MEET THE SKID ROW HOUSING TRUST’S RESIDENT AMBASSADORS
2012

Interviews by John Arroyo. Audio available at: http://colabradio.mit.edu/where-is-home/

THERESA WINKLER
Theresa has been a resident of the Trust’s Abbey Apartments for four years. A former prostitute and drug addict, Theresa lived on the streets for over 25 years prior to finding comfort and compassion at the Abbey. Today Theresa is a prolific poet and a Resident Ambassador. She is proud to be clean, healthy, and in a very supportive relationship. Theresa credits the Trust’s permanent supportive housing model for saving her life.

“To the old parable, home is where the heart is. It is where my home is today because I lived on the streets for 25 years as a prostitute and a drug addict and I am now in my fifth year of recovery. I’ve never been happier in my life. I have a good solid relationship with a very good person and Skid Row Housing Trust has helped changed my life.”

“When I was living on the street I was living on a tent…I’ve seen downtown change quite a bit because at one time I remember there were tents everywhere – It isn’t like that now, today. I’ve tried to stay from my past and not bring up reoccurring pains.”

“I went to their office and registered for an opening and about 60 days later they called me and I got an interview. They ask you what your focus is, what are you trying to do, if you are looking to help yourself. For some people four walls are fine for them because they are still going to do what they are doing but I needed the four walls because I wanted to change my life and the four walls have changed my life because today I am sober and clean.”

“When I moved in to Skid Row Housing Trust, the first day I moved in I was on the elevator and someone I had know 20 years ago was on the elevator – he was a resident too. We hadn’t seen each other for 20 years.”

“My poetry consists of feelings. My feelings from the past and the feelings that I have today. Whatever I’m going through – whatever I’m dealing with that day.”

“The Ambassador Program gives me a chance to speak publicly because I want to be able to speak to young women about what these streets are about and try to discourage any young women from being curious, like I had become. I never want to see another young women on the street how I was. The Ambassador Program gives me a chance to speak publicly – learn how to speak – and be able to put my story out there.”

“Had I not been able to have someone who helped me and guided me – we need guidance sometimes because a lot of us have been on the street, I was on the street my whole life…Myself, what I feel about, as far as Skid Row Housing Trust, had I not gotten my first
unit the very first building I moved into, I probably would have returned back to drugs, I probably would have been back on the street living underneath a bush because that’s what I had known all my life. I had never believed that anyone cared and Skid Row Housing Trust, when they gave me a chance, I was able to give myself a chance. So Today I’m able to say I’m alive, and healthy, and happy.”

“We all live in different buildings, but most of us know each other... It’s really nice when our neighbors – like, ok my brother-in-law lives in one of the other buildings and he was having a problem with his housing. And he was like ‘But you’re an ambassador’ and I like ‘So what do you want me to do.’ And I thought about it and I said ‘Wait a minute’ and I was able to bring him to the people to solve his problem…I make a phone call to somebody at the main office ‘Excuse me, how do we deal with this,’ I mean, I don’t have an education so realistically I can’t tell you legally what it is that you’re going to do. But being that I’m an advocate or an ambassador for these people I can point them in the right direction. When you’re searching and looking and bumping in the wrong doors and no one has time to talk to you because they are too busy or because you’re homeless and they think you don’t care, but ‘Yes I do care’ and it’s nice to tell people off the street ‘Hey, check this out – why don’t you go to the main office and register for a housing unit’ and then to see them in a year – their whole life changed – because they got that unit. Because I was living under a bush as a prostitute and a drug addict. I’ve been clean for five years and I’m in a solid relationship. My whole life has become different by having a unit. But I don’t have a unit – I have a home.”

GREG WILLIAMS
Greg has lived at the Trust’s Boyd Hotel for over six years. He had been married and steadily employed until 2001, when he suffered a serious workplace injury that let him both disabled and homeless. Having grown up with two parents in the Compton and Carson communities of Los Angeles, Greg had never expected to be homeless. Nonetheless, Greg’s chronic homelessness left Greg with few options, especially in Riverside, California, a region that discouraged homeless activity. Greg soon learned that about a law that protected anyone staying in an emergency room. He spent the next three years living in the ER of the Riverside Community Hospital, cleaning-up in a public bathroom and sleeping upright in a chair. Greg made his way to Los Angeles after a New York-based friend informed him about L.A.’s Skid Row services and housing opportunities. He spent several weeks at the Weingart Center before finding the Skid Row Housing Trust.

“The meaning of home to me – and this has always been to me – is where I know I’m going to be where I’m not living temporarily because I’ve lived in a lot of temporary situations and nowhere did I feel that that was home. I’ve lived in shelters, on people’s couches, and on people’s floors, and it never felt like home. So I know the difference between just being somewhere and home. Home is where you feel comfortable. Home is somewhere if you have difficulties with things – like me for instance – before I got a home and I call it home
here – they call it housing but I call it more or less a home because I feel comfortable where I am now. Before I moved into the unit I am in – the Skid Row Housing unit I’m in which is the Boyd Hotel – I lived at the Weingart. The Weingart is a place where you can stay for two weels and they would encourage you to save the little money that you had to move out and move into a place. But even though it was very nice and the people were very nice – I didn’t feel it was home because I had a limited time to stay there. I didn’t really feel like it was home. Once again, I will elaborate, a home is somewhere you feel confident that you’re going to be there – permanently. And somewhere you will feel comfortable being there.”

“But I got to give them credit because no other place would take me in like they did. I had no other place that would take me in. The Weingart took me in, but that was limited and they let me know. Boyd there is no time. I am ready to go though. I am ready to move on. The thing about having a home – having a permanent residence – is that comfortableness and your self-esteem comes back…. When I got to the Boyd I still had a drug problem, but I got it under control immediately. Once I had the sense that I had a home now – that I was able to self-inventory – to take a look at myself because I was somewhere where I could relax and not be in fear of the moment, like you are when you are on the streets. It let me know that I could lick this thing – I could lick this drug thing and I have – I’ve been clean for almost two years now. I credit that with having a home, having a stable place.”

“You build a tent somewhere on the street and you’re very much considered an outcast and you’re treated that way… You’re really looked down on. I’ve been called everything by people when they see you walking down the street with your bags on your back, especially in Riverside because that’s that like a highly white and right wing, conservative area – I’ve been called everything from homeless, the “N” word, crackhead, ‘go somewhere and jump off a bridge and make everyone feel better.’ I mean I’ve been told all these things by just people passing by. You know, it’s not that easy pulling yourself up on your straps when you have to go to a job interview with a bunch of bags on your back and you didn’t have any place to shave or brush your teeth the night before, you know I’m sayin’ and you’re smelling pretty bad. I don’t too many people are going to hire you.”

“You can’t just pull yourself up by your straps if you are chronically homeless. You need a home – you don’t need a shelter for two weeks or thirty days, you need somewhere where you can say ‘I’m going to be here – so now let me map out my plan for my future, so that’s what a home is for me.’ By having a home I was able to go see doctors and find out that I do suffer from depression and a mild form of bi-polar…and I’ve been treated for that. That’s what a home is to me.”

“Now I’m going to tell you about the Ambassador program and what it’s done for me. Now and this is every human being. No human being really wants to feel they are living off of handouts. Even though a lot of people think that they are, a lot of people all they want is a hand out. Every human being I’ve ever met wants to feel that they have earned a part of what they’ve been given. And by me participating in the Ambassador program for the Skid Row Housing Trust has made me feel that I’m putting something back, for them giving me
this opportunity to have a home, a place to stay. And that is the main reason why I became an Ambassador. If I could just give my voice to the public and let them know how this is helping people, you know, how this is healing people’s self-esteem and saving people’s lives, if I could just get that word out, maybe I’ve given back something for all the help that they’ve given me, for giving me a home. So the Ambassador program is the number one thing – to this day I’ve been here for over six years at the Boyd – and to this date the Ambassador program has been the most important program for me. It’s helped give me some self-esteem back. And people (believe it or not – well in my hotel anyway) people respect the Ambassadors. Whenever they find out I’m an Ambassador they say “Oh, you’re Ambassador” and I say “Yeah, you know.” For some reason they respect us.”

**PAUL MITCHELL**

Paul is an artist who has resided at the Trust’s Olympia Hotel for about a year. Paul was homeless for over 20 years prior to being diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He divided his time between his native Seattle and Oakland before moving to Los Angeles. “I was on the streets, sometimes I lived behind buildings, sometimes I slept on the bus. Most of the time I slept on my truck. There was a pool at the park where I could get up early in the morning and take a shower and go to work. I did that for about five years, but I lived for like that (off and on) for about 20 years, not always understanding why I was always homeless and out of a job.”

“At the Olympia they have a cooking club, twice a month we get together and the group figures out what meal we want to prepare. And we have a thing called Coffee with Clyde (with our case manager) where we just get together and talk. And we have an art program also – just kind of an art group where we get together to do art. And we also get together every month to figure out what kind of programs we want to have, if you want to do art, gardening, or cooking.”

“I’m not on the street anymore and I’m doing better. I’ve been able to work on my art – since I was a housepainter and I always wanted to be an artist. When I was younger, I figured, well I could always draw but I couldn’t draw and make the paint stay inside the lines so by painting houses I was able to figure out how to use the paint… The Bold and the Beautiful bought five of my paintings and the Skid Row Housing Trust is going to use one of my paintings for their advertisement and different promotions.”

“When I first moved here it was like the Thunderdome (a reference to the athletic stadium after in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina). Fires, people with fires, fire cans, tent, lean-to’s, parking lots filled with people and tents. That was over twenty-some years ago. It’s still bad, but it’s better, it’s absolutely better.”

“I was working with her friend. But it’s timing. That’s where timing comes in. Where a person – you know, it’s a cycle. I want like you to get off the street and you want to get off
the street. Now we have to figure out the cycle of me helping you through the Housing Trust and you going out and doing it.”

“It all depends on the person and where they are on the cycle. Everyone was trying to help Tasha, but then no one would help her. Patyk was trying to help her six months before that. Her mother was trying to help her – came in from Michigan to help her. The timing was when Molly and I came in she was ready. She was like ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m so glad that you guys are here. I’m ready to do this.’ So it’s timing. It’s timing where the person is mentally and physically.”

“I would just like to say that if we could create – if all the housing projects could model the Skid Row Housing Trust’s model programs, tracking, and just care – that would go a long way – and being supple – that would go a long way in helping people get off the street. Because it’s just not a question about having a place, a shelter, a box for you to go in because you could create a box on the street. You have the services, the tracking, and the love and care is what it really takes. Without that, you’re in a box and it’s easy to go out of the box.”

“If you live on Skid Row, everybody knows about Skid Row Housing Trust and other places they have. But like I said, once you become chronically homeless a lot of people need you to grab their hand and say ‘Come with me’ because they are so far into being homeless and the things that come with that – the mentality and the hopelessness – that sometimes people need a helping hand and look, let me take you here – someone that they trust – to go down and apply for the Skid Row Housing Trust to put your name on a list or something. A lot of people need that. Everyone knows about it, but a lot of people feel hopeless.”

“You know what, they know about the services, but it’s where a person is in their life if like people have stuff on the street and they can’t get to the services or they don’t have the money or time where they may be involved with something else where are just not mentally listening and hearing what you’re saying. Because I know there were a lot of times where there are so many things you could do ‘Well you go over here than you go over here’ but you have your hands full of stuff and you don’t know where to go.”

“Just checking in with them for six months stabilized me… There are nuances and everyone has something different that they need…By the time I got my place I was ready, mentally ready because they were working with me.”

“Without them, I wouldn’t be here. And without their caring – I mean anybody can have a building, but if the structure isn’t about people and if the organization isn’t about people, than it’s just a building. It’s only about the rent. This is about people. It’s not just about the dollar sign.”

Audio transcription and recording by John Arroyo.