

FACES OF POVERTY

'Hope in itself': Auburn man moves from chronically homeless to homeless advocate



MAY 13, 2014 6:00 AM • [SAMANTHA HOUSE](#) | SAMANTHA.HOUSE@LEE.NET

When Chris Bodner looks back on his childhood — on being abandoned, sexually abused and homeless — he wonders why he didn't snap.

"Why am I not mentally ill? Why haven't I taken my life or killed somebody?" he asked. "All I can do is look up and thank God."

Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Chris recalls the first innocence-shattering incident in

his life: At 7, he became homeless.

After being sent to live with his volatile father by an indifferent mother around 1975, Chris bolted — running away to a friend's home in search of a safe haven.

At his friend's encouragement, the boy eventually decided to head to a local police station and try reuniting with his family. But once he reached the Cayuga County station, his wait stretched longer than expected.

When an officer finally returned to Chris, he approached the boy with tears in his eyes and delivered impossible news: Neither of Chris' parents wanted him.

It was not the first time he had been abandoned.

Chris was left as a newborn at Auburn's Mercy Hospital by a mother he never met. At age 2, he was adopted by two Cayuga County residents. And about two years later, as he shifted from toddler to preschooler, his new family split up.

He experienced a "ping-pong" lifestyle for a while after the divorce before his adopted mother made a decision.

"For some unknown reason, she didn't want to deal with me anymore," he said.

Chris lived full-time with his dad, stomaching his "abusive, alcoholic" father for as long as he could before running away. When his attempt to return to his family was denied, the boy's parents confirmed what their child had long felt:

He had no home.

...

Chris spent the rest of his childhood migrating between foster homes, juvenile detention centers and group homes.

The quality of his life varied greatly between foster homes. Some families treated him lovingly; another foster parent sexually abused him. Stomaching the good with the bad, Chris stayed a ward of the state until he turned 16 and decided he was "man enough" to face life alone.

After spending many nights couch surfing, the teen was taken in by a family who helped him graduate high school with collegiate dreams.

But the "fast life" quickly proved more tempting. Chris headed west to Ohio and made friends with a rough crowd that greeted life through a drug and alcohol-induced haze.

Eventually realizing his acquaintances weren't truly friends, Chris decided to return to the only place that ever resembled home.

He hitchhiked the 300-plus miles back from Ohio to Weedsport, the village where his adopted mother lived. Penniless and without shelter, Chris curled up on his mother's front porch and fitfully slept.

He was jolted awake the next morning when his mother opened her front door to grab the morning newspaper. Chris pleaded for her help — begging her to lend him a room until he could secure a place to stay.

"She said 'absolutely not,'" he said.

Chris, yet again, was homeless.

...

After struggling to find a job and a semi-permanent address, Chris found both at once.

He was hired by a Weedsport restaurant, where he put his experience as a chef to use. And for six years, he worked for the restaurant and lived in an adjacent apartment — until a fire claimed both.

Chris found a new job at Auburn Memorial Hospital and met his first wife.

For the first time in years, Chris found himself with a family. But dogged by a childhood filled with abuse and loss, properly caring for others was a concept Chris did not fully comprehend.

"I never had a family background," he said. "I didn't know how to be a good husband."

So he dealt with his demons and doubts like he always had: with alcohol and drugs.

After 12 years together, Chris' wife divorced him. The loss struck him hard, rendering him unable to handle working. He acted out, "not really abiding by too many laws."

"I went on a mission of destruction," he said.

Talking through a grimace, Chris explained that the details of life — from then on — become foggy, clouded up by the libations he used to dull his pain.

By then, he was in his 30s. He met another woman and had a son with her. As the little family struggled to make ends meet, Chris would feed his girlfriend before feeding himself — sometimes going hungry.

Five years later, the woman left him and took their son with her — wrenching away Chris' heart.

With his child gone, Chris worked to numb away his cares. He actively chose to harm himself, using an increased regimen of alcohol and drugs as his weapons of choice.

"I didn't care about my bills, I didn't care about rent," he said. "I didn't care if I lived or died."

His world in disarray, Chris returned to streets — the only consistent home he'd ever known.

...

Homeless and strung out on substances in 2011, Chris felt "beaten up." After his attempt to stay with a friend failed, Chris stumbled upon Chapel House, a homeless shelter for men.

When he was accepted into the Auburn shelter, Chris finally found hope.

"I felt at home with these people," he said.

But at first, it wasn't enough.

He got a job in an Auburn pub, setting himself up "for a downfall." In early 2012 — using the excuse that he'd left his laundry inside — Chris used his employee key to enter the pub after hours and stole \$860.

He was eventually arrested and charged with third-degree burglary and petit larceny.

With a felony looming, Chris knew he had to change. He threw back his last drink on Feb. 29, 2012, and stopped treating Chapel House like a motel. Starting on March 1, 2012, he kicked off 365 days of change.

"I gave myself one year — one year out of my whole life — to do something different for myself," he said.

During the months he stayed out on bail awaiting sentencing, Chris stayed sober. He helped the other men living in Chapel House and got a new job, earning himself many letters of recommendation.

Sentenced to shock probation in October 2012, Bodner spent four months in the Cayuga County Jail. He celebrated the holiday season behind bars, helping him to stay clean.

Chris became a free man again in January 2013 and got an apartment with a friend. He started volunteering at Chapel House, wanting to be involved with the shelter even if he couldn't stay there.

Slowly, Chris found a new way to live.

As a Chapel House volunteer, Chris worked to connect the shelter's men with jobs and permanent places to stay. Using his experiences, he also helped the men open up and address their painful pasts. And as he helped the homeless men, he helped himself.

Chris kept clean and out of trouble. He stayed in the same home, and became a better father to his young son. And with the help of Chapel House staffers, he started to face his dark past.

"Only your secrets keep you sick," Chris said. "That's what kept me drinking and drugging for years, because I didn't want to face any reality."

Last summer, Chris' hard work paid off.

Christina Thornton, Chapel House's executive director, offered Chris a full-time position as a relief worker last August, a job that allowed him to give back for a living. Having Christina believe in him and give him a chance — knowing about his mottled past — changed Chris' life.

"That," he said, "was hope in itself."

As he worked to heal, Chris also tried to make amends with his parents.

Through his adopted sister — who he has recently gotten back in touch with — Chris asked his parents to meet with him. He wanted to exchange "last words" and forgiveness. Once again, however, his parents turned him away.

But instead of turning the sting of their rejection inward, Chris is working to let the ghost of his upbringing go.

He spends as much time as possible in Seneca Falls with his 6-year-old son. They talk every night on the phone. And whenever he sees the boy he credits with saving his life, Chris never neglects to tell his son that he loves him.

"I need to break the cycle," he said, "I need to show my son I'll be there beyond a shadow of a doubt."

...

Chris' traces his route out of poverty back to one main source: advocating for others.

"The more I help, the more I get helped," he said. "I'm having more joy on seeing other people recover, to see them move on from having nothing to getting something and keeping it."

But without the help of those who shined a light on that uplifting route, the 46-year-old Auburn man believes he might never have found his way to a fulfilling life.

"There's a couple great volunteers who showed me hope, who showed me there there was another way," he said. "I didn't have that hope as a child that there was somebody to help me through."

Along with clear-headed days and a reliable shelter, Chris' new way of living includes having a support system to lean on when he feels down and cheer him on when he succeeds. And Chris

plans to pass that feeling on.

In the future, Chris hopes to eventually work with children — particularly children living in foster care or group homes. He wants to break the cycle of silence among abused and abandoned children, and to help steer them away from the destructive lifestyle he lived for so long.

Through sharing his story and spreading awareness, Chris also hopes to convince the community to help the poor instead of opting for indifference — a choice he believes too many residents make.

"The public doesn't see or doesn't want to see," he said.

When it comes to poverty, Chris believes Cayuga County residents have two options.

If you witness the signs of poverty — a child wearing unwashed clothes, a man looking for dinner in trash cans, a black-eye-wearing woman sleeping under a bridge — you can try in some way, whether big or small, to spark positive change. Or, you could walk away.

But Chris hopes you won't.

"Open up your eyes and see what's around," he said. "Our community is only as good as we allow it to be."

Join the discussion

To conclude this special series on poverty in Cayuga County, we're holding an online town hall meeting with a group of local experts on the frontlines of the War on Poverty. Head to auburnpub.com at noon Friday to take part in this interactive forum.