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Dogged efforts hit stubborn patterns of homelessness

Getting the hard-core denizens of the streets into housing is just the first step. Mental illness, addiction and the ingrained survival habits learned on skid row can make it hard to keep them there.

By Christopher Goffard, Los Angeles Times

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Bobby Livingston couldn't sleep. The indoor quiet was unnerving, the softness of his mattress all wrong. For weeks after moving into Room 216 at the Senator Hotel, he found comfort only on a hard tile floor that felt reassuringly like the pavement.

Horses and dogs flitted across the ceiling of his room, but he described the visions as familiar and untroubling, like the voices in his head. Sometimes the dead visited him full-bodied — long-gone family from the red clay roads of South Carolina — and he asked Jesus why he wasn't yet among them.

To rescue the 50 people deemed most likely to die on the streets in skid row, Los Angeles County had a pragmatic plan: Give them an apartment and all the help they'd accept, requiring little in return — not sobriety, not meetings, not psychiatric drugs.

Livingston and a handful of others posed the most extreme test of Project 50's premise. Merely living among others, with a modicum of structure and social rules, was proving a steep demand, considering what accompanied the hardest cases indoors: untreated mental illness and ferociously solitary habits formed by decades in the city's dope dens.

"If we can succeed with him — oh, my goodness," said the program's director, Carrie Bach. "If we can do him, we can do anybody."

Livingston, a cancer survivor with 37 years on the streets, was No. 1 on the list. He had accepted the room but cleaved to old habits, refusing his [schizophrenia](#) pills and plundering trashcans for aluminum to buy crack. So it surprised everyone when he appeared at a hotel community room one morning in May 2008 for [drug counseling](#).

Attendance was voluntary at these twice-weekly group sessions, and though the host, Don Hashima, went door-to-door in the hotels, pounding, urging Project 50 clients to come, bribing them with snacks, he never got more than a handful.

With this crowd, Hashima was forced to jettison the drug-recovery philosophy — total abstinence — that he used to preach with the fervor of scripture. Expectations were adjusted. "If you're using not as much as you used to," he said, "that's cool too."

Livingston sat alone, but his body seemed in restless torment, eyes jittery, hands trembling. He grabbed a bagel and attempted to cut it in half with the handle of a plastic spoon. He chewed the mutilated pieces and shouted: "Dog eat dog! I am a pit bull! They call me Dirty Bob!"

He quieted long enough for the day's topic to be introduced: relapses and what trigger them. A round, wheezing addict who called himself Shorty needed no time to ponder. "Women," he volunteered, to mutters of agreement.

Flouncing into the room just then, looking for a snack, was an HIV-withered woman in flip-flops and pink hot pants. A veteran "strawberry," someone who traded sex for cocaine, she was in and out of the room in seconds, but her appearance shattered the brief calm in which Livingston dwelled. He began thrusting his pelvis in his seat, snarling and cursing.

Shorty, warming a bagel, thought he heard an insult and jumped in Livingston's face. "I'm at the microwave, minding my own business, and he's over here cussing me out!"

Livingston was on his feet in an instant, chest out, screaming, "I'll kill your mama! I'll kill your brother! I'll kill your sister!"

As Livingston was steered toward the door, his first [group counseling](#) session finished almost before it started, Shorty cried, "You ain't gonna kill nothing bigger than a \$40 rock!"

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In policy circles, the watchword had long been "housing readiness": the homeless received a room after demonstrating that they were staying sober and seeking psychiatric counseling. Unless underlying afflictions like drug addiction and mental illness were reined in first, the thinking went, there was little chance they could keep a taxpayer-subsidized room.

Sam Tsemberis, a psychologist and housing activist who began providing apartments to the mentally ill in Harlem in the early 1990s, came to believe this a pernicious myth. Was there no help for the thousands who would not, or could not, endure the gantlet of demands?

Even paranoid schizophrenics — convinced, for instance, that they were hounded by aliens — knew where to get their food and find shelter on a cold night. If their psychopathologies were independent of their practical skills, why assume they lacked the ability to keep a home?

"They have organized a survival on the street that is more difficult than most of us can manage," Tsemberis said. When he put 99 mentally ill people in apartments, he discovered that 80% were still there after two years.

By the U.S. government's count, there are 643,000 homeless people on any given night nationwide, but only 17% are in the chronic category. Making a dent in long-term homelessness, then, might be possible by targeting a relatively small group.

Under Philip Mangano, President George W. Bush's homelessness czar, the "housing first" approach had reached 300 cities by 2007, and Mangano credited it with a 30% nationwide drop in chronic homelessness between 2005 and 2007.

From the hundreds adrift on Los Angeles' skid row, workers identified the 50 most vulnerable using a 30-item questionnaire. Those who made the list reported some combination of multiple emergency room visits, HIV, diseases of the heart, liver or kidneys, addiction and mental disorder.

Skid row was now the latest, most high-profile laboratory probing the possibility that a room of one's own, free from the chaos of the street, might serve as a springboard for getting well rather than as a reward for it.

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The problem with Bobby Livingston, who seemed unafraid of death or jail or the streets, was the lack of leverage. Soon after moving into the Senator, he was screaming contemptuously at his neighbors — they were lazy, always after his money or liquor or drugs — and at the management, which found his behavior menacing enough to threaten eviction.

Eviction meant he would be dropped from Project 50 and banned from subsidized housing for three years, an outcome Bach thought she might stave off if she could get him into drug treatment.

"He's so live-in-the-moment. He cannot defer gratification," she said. "Until he's on his meds, I don't think we have any hope."

It was June 2008, half a year into the project, and Bach was looking for Livingston.

For all its cruelty, skid row carried the comfort of familiarity. If Livingston was hostage to chemical need and random mayhem, he was also lord of a self-contained concrete kingdom whose laws he'd mastered. He knew where to find drugs, sex and cheap food, and his fierce reputation kept enemies at bay.

Still, Bach thought she glimpsed a sweet, almost childlike vulnerability. Maybe it was the way he wore his baseball cap sideways or how, in amiable moods, he greeted her as "My favorite girl!"

She found him at one of his haunts, a diner called Martha's Kitchen on East 4th Street. He sat in the back, violently stabbing a Styrofoam plate of scrambled eggs and toast. He bristled at her approach. "I need to be alone. What's wrong with that?"

Bach needed a pretext to sneak past his defenses. She pulled up a chair and pretended to be hungry. He was hunched over his plate, flecks of spittle flying, when Bach reached out and plucked a slice of toast. She put on a smile. "Will you share? Can I have a piece?"

Livingston looked startled. "Yeah," he muttered.

She took a bite, just big enough to be credible, and returned the bread. They were just inches apart now, and she had his attention: He needed to come with her or he'd be out on the streets again. He followed her outside and climbed into the county car. Seconds later, he threw the door open and headed back toward Martha's Kitchen, his expression malign.

"There we go," Bach said. "We're losing him."

"There's just some people you can't help," said a man watching from the sidewalk. "Too much rock. He ain't worth it. He ain't worth it."

Shortly afterward, Livingston was caught buying crack.

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"I can't stay out of trouble," he said. "I been touched by the devil or something."

For once, Livingston's eyes were alert, his voice clear. He was sitting behind the plexiglass at Men's Central Jail. With his long history of drug crimes and probation violations, state time loomed.

He grew up in Cheraw, S.C., he said, one of 16 kids, scrawny, premature, with asthma that his mother treated with marijuana. He said his stepfather, who was half white, hated the darkness of his skin and covered it with welts. He fled west, and in 1980, at the corner of 5th and San Pedro streets, he inhaled his first hit of crack cocaine: "I said, 'Damn, that's what I need.' "

Over four decades downtown he saw the white retirees vanish and the once-magnificent hotels become shooting galleries and thousands of faces come and go.

"Everybody dead but me. And I was the baddest one of them. I did more than all them did," he said.

Thinking of the streets, horrible memories assailed him: alleys running with blood, bodies in trash bins, death all over. Survival in his world, he said, precluded friendship. Everybody wanted something. "I don't eat with nobody. I don't smoke with nobody. I be by myself all the time. I got no friends. I don't want no friends. I don't need no friends."

He didn't know Project 50's origins or philosophical underpinnings, but he knew that "them people sent from God," and that a woman named Miss Carrie had tried, with surprising intensity, to help him. Then a word came to mind he had already taken pains to disavow. "She my friend."

That summer, after half a year in a borrowed warehouse, Project 50 moved into a headquarters at 5th and Main streets, a quick walk from the clients' apartments. There was an office, a health clinic, and a drop-in center with second-hand armchairs and board games.

The intersection, at the heart of skid row, was known for crime and drug-dealing, and most mornings Bach arrived alone at 7, looking over her shoulder as she bent to unlock the metal gate.

Her days were a blizzard. She was lining up beds in detox, getting ID cards for clients, firing e-mails to the county brass, training staffers as they rotated quickly in and out, their nerves frayed by the work.

By mid-summer, the team had shepherded about 30 people into housing, but it was clear the goal of housing the 50 within six months would not be met. Many just couldn't be found. "We've definitely hit a wall," Bach said.

Stung by her inability to help Livingston, she brooded on whether she might have done more. The difference between success and failure, she reasoned, might lie in her ability to forge personal connections with men and women who survived in a realm of feral isolation.

No one seemed more remote, more trapped in the bleak cycles of the street, than No. 46 on the list, Cliff Butler, the Polish Man, who pedaled an old bike loaded with rags and a tub of wax.

His domain: the streets behind the fish markets on Central Avenue, where for years he slept on a bench and shined big rigs to buy crack. For long-haul truckers in search of drugs or prostitutes, he served as a conduit to L.A.'s underground.

To walk with Butler through downtown was to glimpse the streets as he learned to see them, a landscape of things to take, people to swindle. Crack cocaine had a way of focusing the attention; it supplied laser-like vision, even if it stripped away everything else.

Butler walked down Broadway toward 3rd Street, pointing: Over there was an unattended bag of aluminum cans someone had been foraging: \$1. Over there was a chained-up bicycle, with a seat that could be pried off: \$5. Parked at the curb was a delivery truck, at a busy hour when drivers were distracted: a possible bonanza.

Butler styled himself a Grand Spanker, a professional thief with myriad angles. He was convinced that his breed of criminal was an endangered species in a gentrifying downtown full of condos and security cameras and beefed-up police patrols.

By stroking egos, he learned to manipulate skid row's innumerable social workers and do-gooders. "You make them feel what they're trying to feel," he said.

If a church group showed up to hand out chickens, he'd induce a crack-head to make a scene that he could defuse. Suddenly God's people had a helper on the streets. Maybe he'd dispatch a junkie to run a scam on a trucker — pass off a weighted box as a computer, say — and then rush in to stop it. That's the Polish Man. You can trust him.

When he wanted something, Bach noticed, he became a stooped, shambling figure, and his voice went hoarse. Other times, his spine straightened a little and his voice cleared. He was prone to loud, up-close, hectoring monologues that frightened people, but Bach endured them patiently.

He was now living in the Sanborn Hotel, but she believed that if he had any hope of reclaiming his life, he had to steer clear of the big rigs and the fast money they promised. One day in June, she took him to the carwash on Main Street.

"Don't pay him for a week," she told the manager. "Just give him tips. If you like, hire him." She promised to give him \$10 a day of her own money until he started earning.

Butler lasted four days. He showed up for work without a shirt, took breaks on a whim, and then quit. He found it demeaning to work without wages, considering he could make \$150 on a big rig. "Slave labor," he called it. "The bottom line is, baby, I'm a professional."

Shortly afterward, he failed a drug test required by his parole, and Bach fought to line up an alternative to jail: a three-month stay in a center that treated patients for drug abuse and mental illness. As his check-in day loomed, he found himself in a reflective mood.

At first, he said, he thought of Project 50 as just another program to hustle, a way to get a roof over his head. But now he thought it might save him. "I ain't been Cliff in a long time. I been the Grand Spanker, man. I been the Polish Man," he said. "I been everything but me."

He owed his newfound hope, he said, to Miss Carrie's belief in him, and to the inspiring story she'd told him of her bipolar, high-functioning husband. "I'd lay down my life for that lady. That's like my mama," he said.

Before he left for treatment, he gave her a carved Indonesian candle-holder. He wanted to express how much she meant to him. But he also had a request. His shoulders slumped. His voice croaked: "Do you have a few bucks?"

She refused, wondering later: Had his gratitude been sincere or had he been trying to flatter her out of drug money? Of course, she figured, both might be true. It did not surprise her when he quit drug treatment early.

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By the middle of 2008, Bach's team was still looking for more than a dozen people from the original list. They continued the search as they passed over countless others in desperate straits.

To fill the 50 available rooms, the county chief executive's office finally gave orders to expand the search to the top 75 most vulnerable cases, and in late August, Bach led a series of predawn searches.

On the sidewalk at 6th and San Pedro, they found a man under a wheelchair, lying in a pool of vomit, his head wrapped in a ragged Winnie the Pooh blanket. On his wrist: a hospital band with his name, John Williams, indicating his recent release from the psych ward. They were looking for a John Williams.

Bach leaned over him with her notepad. "John? Hi, sweetie, I'm Carrie Bach."

Through his blanket, he muttered that he was a Vietnam vet, 66 years old, homeless 17 years, with a bad heart, bad lungs, seizures, headaches, paranoid schizophrenia, a 24-pill daily regimen.

"All my pains are 10," he said. "My head is 10. My breathing's 10. My headaches, 10."

An evil entity in his head told him to end his pain by throwing himself into traffic, he said. "I go, 'Man, why can't you leave me alone, 'cause Jesus love me.' "

Bach wrote it all down. But when he pulled aside his blanket, her hunch was confirmed. Wrong face. Wrong John Williams.

Moments later, Bach's walkie-talkie brought word: A few blocks away, they'd found a man who was on the list. She said goodbye to Williams, jumped into the county van and raced off. Troubled by leaving Williams behind, she gave his name to the Department of Veterans Affairs, hoping the VA might help.

Again and again, the searchers shone their lights into tents and asked for names. Again and again, they had to say, "Sorry, you're not on the list."

"How do I get on the list?"

The answer, pinned to the window of the project's office, was a sign to deter the increasingly common inquiry: "Selection of the 50 is closed."