

PA Man Uses Pictures To Document Homelessness

By Erica Erwin

ERIE, Pa. (AP) – The snapshots tell the story of what it means to be Jerry Johnson.

It means standing in a line, day after day, waiting for volunteers to dole out food, because even if the food makes you sick, it's the only food there is to eat.

It means sleeping on the concrete slab outside the entrance of a West 10th Street building sometimes, huddled under an overhang that doesn't do much to keep the cold away.

It means relying on the charity of others.

The pictures, taken by Johnson over one week in October as part of a photography contest coordinated by the Upper Room, a local daytime homeless shelter, document what it means to be homeless in 2009.

Johnson, a 53-year-old Sandusky, Ohio, native who came to Erie nearly three decades ago in search of a job, was one of only a handful of men who participated, using a disposable camera provided by Van Tuil Photo & Imaging.

His goal was simple: to give people a glimpse into his life, and to break a few stereotypes in the process.

Jerry Johnson's life was tough from the start.

When both of his parents died before he was 4 years old, his maternal grandparents took him to live with them on their cotton farm in Collins, Miss. It was a strict Christian home, and the work was hard.

"I tried, but I didn't like it," Johnson said. "I never put in the effort to picking the amount of cotton (my grandfather) wanted. I was 5 years old, and he wanted me to pick 50 pounds of cotton."

At 14, he left for reasons he still doesn't like to talk about. Two years later, after a short stay back in Sandusky, he left again – hitchhiking, this time, bound for Los Angeles. He wanted to play drums.

"I was a musician, so I figured I could do something with my music," Johnson said. "But it didn't work out."

For the first time in his life, Johnson had no home. He slept where he could – warehouses, bus stops, abandoned houses – and ate whenever he could. He joined a gang.

"A gang made it easier," he said. "Having a family, we could look out for each other."

Johnson said he started using drugs. He stole to eat. When he got into a fight with someone who beat up a friend of his, he said, the judge gave him a choice: 10 years of jail or 4 years of military service.

Johnson chose the latter, joining the U.S. Marine Corps just before he turned 18. This time he'd stay, following the job around the world: Okinawa, Japan; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Korea.

"It was good," Johnson said. "I liked the job. I liked traveling. I knew where my meals were coming from. I knew where I'd be. I

knew I was safe."

A call to the Marine Corps public affairs office to confirm Johnson's service was not returned.

When he was discharged in 1977, he said, he found his oldest brother, who told him there were good jobs in Erie. He made the move in 1981. Not long after, he landed a job with GE Transportation Systems as a drill-press operator and his first apartment, a one-bedroom place on East 22nd Street.

He bought a bed, a couch and a television. "That made me feel good, like I'm well on my way," Johnson said.

But about six months later, Johnson said, he was laid off. He said he enrolled at Penn State Behrend to learn computer science, but medical issues forced him to drop out. Behrend officials could not confirm he was a student.

Over the next 20 years, he worked first at a plastics shop, then in commercial construction. In 2003, he started working for a temporary labor service.

He had a steady job and a place to go home to at night until about three months ago, when diabetes and heart issues got in the way of finding what little work could be had.

Johnson spent his days at the Upper Room, his nights at St. Patrick's Haven on East 12th Street. He learned which agencies served what meals and when.

"It was very depressing," Johnson said. "Very depressing. I didn't expect it to happen. I thought I was doing pretty good."

The photography contest was Tom Schlaudecker's idea.

Schlaudecker, looking for a way to draw attention to the plight of homeless people and garner a little publicity for his daytime homeless shelter, thought that the photos might shed a little light on an often invisible population.

"They have a world, too, and are interested in portraying it if they get the opportunity," said Schlaudecker, director of the Upper Room.

Fifteen people signed up for the contest; eight showed up to pick up their cameras. Five turned their cameras in for processing when the week was up.

The contest gave Johnson an outlet. Normally shy, he was less reserved behind the lens. He walked up to people on the street he recognized from the food lines at the Erie City Mission or from

nights spent at St. Patrick's and asked if they would mind a picture.

Some turned their heads. Others posed, hamming it up for the camera.

Some surprised him, like the well-dressed woman who lined up at the Emmaus food pantry for a bag of groceries. He said he learned later that her husband had left her and she'd recently lost her job.

"I'm trying to show that homelessness (doesn't just affect) one particular group," Johnson said. "People see a bum out there panhandling, but I wanted to show it wasn't just that."

Three judges from the Erie Photography Club gathered Oct. 30 to look over the pictures, more than 100 in all.

One showed a man lying on a bench inside the Perry Square gazebo, a church spire in the background. Another, a man in a red parka and jeans standing outside the Emmaus Soup Kitchen.

"People are under the impression, They're homeless, what talent can they have?" club President Patty Raydo said. "When we started looking at the photographs, you could see the artistic eye."

In the end, judges awarded first place to a photo of a man eating breakfast at the Upper Room, with a line of people behind him. It's been enlarged to an 11-inch-by-14-inch print that Schlaudecker hopes to display, with all the others, in an exhibit soon.

"I'm hoping people look at this picture and get a better understanding of how important it is for us to reach out to others as human beings," said Robert McIntyre, the Erie resident who took the winning picture and who was, until recently, homeless. "They all have dreams. They all have aspirations. Some just happen to take the wrong road, but they all want a better life."

Jerry Johnson is still working toward his better life.

He has a bed at an emergency homeless shelter on West 16th Street run by Community Shelter Services, but he's struggling to pay the \$21 weekly rent.

The meals served by the Erie City Mission and other social service agencies are welcome, he says, but the starch and cholesterol don't help his diabetes or his heart.

He's looking for work, but even the temporary day jobs aren't there anymore.

Still, every Sunday at 11 a.m.

he sits in a middle pew at St. Joseph Catholic Church, praying. He prays for peace, for health, for others to find God.

Johnson might not have won the photography contest, but he hopes to get his message out if and when Schlaudecker can arrange for an exhibit. Maybe he'll make a documentary about homelessness in Erie one day, to call attention to the plight of others like him.

PA Family Turns Ice Cream Into A Family Tradition

By Tim Stonesifer

EDGE GROVE, Pa. (AP) – You scream, I scream. Fourteen-month-old Alexis Smith, a stream of vanilla running down her chin, screams with glee.

We all scream for ice cream. And in the case of the five generations of the Smith family who gathered recently at the Edge Grove home of Earl "Tony" Smith, the screams of childish excitement and loud conversations came during their weekly "ice cream night" – their 1,350th, to be exact.

Smith, 71, started his tradition simply enough back in 1978, after he received a stainless-steel ice cream maker from his father. He thought he'd try his hand at making a gallon of vanilla. It was good.

So good, in fact, that some of Smith's seven siblings, all of whom live around Edge Grove, asked him if he'd make some more. "Maybe chocolate?" they suggested. "I just made it that first Thursday night and the next thing you know people were saying, 'we should do this again next week, and then next week,'" he says smiling, standing by the frosty machine that since then has produced more than 190 flavors on Thursday nights.

The ice cream machine – which sits in the corner of Smith's basement in a worn plas-

tic wash bin on a chipped bar stool – makes a gallon of ice cream per batch, using an electric motor. Smith explains vanilla is a simple mixture of milk, sugar, vanilla extract and pudding mix, and additional flavors are added from there.

Over 30 years, those added flavors have ranged from strawberry to watermelon, from Butterfinger to banana. The least successful was a neighbor's request – sauerkraut fudge – but there have been few failures over the years, Smith says. And plenty of successes.

On this night, Smith's great-niece, Jessica Reese, requests another batch of last week's Snickers and peanut butter cup ice cream.

Surrounded by a crowd of eager ice cream eaters, it's clear Smith spends time every week gathering ingredients and mixing ice cream for just such moments. After a stint in the military and time spent working "away from home" in Illinois, Smith says a weekly ice cream night is a way to

keep extended family in touch, and to strengthen the bonds that today's fast-paced lifestyle often strains.

It brings generations together, he says.

Like his sister, Joan – at the end of a polished wooden bar, a cup of vanilla in hand – who, the first Thursday of the month, makes a cake for those with a birthday that month. As the family grew, she stopped writing individual names on the cake, she says, opting instead for a piece of paper that lists them in loopy handwriting. This month's cake flavor is vanilla-pineapple. And the list has 10 names. A slow month, she says.

Ice cream night also brings out Smith's great-nephew, Kevin, who recently returned from Iraq. He's always loved to help people, Smith explains, and relates how this stubbled soldier years ago as a boy would sit on his great-uncle's lap and help give out ice cream. Kevin just smiles at the old story and eats another spoonful.

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