

Education offers homeless man a chance to make it

This is the second in a two-part series on Oakland County's growing number of homeless.

By Greg Kowaleki
staff writer

Quentin Caldwell's life has "bottomed out," but if he can make it through the next year, he's confident that "nothing can stop me."

As he speaks, it's 7 a.m., cold, drizzly and still dark. Still, Caldwell considers himself lucky. At least he has a warm place to sleep. But that, and an ambition to rebuild his future, is about all he has.

Caldwell was among 28 people who found shelter last week at the Birmingham Unitarian Church on Woodward and Lone Pine Road. Each week they move to a different location.

The church is part of the network of churches and one business that work with the South Oakland Shelter headquartered in Royal Oak. SOS provides sleeping space and meals to a small group of homeless people.

Those numbers have grown almost tenfold, since 1985-86, when SOS started keeping records:

- 1985-86 — 73 persons.
- 1986-87 — 224 persons.
- 1987-88 — 244 persons.
- 1988-89 — 414 persons.
- 1989-90 — 577 persons.
- 1990-91 — 683 persons.

CALDWELL, 46, doesn't fit the image of a typical homeless person. Although he doesn't have a job, he says he has a degree in janitorial services, and he is studying computer operations at the PSI Institute of Michigan in Southfield.

Here's his story:
"I was born in Washington, D.C. We moved to Jackson and then Detroit. My father was in the Navy. I hardly ever saw him. Every so often I hear about him from other members of the family. When I was 14 or 15 years old I left home."

Caldwell has a sister, but rarely talks to her.

After leaving home he drifted across the country, working at odd jobs in California, Texas, Indiana, Ohio, Mexico and Louisiana, where he worked on an oil rig.

Along the way he was married and had two children, now age 7 and 5. But he has no contact with them any-

more. Eventually he came back to Detroit and rented a room in a "cheap" hotel in the Cass Corridor in Detroit.

"CHEAP," HIE shrugged disgustedly. "It cost \$210 a month to live with cockroaches, rats and undesirable people," he said.

A few weeks ago he was ejected with all the other tenants. "Do I have anybody to turn to? No," he said.

But Caldwell isn't looking for pity. "It's been a rough life, but I chose to live it." Still he adds, "this is the worst I've ever been."

His world revolves around the shelters and the computer school, which offers him one thread of hope for a better life.

He studiously attends courses, usually staying after classes are over to study. "This is something I've always been interested in," he said.

Caldwell is midway through the six-month course, and PSI of Michigan director Paul Agosta said he has a good chance of getting a job.

"Eighty percent of our graduates get jobs," he said. They may be low-paying, entry-level positions, but



At PSI Institute in Southfield, Quentin Caldwell hopes for a brighter future by learning more computer skills.

they are jobs. "You have to crawl before you walk," he said.

PSI HAS ABOUT 160 day school and 90 night school students studying computer automation and data processing. The school, at Eight Mile Road near Evergreen, opened in 1986. It is part of a nationwide network of schools founded in 1959.

"This is an alternative to college, but we provide college credits," Agosta said. It often provides more.

Agosta has been pressed into service making sandwiches for student lunches.

The reality, he said, is that you can't teach someone who is hungry. Caldwell came to PSI though receiving General Assistance from the state. The recent GA cutbacks set into motion by Gov. John Engler have hit the school as well as Caldwell.

It may seem surprising, but Caldwell doesn't oppose all of the

GA cutbacks, just their sweeping nature.

He said the government should concentrate on training and educating people to help them move back into society.

"I believe in this system. But instead of dealing with the problem, they push it back down the road," he added.

"Educate them (the homeless). Train them for employment. Give the person a chance."

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