

## Homeless gain voice in ex-TV executive

Tuesday, August 25, 2009

By Jennifer Fernandez  
Staff Writer

GREENSBORO - Mark Horvath sat on an overturned crate, his digital video camera trained on a man sitting in a tent in the woods.

Keith Owens, who lives in the tent, is one of about a dozen homeless people camped out near the railroad tracks in this section of downtown Greensboro.

He became homeless in February after losing his job with a moving company and running out of options for a place to stay.

"I've worked all my life and now, I can't get help from anybody," said Owens, 45.

He and a few others living in the woods shared their stories Monday with Horvath, who is traveling the country chronicling homelessness.

Horvath, 49, posts their stories, unedited, with commentary on his video Web log — or vlog. And he sends short messages or "tweets" to his more than 2,600 Twitter followers, talking about everything from who he's met to where he's going.

Using social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, doesn't cost anything. These were the tools available to him a year ago, when on the brink of becoming homeless again himself, he embarked on this project.

Now, social media plays a much bigger role than Horvath anticipated.

In Baton Rouge, La., he wrote about a group needing 50 pairs of shoes for the homeless. Donations poured in.

As word spread, people started asking Horvath to speak about homelessness and his project.

In Arkansas, the homeless showed up at his speech and he brought them on stage, recording their stories there. The city responded by starting a housing program, Horvath said.

A doctor, moved by the story of one woman who was partly blind, volunteered to do her eye surgery, he said.

"I didn't plan on any of this," said Horvath, a former TV industry executive from Los Angeles who said he set out to show the real stories of homelessness.

He knows what it's like. He was homeless 14 years ago. He got sober and turned his life around.

But Horvath teetered on the edge of homelessness again after losing his job 19 months ago, making him another statistic in the country's economic crisis.

He began chronicling the plight of the homeless in L.A. and other large cities.

"The homeless story has not been told by the homeless themselves," he said.

With the help of sponsors, he expanded his project to include places such as Greensboro.

He became friends with Michele Forrest, a local blogger and homeless advocate, through their online conversations about homelessness. Forrest invited Horvath here.

She and her ministry partner, Audrie Keen, hand out food, medicine and blankets to the homeless. They also try to help connect them to programs, such as disability and food stamps.

The system here is overwhelmed, but the community has the resources to help, Forrest said.

She hopes Horvath's project will bring more awareness to Greensboro's homeless.

People such as Yong Suggs, 58, who told Horvath she lost her home to a fire.

She set up a tent in the woods three months ago, but couldn't sleep at night because she was afraid. So she used twigs and leaves to screen her tent and she created a porch out of rocks.

"What's your future like?" Horvath asked, camera trained on Suggs.

She laid out her hopes: Get out of the woods. Find a job. Help the homeless.

She let Horvath take her picture with his camera phone, then wiped the tears from her eyes.

He'll post the photo online with her story, which he called "very powerful." Horvath encouraged her to work with the homeless, work that he said he has found fulfilling.

And he'll move on to the next city. To the next person living under a bridge or in a tent. To chronicle yet another story.

"You're here living homeless. Tell me about that."

*Contact Jennifer Fernandez at 373-7064 or [jennifer.fernandez@news-record.com](mailto:jennifer.fernandez@news-record.com)*