

UHC: Start out by, just tell us a little bit about how you came to be homeless.

Venus: Okay, okay. Well, for me, basically, my childhood years were very normal. I had two loving parents. I grew up in a very nice neighborhood. I attended the public schools. I went off to college. I had aspirations of becoming an attorney. So, my life was normal throughout my early years, teenage years. Things started to change for me, I would say, probably mentally and emotionally at the age of 17. It was my sophomore year in college, and my brother at the time was 23 years old. He committed suicide. And that was a traumatic event in my life that kind of left me empty and not knowing how to deal with my emotions at such an early age. So, I learned early how to self-medicate just to be able to function, you know. So, then I started drinking and smoking marijuana and, you know, just doing anything to fill that, you know, because of the pain. The emotional trauma that I was going through was just a lot, you know. So, that's where it started. But I did, you know, [???] graduate from college. Also during my college years, I was a victim of a date rape. So, then things were a lot different than they are now, and I was pretty much, you know, treated like a perpetrator versus the victim. So, you know, I, I really lost interest in the legal system after being victimized by, you know, something that I very much wanted to be a part of. And that was lost. So, having that experience that just cost me to lose the aspirations that I originally had. So, then I became a person with no focus and no dream, you know. But anyway, again, I finished school. Came back home. Got back into, you know, the workforce, and started working in corporate America, not anything in my field.

Venus: But, anyway, that's when I pretty much lost interest in my career and pursuing a law career after feeling like the legal system really didn't care about people. And that's always been my heart's desire is to make a difference in someone's life and to be able to work with people and, you know, to do positive things. And I thought through the legal system, I would be able to do that. So, that was all part of my aspiration. But, anyway, when I graduated, I went to work in corporate America. Got married and thought I was pursuing the typical American dream and actually married a very abusive man. And, again, that just kind of compounded all of these emotional traumas that I'd never really dealt with, you know. Again, through all of this, I continued to self-medicate, but it was done in a way where I could still function, you know. So even though I was smoking marijuana and drinking, I was still able to work and maintain for a while. And then after being in this abusive marriage for five years, it's like everything started to take its toll at one time. And, once I decided to walk away from that marriage, I decided to walk away from everything, and I walked away hopeless. And that's just to cut a long story short. Bottom line: that's how I felt. I felt like life wasn't worth living. Even though I had two loving parents still there, I was ashamed. You know, I was ashamed of the choices that I had made. I was just not able to live life on life's terms, so to speak, just not able to deal with the life. So, eventually I...my drug use escalated, and it just escalated to the point that I was completely dependent. So, every waking moment was having to have something to alter the way that I felt. And, of course, a life of drug addiction just pretty much leads you to every nightmare of a situation that you could possibly think of, you know. Of course, I had no idea that I would end up homeless. And I do have to say that my homelessness was a direct result of the shame and guilt of the addiction because I stayed away from my family. I was too ashamed to be around them. It's not that I...that they wouldn't give me a place to live. I was just too ashamed, you know. And so my life

as a drug addict, you know, began, and I stayed in the horrors of addiction for about 8 years. Now, in the interim, I would go to short-term treatment programs but return to the same lifestyle, the same friends, the same old playgrounds. And, therefore, it was just a matter of time before I ended up in that same addicted cycle again. When I finally got so sick and tired of the detriment of my life and also had some other medical issues going on because I wasn't taking care of myself health wise. So I just had a lot of things going on where I felt like I just might as well commit suicide or try one more time to get help, and that's what I did. And actually ended up in a long-term treatment facility for homeless women that was partially funded by the Upstate Homeless Coalition. I had no idea that years later I would be working for them. But that's pretty much how I ended up in a homeless situation. It was a direct result of a drug addiction, but it was also what I found out once I got in the process of recovery, is that I suffer from severe depression. And because I kept self-medicating, I did not realize that that problem existed because I kept altering the way that I felt with street drugs. And so once I was able to medically get the help that I needed, then I was able to, you know, deal with the depression where it wasn't so overwhelming for me, and where I could, you know, function as a normal human being. I stayed in the treatment transitional program for 13 months, and, of course, when I left there, I had a job again in corporate America. Was able to transition into my own place and just had developed a whole new lifestyle for myself again. I can't say it was the way it used to be before the drugs. It was actually better, you know. Because I had a whole different outlook on life, and then the, the experiences that I went through, you know, were so traumatic that...I've always had a compassion for people, but I really had even more of a compassion and understanding because I had lived it. Of people that suffer from mental illness, that suffer from addictions, you know, I really knew what it was like, you know, because I was no longer that person in the nice neighborhood, and on the outside, I actually became on the inside of that problem that we feed. But I went back to the recovery house and volunteered my services, and then I actually a year later went to work part time. And eventually became the program director of that facility and, you know, did very well being able to work with the women and just seeing tremendous progress, which was just a blessing. You know, it's always a good thing when you see a blessing come out of something as horrible as addiction. And it was during my employment there that I actually became affiliated with the Upstate Homeless Coalition, and some of the staff, and the Greenville Mental Health staff. You know, working with them on a professional level and on a personal level. Working at the mental health center, I began to know people, and I heard about this particular opportunity when they were in the process of building this safe haven. And I did continue my education once I made the decision that I wanted to go into human services. I felt like my suffering and addiction would not be in vain if I could do something to help somebody else to come out. And so, I went back to school and took a lot of courses on addiction and recovery and dual diagnosis and, you know, just the whole nine yards. I'm still in the process of becoming certified as an addictions counselor. So I hope to have accomplished that by the spring, and, but I've worked in that capacity. I've already been working in that capacity now for about five years. And I absolutely love my job here. This facility opened October of last year [2006], and I watched 15 people come in broken, with nothing, no hope, you know, just nothing. Just the clothes, the dirty clothes on their backs. And to see the tremendous progress that has been made in one year has just been awesome, you know. If I don't do

anything else in my career, this experience alone I think outweighs everything that I've done. Just being a part of this transformation and realizing that the most important component of anyone's healing is the love of another human being. You know that if you're able to share love and compassion with someone, it makes all the difference in the world. So, I've watched my dreams unfold in a way that I never anticipated. You know, from the little girl who, from animals to, to sad children, I would pick up. You know, I still do that. Not the animal part, my husband won't let me. But, you know, I've watched been able to see my dreams fulfilled in a different way. It was an odd way of getting there. Homelessness was a part of that. But I realize now that there was an ultimate goal for me to reach. And I don't think I've reached the peak of all that my God has intended for me to do. But I know that I'm in the process.

UHC: Can you tell me a little bit about a typical day as a homeless person and what that was like for you?

Venus: A typical day for a homeless person is...it's just, you're aimlessly wandering, you know? There's no destination. There's no place to go. You don't know where your next meal is coming from. You don't know what you're going to do when the night falls, and it's cold. Or, you know, you...it just, if you can just picture being aimless and wandering, you know. That's what a typical day is like for a homeless person. Now, unlike some people that have been chronically homeless for years and years and years, I do have to say that my primary problem was my addiction. And so the addiction actually led to my homelessness, and, you know, I guess one problem was just as bad as the other. But my main focus was not on getting shelter; it was on getting my next fix. And so, once that part was met, it didn't matter if I fell asleep in a place not fit for habitation, you know. Because my addiction had grown to the point that it was more about satisfying the craving, you know, for the next high.

UHC: How did you eventually, like, I mean, come to the, you said you came to the homeless...Upstate Homeless Coalition for treatment? How did you find that?

Venus: Just out of desperation, out of desperation, I actually went to the Vocational Rehabilitation Center and went to a treatment facility called Holmesview, and that treatment facility, the counselor there actually said that there was no way that I was going to be able to rebuild my life without having long term treatment. And that's when I went to this place called Rosewood. And Rosewood is partially funded by the Upstate Homeless Coalition. And so that was a treatment program, a residential treatment program for women who are homeless, you know, with a, with a substance abuse problem.

UHC: So, I know that you said, you know, finding shelter and finding food was not your primary interest when you were homeless, but obviously you were homeless for a number of months. You had to find food somewhere. So, how, how did you go about finding food?

Venus: Yeah, you're right. There comes a time when the body has to have it whether you want it or not. You have to have it in order to keep going. And there were times of

desperation that I would go to family members or, you know, that I would call my family and, you know, tell them that I needed something to eat. And...and there were those moments when I would go more or less to recuperate, I guess you can say, with my family and rest and eat. But then again that was only temporarily that I could do that. And again, it was only out of desperation. So you can know that I visited the soup kitchen, the churches, you know, that provided free meals. And sometimes, and I'm just, I'm a person of faith, and I realize that God placed people in my life, you know. So, there was a little lady that I knew that she lived pretty much on the, the two mile radius, you know, of where I went on a daily basis was probably actually less than two miles, you know. Because I was either in this particular area of a two mile radius or less. And she would always feed us, you know. She didn't have children. She was a Christian lady, and she would see us, and she would always have food for us. So there was a certain time of the day that we knew that we could go there and that she would give us food and prayer and, you know, unconditional love. And so, that was also a place, you know, that I did receive some of the means that I needed. I also frequented shelters, you know. When it's really cold and you're really tired, you know, you go to the shelter. But, you know, when you're dealing with the disease of addiction, your whole life is centered around using. So, you know, that only lasts for a few days, and as soon as you're rested up and your energy level is back up, then, you know, it's back to the races again.

UHC: I know you said this earlier. How long were you actually homeless?

Venus: I'm going to say probably the last two to three years of my addiction. And I lived in active addiction on and off for eight years.

UHC: And where were you, like, what city were you in?

Venus: I was here in Greenville. Pretty much in this same area.

UHC: Oh, really?

Venus: Uh-hmm.

UHC: That's amazing that you're here, though, now.

Venus: It's very ironic that I'm right here in the heart of, you know, where I used and where I wandered the streets aimlessly. And it's still on any given day that I will get really, really filled, you know, just passing places, and especially the church right up the street, you know, was one of the places that a lot of the meals. And had no earthly idea that, you know, seven years later because I now have eight years and several months of recovery that I would be where I am right now, you know. Could not even fathom the idea that I would even be able to overcome addiction, let alone have a relatively normal life again.

UHC: I know you said at times, like, you had a lot of different places that helped you out, but I was wondering if you had [???] who was most helpful and [???] who most helped you in your transition out of homelessness?

Venus: I'm going to have to say that would be my father because my father, my father always gave me unconditional love. Like I said earlier, it was my shame and guilt that I didn't want him to see me that way. I'm his only daughter that he had very high hopes and dreams for. So, living the life of a derelict and an addict and watching the pain in his eyes was just too much for me to bear. But he was always there for me. And I can't say that my mother didn't love me, but she was more of a tough love kind of person, you know. It's like, she wasn't going to enable me. She knew my potential, and, you know, her hopes was that one day I would come to my senses. But she would not enable me in the condition that was in. But my father on the other hand, if he saw me, he would pick me up. He would open his doors to me even when people told him that he shouldn't. So, he was always there for me, and he was always looking for some avenue for someone to provide me help. So, you know, on any given day someone may see me and pull over and start telling me about programs, or, you know. Something because some...you know, he told a lot of people about his daughter, you know. And...and so, a lot of people would come my way. But I would say that my father is the one that he loved me no matter what, and he was always there. And he didn't give up on me. He never gave up on me.

UHC: Did he ask you to come live with him or...?

Venus: Yes. I couldn't. Yeah, and that's what I was saying. It was just the shame and the guilt, you know. Because I knew that my lifestyle would keep me more on the streets than it would at home, you know. And, you know, there are some addicts that live that way, and, but I was just one that couldn't stand to see the pain in his eyes. You know, that was just something else for me to use over. You know, to try to cover up

UHC: Well, we have a question here. Where do you see yourself in five years? But I guess you're already, you're married, do you have children?

Venus: I don't have children. I am working to adopt. I do still have a vision, you know. And that vision is to have a center of my own. I would like to have a center for women. There's just a great need and not enough resources here in Greenville. Greenville is a large city that's growing, and addiction is a problem that is growing. And you see it more now in your age people, you know. For me, I always say I was a late bloomer, you know. I was actually in my early thirties before I entered into addiction, you know. So, I did some things with my life before, but there are a lot of young people out here now that never even get the chance to do anything with their lives before they embark upon addiction, and, you know, they lose all. So, my vision is to be able to open a center. My focus is on women because there seems to be more programs available for men actually than there are for women. And I've got something that I'm working through. I would like to one day go into private counseling. I have a gift of being able to reach the most difficult of people, and that's because I understand, you know. I been there. I understand what they're feeling. I understand their anger. I understand all of those layers underneath that. That thing that some people don't understand, but I guess that I can identify.

UHC: I'm sure you can relate more.

Venus: Right.

UHC: And even make people feel more comfortable.

Venus: Yes. The identification means a lot, you know. It's much easier even for myself to talk with people that you know that they identify where you've been and what your struggles have been.

UHC: You just said that there tend to be more stuff for men than for women. Do you have any kind of idea why that would be?

Venus: No, no more than the old tale that women are much harder to deal with, which is an old tale. Actually, I've found working with women to be a wonderful experience, you know. But I don't know why that is. Rosewood was actually the only long-term treatment facility with women, and there's one other place in Greenville for women and children. And Rosewood was only a ten-bed facility at the time that I was there. And, there's, of course, Miracle Hill Ministries. They have a program for men and for women. That is a faith-based program. So, but they only, that program is only, I think it's for 14 women. So when you look at...when I worked at Rosewood, we had a total of anywhere probably from four to six hundred inquiries a year. And you have these places with only the capacity to serve maybe less than 100 a year collectively. Then there is such a great need, you know, for more places. And there's such a high rate of people...of relapse that, you know, places out of state now, you know, it's just that it's harder. It's getting harder and harder for people to receive treatment. Because a lot of people don't get it the first time or the second time or the third time, you know. And so, it's even harder, and I think residential long-term programs allow people the opportunity to work on those...on the issues, the core issues, you know. You can separate a person from the drugs for a while and that they're clean, but if you don't deal with the issues as to why they were getting high to begin with, then, you know, it's just eventually they'll return. And so that's what these long-term places offer is a safe haven to be able to work on those core-issues, you know, just like the people here. Even though the people here, their disability has contributed a lot to their chronically homelessness. And one of those disabilities for most of these people is also substance abuse. So they, they are coupled, with not only a mental illness, but substance abuse or a physical disability and substance abuse. You know, and it's kind of that thing of which comes first? You know, the chicken or the egg. You know, you don't know which one comes first. But, you know, people are trying to medicate themselves to feel normal.

UHC: How many people are actually here?

Venus: 15. And this is permanent housing, which means that this is a permanent solution. So they're not here for a year, and then you have to find someplace else for them to go. The Safe Haven is actually the first of its kind in the state of South Carolina. And it was the dream of quite a few people that came together and made it happen. And it's just, it's just great to see the outcome, you know. And the grandiosity of some of the people now who couldn't look at you in the face. It's just remarkable.

UHC: What advice do you give to people that are here and going through these experiences that you went through? I mean, how do you connect with those people?

Venus: That they never have to go back again, you know - that you never have to return to that way of life again. It is not normal. Believe it or not, some people live in chaos for so long that that's what they find to be normal, and they actually, and we've experienced that here, you know. They actually cannot adapt to a loving, caring, and nurturing environment because they never had it. They never had it. And basically here, we're just saying, you know, allow us to love you and help you to regain your self-esteem, to regain your stability. You know, just allow us to help you do that. And Greenville Mental Health plays a very, very huge role in these folks getting the help that they need in order to live normal lives, you know - what we consider normal, you know. So, and it's worked. It's really worked, you know, because they treat this like it's their home. As you can see, it's very clean to be a year old, to have 15 people in and out all day, every day. You know, just imagine a house with 15 kids? You know, that...you know, really, it's because they take pride in their home. They keep their individual apartments very clean, you know, because one of the things that we really instilled is that this is yours, you know. It's what you're going to make of it, you know. Value it and, you know, treat it, treat it with, you know, dignity and respect. And that's what they've been doing. That's what we've been telling them early on. And we just remind them every day how special they are, and that was important to me in my early recovery, to be reminded every day of how special I am. Because I didn't believe that I was special anymore. I didn't believe that I could ever return to the workforce that I had done too much. It was just too much degradation that I would never be able to look at people, you know, in the eye, let alone talk about myself openly on a recorder. You know, it's just I never thought that those things would be possible. But that's what love and acceptance do, you know, for people who are broken for whatever reason.

UHC: Is there anything else that you think that we might have left out or we need to know?

Venus: No, it's just that homeless people are people like you and I. Nobody, you know, you can see the commercial. Nobody says, "I want to be a drug addict when I grow up." You know. Some people are born with the disease of addiction. I believe that I was because of family history. Some people are born with mental illness because of family history. That does not make them people who are not able to adapt to life on life terms. It's just that they need that special care, you know. And they need those special people in their lives to understand what they're going through and to help make a difference. And we see more services now than we've ever seen because people are beginning to realize that. But I'm forty...I'll be 47 years old tomorrow and...

UHC: Happy birthday.

Venus: Thank you. And you know, before, you know, when I was a little girl growing up, it was just, it was a horrible thing to have a mental illness or to be an addict, you know. And so, I guess I would just want to say that they're people like you and I. I mean, I was once a young, ambitious college girl. Had no idea that I would end up in abandoned houses, you know what I'm saying? Just never imagined. You know, so you never know what's going to happen to you in life, you know. You never know what's going to happen,

and sometimes our circumstances lead us into situations that we really didn't want to be, we really didn't ask to be, you know.

UHC: One more quick question about this place. I know you had said it was permanent residence, but what is...where do y'all see these people in...the people who live here, in the next five years, or ten years?

Venus: Actually, some of these people will always need this type of structure. We have staff here 24 hours a day. It's not so much that they cannot care for themselves. They just don't do well living alone. And even though they live alone - they have individual apartments - they're not alone because they have each other, and they also have an authority figure here all the time. That...that helps them to feel safe. Some of them never had that, and that's real important to their stability. Others case management, life skill education, these type of services are being offered here through other agencies. Some of them are, most of them are being awarded Section 8, which means that they can actually go on to a different permanent living situation from here. So, we're definitely looking into their future and trying to equip them for this not to be the last stop. You know, we would like to see them with a little white house and a picket fence, you know, and the rocking chair and the lemonade and, you know, the American Dream of growing old and having a place to call, you know, to call their own. And this is, this is letting them know that, hey, I can do it. You know, they cook for themselves. They clean, you know. They take care of themselves. They're keeping their doctor's appointments. You know what I'm saying? So, they actually are doing things that some of them, I don't think, ever thought they would or could, you know. So, I see even a bigger picture for quite a few of them of being able to move out on their own, you know, into permanent housing. So their Section 8 is going to allow them to do that. Because with them being, this is, you know you have to be disabled to be in this facility, so with the fixed income that they're on, there's very little that they can do. You know, you're talking about living for under \$800 a month, you know. And, you know, now I spend probably close to 2 [hundred] on gas, you know. So, and then food and everything, their utilities and all of that. So the Section 8 will help them to be able to have a decent, affordable living if they decide to move beyond this type of structure.