



ART BY ALVIA BENEDICT

A PLACE TO FINALLY CALL ONE'S OWN

A glimpse into a student's journey to find a home

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The early years of sophomore Mark Davidson's life will forever be ingrained in his mind. The fights. The tears. The shouting. His stepfather's abusive view of life that left permanent marks on his mental, emotional and physical health.

Davidson has requested to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity and privacy of the subject.

While many of Davidson's friends were going through adolescence with loving parents and stable roofs over their heads, Davidson was not.

Instead, mere thoughts of these things were a fantasy in his world, a mirage of the life that he aspired to have.

Every night, he would pray to be noticed, for someone to save him from his internal battle. He prayed for his stepfather to change — to be a loving and kind-hearted parent instead of a “demanding monster.”

Davidson was later admitted to Heartland Mental Hospital because his depression had “reached the last straw.”

“Things in my house got so bad that I had an issue with self harm,” Davidson said.

But nothing changed. Even the slightest complaint or comment was enough to send his stepfather over the edge.

“My stepfather didn't want me to get taken away from him,” Davidson said. “He was very abusive.”

Coming home from school, Davidson saw eviction notices attached to his front door, but he ignored them. They became the ordinary; they did not initiate any worries.

A few months later, he did not even have a door, let alone a house. His new home was made out of worn-out nylon; it was a tent.

“Imagine having tons of rocks on your back and having to sleep on those rocks every night,” Davidson said. “Then imagine sleeping on those rocks when it was freezing cold outside. That's what living in that tent felt like.”

After moving back and forth from shelters to tents due to legal issues between his parents and Child Protective Services (CPS), Davidson knew it was time to make a change.

“I got tired of being afraid,” Davidson said.

Secretly, Davidson composed a plan. But he would not tell anyone about this plan because if his stepfather found out, Davidson said he would feel his wrath.

This was no ordinary plan. The plan consisted of knocking on the door of KVC Kansas, a foster care organization, and requesting help.

“I wanted to solve things by myself,” Davidson said.

After Davidson was released from Heartland Mental Hospital, his KVC caseworker relocated him and assigned him to a new family. All of his ties between his mother and stepfather were cut off.

“My [current] family is really special and they help me a lot,” Davidson said.

THE SEARCH FOR WHERE TO GO

However, while Davidson eventually found the home that he wanted to have, others are still searching. Children just like him are searching for bravery; the bravery to get help.

Davidson's struggle to find help was a common one in his high school.

Currently, 18 students in the high school database are identified as living in a foster home and 14 students are identified as homeless.

However, registrar Maggie Serrano believes this is not necessarily an exact number due to a lack of a method to identify a student's living situation.

“I believe our number [of homeless students and students in foster care] is greater, though [because] the only way we can pull a list of foster students if the foster parents hand-writes [foster] on the enrollment form. It has to be exactly what the guardian writes on the form,” Serrano said.

Not only is homelessness an issue in the high school, but

also in Crawford County.

Crawford County is classified as the “poorest county in Kansas” by a study released by MSN Money and USA Today, which reviewed five-year estimated median annual household incomes from 2009 through 2013 from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS).

In addition to low household incomes, Crawford County has limited options for homeless individuals.

Part of this stems from the closing of Pittsburg's only homeless shelter, C.H.O.I.C.E.S., due to the cutoff of its government funding.

“Besides Wesley House, there really aren't any other areas in Crawford County that would serve homeless families,” said Marcee Binder, executive director and head pastor of Wesley House.

Another factor contributing to limited options is the amount of minimum-wage jobs in Crawford County.

“Yes, there are a lot of families who work,” Binder said. “However, the majority of them are working at places like McDonald's, where they are not paid enough to support a family.”

According to Binder, the centrality of Wesley House makes it a popular resource for homeless people.

“The biggest thing that makes us unique is that we're the hub of the city,” Binder said. “We are the central place where people come in to figure out the resources that they need.”

Binder witnesses homelessness every day. But the majority of the people she serves are not families.

“There is a problem between homelessness and students,” Binder said. “However, I am just not seeing it.”

The majority of people served by Wesley House are single people from age 19 and up.

According to Binder, this is due to parents' fears and legal insecurities.

“There is quite possibly, a fear,” Binder said. “If a student is under the age of 18, then we would have to report their situation to the Department of Children and Families (DCF). They could get taken away from their parents due to insufficient housing.”

This so-called fear was one of Davidson's distresses.

“If I even mentioned the idea of getting help, my stepfather would have [punished] me,” Davidson said.

Because parents often do not report their housing situations, other sources report them instead. Some of these sources include DCF, school districts and various people in the community.

Working through the Children's Cabinet Grant of approximately \$150,000, Pittsburg Police Department (PPD) homeless advocates Charleen Workman and Katie Douglas are often contacted when a homeless family is in need of help.

“Our main focus is any family that is possibly in threat of their children being removed by DCF,” Workman said.

With a case load of 80 families, Workman and Douglas provide a multitude of services including financial help, housing, grocery shopping and provisions of hygienic items.

However, according to Workman, there is no limit to Workman and Douglas's services.

“Although housing is our most-utilized service, there really isn't anything that we don't do,” Workman said.

But the services don't just end there.

Sitting in her office, Communities In Schools (CIS) site coordinator Deanna Miller serves students daily.

Miller runs CIS, a national dropout prevention program that is utilized by students who are homeless or on the verge

of homelessness.

While she does not provide the same housing and financial services as Workman and Douglas, she provides other services.

One of these is a basic-needs closet visited by approximately six students per week.

The closet includes clothing items, shoes and school supplies.

While many of these items are donated, some of them are purchased from Miller's budget.

“Many of the students in [CIS] don't have much support at home,” Miller said. “CIS helps them overcome those barriers.”

CIS provides services such as college preparation, career preparation, food assistance, transportation to doctor's appointments and guidance provided by Miller.

However, CIS is utilized by students all across the spectrum, regardless of whether they are homeless or not.

“Students do not have to be in poverty or homeless [in order to] use CIS,” Miller said.

For freshman Roger Adams, who has also chosen to remain anonymous to protect his family's privacy, a world without CIS would have been a world without food.

“My family would always be short a few days on food,” Adams said.

Because he was often on the verge of homelessness and often risked running out of food, Adams contacted CIS.

Automatically, Miller presented Adams with food bags including noodles, snack items and canned chicken.

“[My family and I] discovered that we could finally get food and avoid hunger,” Adams said.

DETERMINING WHAT TO DO

However, not every case of homelessness is the same. Determining how to help a homeless student is based on a number of factors.

According to Miller, the most important factor is a student's age.

If a student is under the age of 18, their parents will be contacted.

“We would have to work directly with the family to try to figure out what we can do,” Miller said. “We would have to talk to the them to see if the student can live somewhere else when [he or she] turns 18.”

If a student is 18, then the process is individualized.

“The priority is finding them a place to stay and help them get on their own,” Miller said. “We help them understand housing options and understand where they are going to live.”

Sometimes, this requires other students or teachers to chip in.

“We have people here that are willing to take students into their household,” Miller said. “Sometimes I have to make sure the student lives with a friend until they graduate.”

But regardless of the current issues and constraints of homelessness, Miller believes meeting the students' needs is top priority.

“Our number one goal is to help our students,” Miller said. “We will do anything in order to achieve this.”

And while his search for a home was not easy, Davidson believes it was all worth it.

“I am happy with where I am right now,” Davidson said. “My mental and physical health is [better] than ever before.”

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-MARK DAVIDSON