

Everyone has this picture in their head of what homelessness looks like. For some, it's people in tents, somewhere in the woods or under a highway overpass, drinking and drugging. Others, particularly in larger cities, see the men or women sleeping on park benches, at bus or train stops, or in a pinch on church steps. My image was that of old drunks with holes in their socks riding the trains. Yet, when it happened to me, none of these images would prove to be my fate.

In the early fall of 2003, I was a young 20-year-old with a wife and a 9-month-old baby. I had made a series of foolish mistakes in moving from where I was living in Huntington, WV to my hometown in Ohio then back to Huntington again with no attention for money or employment. We were broke. We had nothing but the car we were in. I had no family to turn to at the time, so I pulled into the parking lot of the Huntington City Mission homeless shelter. I was scared, out of options, and was slowly realizing I was a complete and utter failure.

Neither I nor my wife had come from "bad" or "irresponsible" background. My father was and still is a doctor and my upbringing was so normal that it is boring to even think about. My wife came from a single parent home, but her mother worked her way from nothing to be

a police officer and was a very strict and good parent. Our only mistake to become homeless was being young and stupid with our money. That's all it took.

We were sat in the large open reception room of the Huntington City Mission. It looked clean, almost like a hospital. We found out that there was a room with a bathroom for my wife and son, but I had to stay in the Men's shelter. Here the real fear began. Staying with my family was one thing, staying alone was entirely another.

So I had to leave. I figured I could live in my car or eventually make some family or friend take me in until I got my life back together. Luckily the pastor came in and decided to let me stay with my wife and son out of kindness.

Leaving the office, we climbed a set of stairs to the rooms upstairs. We were told when and where the meals were served, what time we had to leave the building in the morning (you couldn't just hang out in the shelter unless you had a reason), and when to be in the building to stay for the night and what time they turned lights off for sleep.

Shown to our room, we looked around. There was a double bed with a thin green plastic mattress, a chair, and

a small bathroom. The floor was hard tile like you'd see in a school cafeteria. The whole place was about the size of a large walk-in closet. It looked and smelled clean and was not all that bad considering the circumstances.

There were no other families that I remember, mostly single women of various ages with their children. Over time, we would learn that some had drug abuse issues, some had been beaten by their partners, and some had just gotten down on their luck. None fit the stereotype you would imagine.

We had made it in time for dinner. The front of the Men's Shelter served as the cafeteria. Men ate at a different time than the folks from the Women's and Children's area so there weren't many of us in there at all. The whole process, including the taste of the food, reminded me of school.

Following dinner, we walked back to the shelter. We were given toiletries, diapers, and some blankets and pillows. Everyone left before they turned the lights off for bedtime.

As I laid there on that first night of what would become sixty, I remember contemplating how all this had happened and what I was going to do to get out of this

situation. I knew I was lucky to find a clean quiet shelter, but I still wouldn't want to ever go it again.