

# Opinion: The faces of homelessness in SLT

By Nicole Zaborsky

Allow us to introduce Stan and Karen. Stan is a 20-year resident of South Lake Tahoe, college educated, a chef, articulate, friendly, and Christian. Karen is a local, grew up in Tahoe, and has a college degree and a professional career.

These are two of the many faces of homelessness in South Lake Tahoe.

We met Stan recently and had a chat about his particular situation. After the economic down-turn, Stan was laid off which led to him becoming homeless. Last year Stan secured a job at a local motel as a maintenance worker. A job that despite the low pay came with free housing and an opportunity to rebuild his life. Sadly the winter of 2014-15 did not produce heavy snowfall and the local motel did not possess the means to keep Stan on staff resulting in him becoming homeless once again. Stan inspired us with his determination as he continues to be motivated to find work and is utilizing employment leads and contacts to find a job.

Karen's story is all too common within the homeless community. A medical catastrophe blindsided her. Following her health issue she lost her job and then her home. She currently lives in her car, and her health continues to decline. She told us that she is constantly on alert for her safety, which makes sleeping and rest a challenge.

Each homeless person has a unique story and includes people with college degrees, long-time locals, death of a primary income earner, and those with catastrophic medical conditions. Homelessness does not discriminate. Some formerly homeless locals include a lawyer, engineer, small business owner,

religious leader, and a high school student.

How do people become homeless? According to the Housing Assistance Council, homelessness is primarily the result of poverty and a lack of affordable housing. Ending homelessness in a community like South Lake Tahoe requires jobs that pay a living wage, adequate income supports for those who cannot work, affordable housing, access to healthcare, and reliable transportation.

The California median monthly rent is \$1,300. In order to afford this, an employee needs to make at least \$25 per hour, or \$52,000 per year (assuming they will spend no more than 30 percent of their income on rent). A worker who earns the minimum wage in California, \$9/hour, will have to work 111 hours per week to have an income high enough to afford this rent.

Homelessness is often considered an urban problem, but homelessness and its underlying causes are challenges that communities of every size face. Due to the fact that South Lake Tahoe has no homeless shelters our homeless live in their cars or campers, with relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing, and are employed.

The Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless will run a "warm room" for our homeless community throughout the 2015-16 assistance season and are accepting donations to fund its operation. Checks may be made payable to Live Violence Free (our fiscal sponsor), note "Warm Room" in the memo line, and mail donations to P.O. Box 13514, South Lake Tahoe, CA 96151.

We are also inviting volunteers for warm room setup and overnight staffing this season. Trainings will be Nov. 10th from 6-8:30pm and Nov. 18 from 10am-12:30pm. Email TahoeWarmRoom@gmail.com to register.

*Nicole Zaborsky is a member of the Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless.*