



From Homeless to Helping Others

Maura Kelly, Special to The Washington Post
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When a position for an AmeriCorps VISTA "outreach" volunteer at Miriam's Kitchen, a nonprofit breakfast program for the homeless, opened up three years ago, Greg Hill was an instant candidate. Everyone at Miriam's "thought the world of Greg and thought he would be fabulous," said Ruth Dickey, kitchen director. The outreach volunteer helps homeless people meet their immediate needs, from something as simple as providing someone with a toothbrush to finding services for those who are severely mentally ill.

Hill understood many of the problems of the homeless because he had been was one of them.

Three years ago, Hill was living at the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV), a shelter on Second Street NW between D and E streets. At that point, he had been homeless for about six years.

CCNV provided him with a bed he could call his own, limited health care, a shower and a place to store his belongings--everything but breakfast. A shelter four blocks away served hot morning meals.

Instead, he said, "I would walk 23 blocks to go to Miriam's Kitchen," at Western Presbyterian Church, at 24th Street and Virginia Avenue NW. Hill said he went the extra distance not for the food but for the mental nourishment at an after-breakfast writing workshop offered there. Hill said he had developed enthusiasm for poetry as an adolescent while attending a military school. "And in February of 1978," he said, "I [wrote] a flurry of poems, kind of . . . oh, about daily living, I guess. I was showing some of the stuff around and people liked it, so I decided one day I would write a book."

Years later, after getting involved in the workshop at Miriam's Kitchen, he began to think his old dream had a chance of becoming a reality. "I thought, 'Hey, maybe I can make something out of this,' " he said.

Hill first became homeless in 1989. He had been convicted of possession of eight dollars' worth of cocaine and spent 27 days in the D.C. jail, followed by 18 months in a halfway house. When he was released in 1989, he called his wife.

"She said, 'Don't come back here unless you have \$700 [for rent] with you,' " Hill recounted. He didn't have the money and so, he said, he was forced to live on the street. He would sometimes find employment, as a walking courier or on different construction sites, for example.

At one point, he was so eager to find a job that he moved to Centreville in 1995 after being promised a temporary position cleaning buses there. But he was not able to find a permanent job and, more often than not, he said, he didn't make enough or wasn't consistently responsible enough to maintain a place of his own.

He occasionally found a place where he could pay the rent and was accepted as a tenant. But, he explained, "I had some substance abuse issues at that time, not chronic, but enough that a weekend of partying would put me behind with the rent."

He moved to CCNV in 1995, and his luck started to change about April 1996. He had made a close friend, who also was staying at CCNV. She was suffering from a bipolar personality disorder. One day, that April, while they were spending an afternoon together, she suffered a depression episode so severe that Hill became worried about her safety and took her to George Washington University Hospital, where she was admitted.

The next day, when he went to the hospital to bring his friend her identification cards--required for admittance into many shelters--she had been transferred to another room and Hill had trouble finding her.

Hill knew it was important for her to have identification. It occurred to him that the people at Miriam's Kitchen, whom he had gotten to know and trust while attending the writers' workshop, might be able to help. Carol Teitlebaum, a former social worker at Miriam's Kitchen, located his friend's room number after a few phone calls. Hill's interest in his friend's welfare impressed the staff at the Kitchen, who saw how well-liked Hill was by the other people who ate there.

Dickey said Miriam's Kitchen has tried out three other homeless people as VISTA volunteers, but "Greg is really the only one that's worked out."

He has done more than simply fulfill the duties expected of him, Dickey said. Though there have been a number of changes in directors at Miriam's Kitchen over the past few years, "Greg has been steady the whole time," Dickey said. She emphasized his empathy, noting he draws on his own experience to help the people he encounters and helps defuse situations that seem ready to explode in violence.

"Another one of the things that's really exceptional about Greg is he has a really strong presence and a really impressive ability to convey to others his experience in a way that's really positive and uplifting," Dickey said. Hill has been asked by the National Coalition for the Homeless to speak at a number of its public programs, and he recently spoke at the Fannie Mae Help the Homeless walk-a-thon.

And Hill's job as a VISTA volunteer has taken him off the streets. He rents a bedroom/office at Western Presbyterian Church.

He also actively pursues a number of hobbies: he plays the flute and sings in a band called "New Harvest/Mu Street" that plays Tuesday nights at Food for Thought in Dupont Circle; makes stained-glass vases; draws; and participates in the Miriam Kitchen's Monday morning art workshop. He also has found the time to put together a manuscript of 35 poems, called "Lessons of Life," which he filed with the Library of Congress in January of 1997. He's at work on a second collection.

In one of his newer poems, "Homelessness is Not a Sin," he wrote "Homelessness has proven to be/A valuable lesson" and concludes:

Compassion is required

When you look into

A homeless person's face

If one finds it difficult to care

Just try living

In a homeless person's place.

Hill said his three-year term as a VISTA volunteer expires in August, so "I'm working on a resume [that I will] pass around to different outreach centers to see if I'm qualified for any of their employment opportunities." He said the National Alliance to End Homelessness and Miriam's Kitchen have been very supportive.

If he doesn't find work, will he be homeless again?

Hill said he feels confident Western Presbyterian will allow him to stay there while he saves up for a security deposit, if necessary.

Regardless of where he lands, Hill said, Miriam's Kitchen will always be there for him. "No matter where I go," he said, "if I get stranded, if I get back to Washington, D.C., there's a place for me to eat, a place for me to live, a place where I've been afforded the opportunity to help people."

Cutline: At a writing workshop at Miriam's Kitchen at Western Presbyterian Church, Andrew Applewhaite, top, reads a book of poetry and short stories. Above, Greg Hill, far left, Ted Murphree and Larry Mitchell work on their writing during the workshop. Hill credits the workshop with helping him overcome homelessness.