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Outreach worker offers Indianapolis' homeless a helping hand a warm heart

Donnie Robinette has spent 14 years doing what he can to help Indianapolis' homeless

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It's obvious Terry Miles is resourceful. But it's also clear he needs help, and Donnie Robinette offers it to him, gently, unobtrusively.

"Terry, I'm going to bring a doctor around next week, OK?" Robinette said the other day while visiting Miles in the jury-rigged plywood shack along the White River that Miles calls home.

Miles has been homeless most of the past 15 years. Bearded and craggy, he is 54 but looks 64.

He said a doctor would be OK.

"Terry, is there anything else I can do for you?" Robinette asked.

No, nothing. The men shook hands and parted.

Robinette has had countless such exchanges with the city's homeless over the past 14 years. All part of the job -- and a tough one it is.

Robinette, 52, is one of roughly a dozen homeless- outreach workers in Indianapolis and the most senior. His job, short-term, is to keep homeless people alive. Long-term, he tries to persuade them to accept counseling, job training, housing, to coax them to "come in," as he says.

As the weather worsens, the need for proper shelter becomes pressing. But Robinette doesn't push it.

His exchange with Miles is typical of the delicate yet persistent negotiations that can span years.

"You can't judge," said Robinette, who works for the Homeless Initiative Program. "If I said, 'I'm here to save you,' they'd say, 'From what?' I like Terry. I've worked with him four years. He's not ready to come in."

Robinette's understanding of the homeless -- his street knowledge -- is said to be unsurpassed.

"Donnie knows all the nooks and crannies," said Melissa Burgess, who used to work with Robinette and now is a manager at Horizon House homeless day center.

"If I need to know something (about the homeless)," said Sgt. Bob Hipple, of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department's Downtown district, "I ask Donnie."

"Homeless" covers a range of people: from those out of work or underemployed who are "doubling up" temporarily with relatives, to the "chronically" homeless, mostly alcoholic, drug-addicted, mentally

ill or all three -- the ones who sleep in the nooks and crannies.

Robinette spends most of his time with the hard-cores. A count earlier this year by Indianapolis' Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention (CHIP) put the "chronically homeless" population at 216.

They've lived outdoors for years, stopping at shelters only long enough for an occasional meal, often getting tanked, sometimes panhandling, sometimes dying.

Robinette has found dead bodies more than once, the bodies of people he knows. Once, he'd persuaded a man known as Tree to get help. Tree, a fixture at the corner of Illinois and Washington streets, wanted one more weekend on the street. A firefighter convention was in town, and firefighters, he said, are generous to panhandlers.

Tree's body was found two days later in an alley.

"These are people you know, and it kind of stuns you," Robinette said, "and you're like, 'Damn!'"

"But you separate it. This is my job. I'm here to treat the living, not the dead."

Robinette knows the urgency of his mission, but he stays patient, his manner mellow and relaxed. His is a long, slow sell. Chronically homeless people are hard to approach.

"Many are treatment-resistant," said Neil Donovan, a former outreach worker and now executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Coalition for the Homeless. "They build defenses, and your job is to get into their lives."

Robinette doesn't push it. He hands out tins of Vienna sausages and blankets. He talks slowly and with a rural, Hoosier accent, sometimes saying "them" instead of "they" and "don't" for "doesn't."

Robinette knows rugged living. He grew up poor in the countryside near Martinsville. His family ate government cheese and used an outhouse into the 1970s.

He joined the Army after his sophomore year in high school and served for eight years. After his discharge, in 1982, he foundered. He drank hard, couldn't hold a job and for a time lived in a 1972 Cadillac Coupe DeVille. He married, had a child, divorced.

He has been sober since 1991 and now lives in a three-bedroom ranch on the city's Westside with a rent-paying roommate and six dogs, strays he has adopted. He drives a Buick Roadmaster that's as old as he is. He makes \$31,000 a year.

He plans to stay at it another six years, which would give him 20 years on the job and make him eligible for a pension.

He has not thought past that point. For fun, Robinette keeps a large fish tank and a terrarium with frogs. He builds miniature plastic models of World War II tanks and watches the History Channel.

On the job, Robinette drives a large van, white with "Homeless Initiative Program" on the side. Its ball joints are shot.

One day last week, he lurched the van up to a Southside picnic shelter at Garfield Park, where William Jacobs and Vaughn Barker, a couple of longtime street people, were sitting.

"I see fine now," Barker announced, referring to the recent cataract surgery he had, at Robinette's insistence, after he was hit by a car for the third time.

Then, Robinette turned to Jacobs, who goes by "Wino Willie." Robinette had tough news to share about Bobby Hollon, another street person who was Jacobs' best friend.

"Willie," he said, "I hate to tell you this: Bobby passed."

Jacobs' eyes widened. "Damn!" he said. "I dreamed about Bobby the other day. Where they going to show him at?"

Robinette told Jacobs about a citywide memorial service at Christ Church Cathedral on Monument Circle later this month for the homeless who've died -- 49 so far this year. (Last year, it was 38.)

Robinette lit a cigarette -- he smokes constantly, Camels. Jacobs asked for one. Robinette's pack was empty, but he offered Jacobs a puff, which Jacobs declined.

Robinette figures he sees about a dozen street people a day. During cold weather, he persuades a half-dozen a month to get help.

But new faces show up constantly, the newly homeless as well as transients from other cities and towns. CHIP's January 2009 count found nearly 100 more chronically homeless people than the previous year's count.

It's hard to measure an outreach worker's success.

"It's not just the number of engagements," said Donovan, the National Coalition for the Homeless director. "You come upon someone obviously troubled, it could be a good use of time to just sit with them for hours."

But some successes are evident. They're what sustain Robinette.

He has known Louis "Screwy Louie" Downs for a decade. Two years ago, he might have saved his life.

Robinette found Downs on some railroad tracks, in midseizure. Robinette called an ambulance and carried Downs to the nearest sidewalk. It was easy because Downs was rail-thin.

Last month, Downs agreed to get help, partly because his best friend, Robert Miller, was getting help. Miller, whose arrest record (entirely public intoxication-related) contains 38 pages, is another Robinette success story.

In October, after years of quiet suggestions, Robinette said to Miller: "Robert, if you stay on the streets, you won't last another winter."

Miller has now been sober 56 days, his longest dry spell since the 1980s. Downs is approaching one month sober and has put on 20 pounds.

Robinette visited the pair the other day in a Salvation Army detox facility.

"I'd have been on a slab somewhere," Miller said, "if it wasn't for Donnie."

Downs paused, thought a moment and smiled.

"Me, too."

