.

“I got wet,” was all he reported the next day. “I’m OK.”

By the next night, for the first time in a decade, Greensboro’s best-known homeless man was homeless no more, ready to move into a HUD-subsidized unit with help from Centenary United Methodist Church.

Old habits die hard, however. He still ate soup cold out of the can. He showered but put the same soiled clothes back on. And he slept on the floor, next to the bed that Clara Ellis, his church sponsor, had made up.

Clearly, there were more steps to go. But for now, he had a key and a place to put down the baggage he has carried this far.

It is a journey that homeless advocates have watched with interest, and for good reason.

This month, the state informed the Housing Support Teams — shock troops responsible for finding chronically homeless people and getting them permanent shelter — that the plug is being pulled on their program July 1 and that there likely won’t be new funds until October.

Meanwhile, with the economy in a tailspin, homeless shelters are at capacity, and rental vacancy rates and evictions are up.

So, as with last winter’s emergency that saw local churches and community centers respond by opening their doors to 100 homeless people, the story of Mark Hoffmann and Centenary was planting a seed.

“I had a lady say to me about Mark, ‘I wonder if my church could do something like that,’ ” Ellis, 76, said this week. “I told her, ‘Well, there’s not a thing standing in your way.’ ”

Then again, Ellis, the youngest of 10 children to grow up on a farm in Murphy, is a determined woman.

And like the enigmatic homeless man who showed up at her church on Easter in 2001, and has since become like a son to her, Ellis has a tendency toward understatement.

Mitch McGee got up at 5:30 a.m. Wednesday and made his bed. Then he sat down on it.

What do I do now?

He is a Housing Support specialist. Apart from filling out paperwork, his job, in a nutshell, is to go out at dawn and peer under bridges, behind loading docks and in abandoned cars to look for chronically homeless people and get them into housing.

These are often the people who use the most resources, cycling in and out of jails and hospitals. Hence, the purpose of the state grant that has been paying the teams' salaries: Show how much money they can save the system, and the state will broaden the teams to work with other homeless people. The newly homeless, perhaps. Those between jobs, say, with a couple of kids in tow.

Did it work?

Evidently so. The Jordan Institute in Chapel Hill estimated that in its first year, Guilford County's pilot project saved the system \$97,000 in jail and hospital bills for the first 15 clients to be housed.

But as McGee sat on his neatly made bed, he faced the same problem he had gone to sleep with the night before.

It didn't matter how much money the program was saving the state. There was no money. Not only were the assistants being laid off for the summer, but the program was basically being put on hold until Oct. 1.

What do I do now?

He would check in with Ellis, to see about Hoffmann.

"This is the most fun I've had in months," McGee, 51, said. "And Mark's not even a client."

In fact, Hoffmann did not fit the team's grant criteria, seeing as he had not been in jail, had no drug or alcohol issues and had not been in the hospital, as far as anyone knew, since the 1980s.

Most of the time-consuming tasks that usually fall to McGee — obtaining a duplicate birth certificate, for instance, or a state ID from the DMV, getting utilities turned on — were in this case done by others.

"Every time I would ask the church people something — 'Did you get a spare key made?' " McGee said, "They'd say, 'Oh, we already did that.' Usually, it's me trying to find the time to do all these things."

It was a two-way street. Ellis, though resourceful and tireless, had no experience with the byzantine social services system. There, McGee was in his element after 25 years in private social work.

So it was that Hoffmann quickly moved up a waiting list for a rental housing voucher and did a food stamp interview at Centenary by speakerphone, with the help of McGee's assistant.

Shy about accepting help, Hoffmann was reluctant about the application.

"If you don't want it, Mark," Ellis said, joking, "I'll take it."

Hoffmann replied softly: “I kind of need to know which side of the fence you’re on.”

“I’m on your side of the fence,” Ellis said, tugging at his arm. “And I’ve been on your side of the fence all these years.”

Without the involvement of Ellis and her husband, Don, Centenary’s longtime retired pastor, McGee felt he would have taken much longer to gain Hoffmann’s trust and perhaps would not have gained it at all.

It was, after all, Ellis who persuaded Hoffmann to come back to Greensboro after a cold, somewhat inhospitable winter in his hometown of Catonsville, Md.

Earlier this spring, the couple took Hoffmann to a favorite breakfast spot, Tex & Shirley’s. The waitresses crowded around, telling Hoffmann they were relieved he was back.

Last week, Ellis went to her cardiologist. The doctor closed the door to the examining room and looked her in the eye.

“Now, Clara,” the doctor said, “tell me about the man on the bench.”

Why did Hoffmann have this effect, not just for passers-by unlikely to get involved, but even for McGee, who does outreach for a living?

“There’s no guile,” McGee said of Hoffmann.

“With some folks you meet, you’ve got to kind of sort out what’s real and what’s not. With Mark, there’s just something very real there, and you know (he) needs help to get inside.”

Both McGee and Ellis expressed a sense of failure, of missed opportunity, when Hoffmann vanished a year ago.

McGee has often said Hoffmann put a face on homelessness. For Ellis, it went deeper.

“He was a godsend. I really believe that he has changed some people’s thinking. But not all people,” Ellis said, recalling an instance when a church member gave Hoffmann a sleeping bag and another objected, asking, “Are we going to support that kind of lifestyle?”

At dusk June 3, just as Centenary’s team had Hoffmann’s apartment ready for him to move in the next day, Beth McKee-Huger suddenly feared it could be one last missed opportunity, a day too late.

As she and her husband, Ray, drove through Lake Daniel, the Greensboro Housing Coalition director watched in alarm as the creek at Hoffmann’s usual spot crested at the bridge.

“I said, ‘Mark’s supposed to be getting into his housing tomorrow!’ ” McKee-Huger recalled. “Two blocks later, Ray said, ‘There he is!’ ”

If Hoffmann’s winding tale had so intrigued Greensboro, what will the effect be of the apparent resolution Centenary and McGee together brought to his story?

For McKee-Huger, whose nonprofit staff daily watches the troubled economic waters rise, Hoffmann represents a growing, mostly unseen population.

And with the state pulling back on the Housing First initiative that pays for the support teams, McKee-Huger took heart in the teamwork performed between church volunteers and a professional social worker.

“Getting Mark into housing is a huge thing for us to celebrate because there are a lot of people like him who need help,” McKee-Huger said.

“Getting people into housing costs a lot of money. And that money has got to come from somewhere. There has got to be a bridge to get us through this time.”

Meanwhile, the last time Ellis stopped in at Hoffmann’s apartment, he had been watching a ballgame in his bedroom. She noticed the covers turned down on his bed.

As if one of these nights, who knows? He might climb in.

*Contact Lorraine Ahearn at 373-7334 or [lorraine.ahearn@news-record.com](mailto:lorraine.ahearn@news-record.com)*