

UHC: What events in your life just kind of led into being homeless for you?

Margaret: I was 45 years old. My children were grown, and all of a sudden, I just realized that there was no way...I was working...but there was no way that I was really going to be able to keep things going. And a friend of mine actually came and said, "You know, Margaret, you've always felt like as long as you could work, you could make it. But you're not." And when my children left, all of a sudden, there was nobody else to have to deal with. And it was kind of like the pain of a lifetime all of a sudden just erupted, and I was in the middle of this big tornado that somehow I was supposed to associate the faces I could see with the problems that they created. And if I could get all that straight, then I'd understand what was really going on. And by the time that I fought with that for a while and realized there's no way that I by myself can figure this out, I was exhausted physically, mentally, spiritually, and every other way. And that's when the friend stepped in, and she said, "I have two places that I want you to try." The first homeless place that we went to said I didn't fit their criteria because I could talk in full sentences. I wasn't chemically dependent, and so I didn't fit the stereotypically homeless person that they were looking for. And the second place I went, they said, "Yeah, you know, we understand, and you need to think about it." It wasn't ready for occupancy yet. They had...they were getting ready to open the women's shelter and asked if I had somewhere I could stay until I did that because I knew I was losing everything. And so in...in March of 1993, I was taken in to the shelter. And I was the first woman that they actually took in there. But as I went in, I also became housemother. And so I started working with all of the other women that were there. And that was kind of the beginning of my own healing because as I'd say things to them, it was almost like the Lord was speaking and saying, "Yeah, I mean that for you, too." And I would kind of go, "What do you mean? All that stuff is a hundred years old. You know, I'm so over all that." But not being able to realize where the problem started or why, just knowing that life had totally been sort of a series of going in and out of one wilderness to another. And that was kind of the events that led up to it.

UHC: Could you give us a little bit of description about what happened when you were actually in the shelter? Like, being the only woman, the first woman?

Margaret: And within that first week, there were many because I really felt like that at first that if you couldn't keep a roof over your head, then there was something really bad wrong. You know, that anybody who is able bodied ought to be able to do that. And so admitting that was, like, that was as far down as I could go. In hindsight, probably that was really my first step out of the pit. The women that started coming in, as we would talk, I began to realize that there was a similarity between their stories and mine. And much of the histories are the same. And it doesn't mean that everybody's parents are terrible, horrible people, but there are things that go on in the American home. And home may not just be that safe place to grow up. And certain events happened. So living in the shelter was extremely eye opening. And I finally did decide that sharing my particular story with the girls would have been much like a mother confiding in her children, and you just don't do that. So I...there was a counselor that came, and I began working with her. And she probably was first person I ever spoke to that understood how I got where I was. And I began to realize that there were actual answers to, and there were actual

reasons why. I kept finding myself, though I would change circumstances, it was really more about the way I played the game. If you play football on a basketball court, you're never going to win. And there are different rules and regulations. And there were lots of rules and things that coming up in poverty, you just don't learn. And so there were different things that I had to learn. There were things I had to go back and relearn because different abuses that happened that periodically throughout my life had stopped certain growth patterns. You know, like a two year old, they're beginning to learn autonomy and how to trust being outside. Well, if you're violated at that early age, you never learn how to trust. You know, you never completely learn to be autonomous, or you withdraw so from everybody else that you maintain more in isolation than being autonomous, which some people would think it's kind of the same thing. But it totally isn't. And...and so, by working with the women, I began to be able to identify certain parts of issues that maybe I needed to talk with her about.

UHC: So, you think helping out these other women helped more with your own rehabilitation?

Margaret: Absolutely. I think any time you help someone, it works two ways. I think that the more that you interact with people, then the more you learn from the people that you work with, rather than sometimes even the other way around. Though I think they benefit from you being there and you having had some of the same experiences, I really believe that, for the most part, it was a two way street.

UHC: What was a typical day for you like whenever...before you got help? Did you have a routine or was it just kind of different every day?

Margaret: You got up...well, it was different, but very similar. We had to be up by six-thirty every morning and make sure that all of the women were up and make sure that they got their children ready for school, those that went to school. Those that didn't that their babies were up and dressed and that everybody had to be dressed by a certain time. And then we would all go downstairs and usually meet and see what else needed to be done. Every week there was a new chore list that whoever was in there. Some cleaned bathrooms. Some cleaned the day room. Some cleaned up the kitchen area. Everybody was responsible...it was actually, everybody had their own room kind of thing. The women did, and some of them, of course, had children in with them. And those who were single were by themselves. And so we would do that. When it was time for newsletters, everybody worked on those. If we had churches coming in to do tours, everybody got busy and made sure that everything was up to par. People took, had their day to wash clothes. So it wasn't that you could just go to the washer when you had dirty clothes. You had a day that was set aside that you washed. And so things were pretty regimented and pretty scheduled. But that was comforting in a way. There was...it took a lot of the guesswork out, and it made things flow pretty easy. Evenings the schedule kind of went down, and that's when...and all of the management people had gone home...it was in the evening where women got together. And of course, most women don't deal with any problem until after all their children are asleep, and the dishes are done. And then you begin to sit down, and then they'll face the realities of the situations they're in. So being there, really, I think, provided an education that you cannot get in school - you cannot get

out of books. You've got to see people who were sliding into even episodes of mental illness. You begin to watch the patterns that they might...and so you kind of knew where they were even before their counselor might. But it was during those times, during those talks, that the real problems and issues that led them there came out. And it was a time when you could really minister. And you could really let them know that they weren't alone in that, that there were millions of people. I had one little 17-year-old girl who told me she had been raped when she was three years old. And she said, "Well, that doesn't happen to white people." And I said, "Oh, baby, yes, it does." I said, "Yes, it does." And she looked at me, and she said, "Well, my daddy did that because he loved me." And I said, "That's not love. That's not love." And she looked at me, and she said, "How can you know?" And I said, "Because I know." And she just looked at me, and all of a sudden she goes, "You do, don't you?" And I said, "Yeah, I do know." You know, it wasn't my father, but, you know, I do know what happens, and I do know that. You know, and I was less than three years old probably the first time I was ever molested. And you know, but to be able to sit there and actually confront that, if there had been, if it had been any other time of day, she never would have said anything. So it was in those evening hours when things were...and then there were times that were really light and funny. Sometimes when we would start to get tired, especially for me, everything begins to sound like an old song. And so we'd bust out, and then sometimes we'd just start cutting up, and everybody'd be singing something that was goofy. And we could laugh. And that was healing. So I'd have to say that the shelter was really my first safe home. And it was the first place I really began to understand what home was all about.

UHC: Were there times before the shelter that you, like, in between becoming homeless and the shelter, was there any time that you had to sit on the street, or was it you pretty much you just went straight to a shelter?

Margaret: There were times all through my life when we moved a lot. There were times when we lived in substandard housing. There were times when I first was divorced that my husband and I...when he left, my children and I lived in a house that had electricity, but it had no plumbing. We piped water in from...with a pump from the creek. And we didn't use that to cook or to wash dishes with, but we used it to bathe and what have you. And, of course, having electricity, the hot water came in, so we could get a hot bath, but then when the creek dried up and the pump burned out, it burned the water heater as well. And someone reported us there because it didn't have a septic system. So we had an outhouse there that we used, and the children and I really got so we said, "You know, this is a lot like Little House on the Prairie, except we have lights." You know, and, so I think a lot of the trauma that could have come from that didn't because, you know, roughing it was something that we were kind of used to. There was a period of time when the only furniture we had was pieces of foam rubber that were laid on the floor. And then we were able to actually get into an apartment and acquire some furniture and begin to get back on our feet a little. But we were always like just one step ahead of everything crashing. And when they left, it was like I couldn't hold it together anymore.

UHC: Do you want to talk about, like, transitioning into the housing that you're in now? Like, how did that come about? Through Upstate?

Margaret: It was really, well it was really funny. I've never been in Upstate Homeless Coalition's program. I actually started here as a case manager after I secured housing of my own. But I really began to feel that if I was going to be able to tell homeless people that you can make it, that I had to leave the shelter. So I started looking around for apartments to rent and realized there was none. Because I worked at K-mart at the time, and there was nothing I could afford in the way of an apartment, not even a one bedroom. And so I thought, well, you know, maybe I need to look and see if I can get a used mobile home. Because mobile homes are, sometimes even new ones are less. I had no idea what my credit was because I was actually four years at the shelter, and I finished two years of college while I was in there. But I just decided okay Lord, if we're going to do this then I need to see what I can do. So the first place I went to, the first mobile home place, really pretty much just laughed and said, "Get out of here, honey. There's nothing in your price range that we have." You know, and the second place wasn't even very patronizing. They just pretty much said, "We'll never have anything like that." And the third place I went to, the guy said, "You know, I don't have anything right now." Then he goes, "Wait a minute." He said, "Yes, I do. We've had a person who's bought a new trailer that wants to use theirs as a down payment. And we probably can get you into that for what you have figured out that you can pay for. And it's already set up on a lot. Why don't you ahead and do a credit report?" And I thought, well, that'll shoot that because heaven only knows what my credit looks like now. And he called me the next day and said that I was approved. I went to church that Sunday, and I said...the pastor came to me, and he said, "Well, I hear you're going to, you know, be moving." And I said, "Yeah, now all I have to do is come up with \$1,000 down." Because that was a number I picked out of the air. And he said, "Oh, no, you don't have to worry about it. I've got part of it right now, and the other half I'll have by Tuesday. Come by and pick it up." And I went, "You have got to be kidding me, Lord." Because I didn't realize it could happen that fast. Last year in April, I paid off the mobile home. I have it...it's sitting on now an acre of ground that I own. And for the first time in my life, no one can come and say, "We're taking your house." And it was, it was extremely freeing because even though I've been back into the mainstream since '97, there was always that threat. And I always knew how close I was. Most Americans don't realize they're one to three paychecks away from being homeless. Most Americans don't know that, you know, one catastrophic illness or car accident or a lay-off or...or even just something so ridiculous as gas going too high to be able to keep affording the place you live in, that that can put you in that position. But if you've been homeless, you know how easy it can happen. And you live with that, that constant threat of knowing. But when I finally got the title to that, it was like, nobody can take this now. It can fall apart. You know, there's a lot of things that can happen. A storm can take it. But nothing I do is going to cause me to be homeless again. So now it's just take care of it and do what I can. And see what's the next step is. And I've worked [???], I started working with the Upstate Homeless Coalition right after I came out of the mission. I had actually been on a board where they were talking about consolidating the counties to try to get a grant. And actually got to sit in on some of planning meetings because they needed a person who was homeless or formerly homeless in on that board. And so actually, had a hand in being able to say what the case management piece, I felt needed to look like. And so for the last ten years at UHC, I have...I was hired when they first started, and I've been here ever since. And I'm getting ready to leave the case

management piece and work with the computer system only because there comes a point in time when you have to be willing to grow. You have to do the same things you tell the clients to do. You have to keep yourself challenged. You have to become everything that God intended you to be. And if you don't do that, then you're not reaching your maximum potential. And so hopefully, maybe there'll be some opportunities that I can do some advocacy on their part. But dealing with the everyday, there comes a point in time when you have to be able to walk away, and say, "I can now do more for you on the outside than being in there with you all the time. It just like when I left the mission. Had I not done that I couldn't tell people that they can walk away, but if I don't get out of case management, I'm not going to say there's really life beyond this homeless identity.

UHC: I know that nobody ever wants something like this to happen to them or ever want to be come homeless, but do you think that through this whole journey that without it you wouldn't have become the person you are today?

Margaret: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I don't think there's anything we walk through in life that if we're willing to glean the good out of it that we can't come out better for it. I think obstacles in themselves, trials and tests make you stronger. They...one of the things homelessness taught me was how little people really need. And it also helps you to realize what's really important. There was a time in my life that I didn't really realize that you could feel the sunrise at the same time that it was actually happening. I had a condition...they call it disassociation, but literally it was like part of me was out here and part back there. When that was healed, it was like amazing to know that you could feel something the very moment...the first time a friend smiled and I actually felt it in my heart instead of just seeing it on their face was amazing. I said, you know, I was like 45 years old when I became homeless, but I'm kind of now I'm almost 60, and it's still like I'm a 62 year old 5 year old. You know, or a 60 year old 5 year old because you know, there are so many things that are still new. I still love being able to see the sunrise. I still appreciate...I don't think you would have that if you...that was something you'd always had. And so I think, yeah. It brings a lot of pluses. Not that I ever think that...I never wish any child to go through what I've had to go through. I don't wish any adult to have to go through that, and one of my goals is to see if we can't slow this process or stop it. But I do believe that most of it depends on what are you going to do with it? You can't change the hand you're dealt in life. But you can decide how you're going to play the cards. And that makes all the difference. If you choose to look at it and say, "Okay, what was the good that came out of that?" Well, you know what being poor taught me? There's some things I just don't need. I don't have to have a name on the back of my pants to say I'm somebody. You know, if I've got nice clean britches to wear, I'm happy. You know? (She laughs.) And if they don't have holes in them, that's even better. You know? So I think there's a lot of things that we can appreciate, and I think there's a lot of things that sometimes we just take for granted that we need to stop and say, "You know, if it hadn't been for those places where I really had experienced a lack..." It was really funny because I love to paint, and I was doing this painting one time, and I thought I'd really...it was oil, and I thought, you know, that's not right. I got to change this. So I scraped everything off and kind of put it in a pile, and then as I was painting, I just...because I can use that later on...as I was painting, the picture came out. And I looked at it, and I thought, you know, it really speaks refreshing and filling and what-have-you. And then as I walked by it the

morning before I was to give to the person that it was going to, God said, "No, I want you to go by there and stand there again and look." And He said, "I want you to notice the dark color." He said, "That's what shows off the brilliance of every other color on this canvas, and that's what you call a mess." And I think that really spoke of life. That those things that we think are messes - our sins, or problems, that's the dark by which you will judge the brilliance of every other thing in your life.

UHC: Is there anything else that you want to tell us, or anything missing, or is there anything you want to ask us?

Margaret: I don't know. Do you have any questions?

UHC: I mean, you answered all our questions. I feel like, I don't know. What role did, like, you said your kids left, like were they...?

Margaret: They were grown. They were grown, and my seventeen-year-old daughter went to stay with an uncle for a while. And she lived there, and then...and she's back in the area now. She actually is in her thirties, and she's still, she's single, so we kind of share the mobile home because it's crazy to pay two light bills and two water bills. So we consolidate that way. My son is married and has three children. My oldest granddaughter just turned 14, and the middle daughter, granddaughter is 7. And then I have a three year old granddaughter by them. And they live in Spartanburg, so we're close, and life is good. And the one really great thing is since I see my grandchildren, they're very opinionated. They're very...they've very determined young women, and I see in them that they know it's okay for them have their own opinions, whether that agrees with Grandma or Daddy or Mommy or Aunt doesn't really matter. That their...it's okay for them to have an opinion of their own, and I think, you know what? The generation of victims broken is gone. And that's a wonderful feeling to know that they're not going to have to live through the same things that we all did.