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Middle-Class Family Resorts to Homelessness in the Outdoors

Bob Costantini GLEN BURNIE, MD (April 26, 2009)

Warmer months often push some of Maryland's homeless out onto the streets. For many, it is a cycle repeated each year. But in the current recession, WYPR's Bob Costantini found some people who are roughing it, for the very first time.

It's hard to see from 8th Avenue, but a short walk into the woods...and you come upon four tents pitched in a spot that clearly has served as a local drinking hangout:

"Hello!?!?!"

Here, Mike Eisenhart and three others have set up their tents as they ride out tough economic times. Age 30, Eisenhart and the others found themselves out in the open, around Glen Burnie, with the end of Anne Arundel County's winter shelter program, which actually uses local churches:

"[Bob] How did you just happen to find this place?"

[Mike] Just exploration; Jason and I..."

Eisenhart says he's never had much trouble getting work before, but a second divorce a year ago, cost him his home on the Eastern Shore. To be close to his kids, he says he quit work in Pennsylvania and came back to Maryland:

"We chose to stay out here Christine and I did so we could bank our money enough to get a nice house for us to live in, rather than spend 80 to a hundred dollars-a-night for a hotel. We'll never get out of that; and we're currently buying a car and paying that off at the same time."

"[Mike] We do have the luxury of a cooler..."

[Christine] We have a luxury!? (laughs)

[Mike] Hey, it's a luxury to me."

Christine is Mike's 38-year-old fianc e, who bluntly says she ended up here via a lack of work. Last month, she landed a job as a medical assistant. She specifically did not tell her new employer she was homeless until after she got the job:

"I wish I could offer you a seat but everything's wet!"

Most people would move in with family members, but as you might imagine for Mike and Christine who didn't want her last name used the stories are complicated. Estranged from their families, Christine has to commute to Columbia what for the first week was a three hour bus extravaganza though now she gets a ride with another homeless person:

"[Bob] Do you consider yourself middle class?

[Christine] Yes, yes, I do.

[Bob] Still?

[Christine] At the moment, I don't. At the moment...I consider myself on a poverty level."

For his part, Mike Eisenhart walks around the land along 8th avenue as if he's the caretaker. He points out more tents secluded in the brush, where others have thrown in their lot:

"I'm going to get out of this; that's why I'm sitting here. I've got a couple prospects with Domino Sugar and a couple other companies one, Oceaneering International so hopefully, I'll be able to go back to work for them."

Forgive us our trespassing,,Mike hopes,,literally.

He and the others get canned goods from a food bank in downtown Glen Burnie, run out of the Emmaus Center, a store-front, daytime homeless services godsend.

A back room serves as a modified chapel, and meeting space, where each weekday, Amma Trish Gaffney, ordained as a priest in the Old Catholic faith, helps lead group bible study:

"Touch a hot stove, and Ow!" like you're angry, which is normal, then what purpose is that from God? We really struggle with that and to stay connected to him, even though we didn't like what just happened. I wonder if God built that tension into us."

Gaffney, and husband, Fr. Ed Jansen run the place privately, on a shoe string. Jansen notes the food bank is open to anyone who comes in:

"Today, what we're seeing is the middle-class people who have lost jobs, who have serious medical problems are coming to our doors seeking food because they can't afford to provide just the basic necessities for their homes."

Those are people, who, for the moment, still have a place to call home.

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