

THE  
**Tidings**  
*Southern California's Catholic Weekly*

## 'Harry, if I don't get a place to live this winter, I'm going to die'

An unlikely friendship forms between a businessman and a homeless man at St. Brendan Church.

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Los Angeles

Oct. 3, 2008

Harry has lived in Hancock Park since 1978. Paul grew up in the old mid-Wilshire neighborhood of mini-mansions, and returned years later to its safe streets to sleep.



The two met after a Sunday evening Mass in 2002 at St. Brendan Church. Being winter, it was nearly dark. The semi-retired businessman, a consultant for start-up companies, was going out the door when he spotted the homeless man he'd seen around the Hancock Park church. His face and hands were caked with the dirt and grime of the street. He didn't have a single possession, not even a shopping cart. His body was bent in despair, with his eyes focused morosely on the ground.

"Hi, there. I'm Harry Langdon."

The middle-aged man barely glanced up. But with Harry's prodding, they managed to exchange a few words before the churchgoer said, "Well, I'll see you around."

During the next couple weeks, they did run into each other at St. Brendan's, mostly at weekday Masses. And one morning after the liturgy, Harry decided to take their fledgling relationship to another level. He said, "Well, let's go have some coffee?" with his best Shenandoah Valley, Virginia grin.

At first they couldn't really carry on any kind of sustained conversation. Paul would go off on tangents when Harry would make any kind of suggestion. He'd say, "We can't do that 'cause we don't have the permission. You've got to get the permission to do that."

There were many things the white-haired businessman simply couldn't make sense of. Paul would talk about growing up in the area, of being an altar boy when Masses were still said in Latin. But his words and thoughts were as scattered as spilled pick-up sticks. Sometimes what he said added up, sometimes it didn't.

But over months, Harry learned that the 50-year-old man had been living on the street for about 15 years, not only in Los Angeles but also San Diego, with the dual demons of alcohol and drugs. From time to time, he heard "noises." And his family was pretty much out of the picture.

Paul had come from a fairly well-to-do family; his father had been a television executive and his mother had drowned in a swimming pool accident in Hawaii when he was 13. He was raised in Hancock Park, attending Precious Blood and St. Brendan parochial schools, then Daniel Murphy High School, graduating from a private Jesuit high school in northern California, and studying art at a Southland college.

There were periods when Paul simply disappeared, but would show up again suddenly at Mass at St. Brendan's. Harry would also find him sleeping uncovered on the sidewalk of Larchmont Boulevard with no pillow or blanket. One day the consultant couldn't help himself, blurting out: "You know, you can't be living like this."

Paul, going off again on one of his tangents, said in a roundabout way that he was doing okay. But before the end of that year, he changed his mind and confided, "Harry, if I don't get a place to live this winter, I'm going to die."

#### Lamp Community

That began a lengthy education and effort to help his down-and-out buddy. The consultant searched the Internet for homeless shelters, making phone call after phone call. Most places had no vacancies, and the few that did wouldn't even consider taking a homeless person with "mental issues."

So Paul spent the winter of 2004 again on the cold concrete. Harry would bring him blankets, but the next night they'd be long gone.

Doggedly, with one contact occasionally leading to another, the businessman had the good fortune of hooking up with Casey Horan, the newly named executive director of the Lamp Community.

Based on L.A.'s infamous skid row, Lamp specifically targeted the mentally ill population neglected by others. Over the years, it became nationally recognized for providing immediate housing and lifelong "wrap-around" support services to homeless men and women with severe mental illness. Lamp's operating premise was basically that mentally ill people are far more likely to succeed in treatment, as well as other areas of their lives, when they have a stable home.

That's exactly what the organization has done for Paul.

In November 2005, Horan did some one-on-one outreach of her own, driving to meet him after a weekday Mass at St. Brendan's. Using a mix of street smarts and personal skills, the young woman managed to coax him into coming down to their weathered brown brick building on Crocker Street "just to have a cup of coffee."

Paul has never left the embracing community. And for nearly a year now, he's had his own place at Lamp's La Primavera Apartments, which offer permanent supportive housing units. But he still "car pools" to church, and goes shopping and on other outings with Harry.

For his part, Harry says the relationship has humbled him. He knows a lot of retired people in Hancock Park who like to talk about their latest golfing vacation to Scotland and \$200 dinners at toney Westside restaurants. He usually just sits and listens, but often feels like asking them why don't they put their money where it'll really do some good.

"We're self-centered as a society and don't really look at many of these people like Paul who can't help where they are," he says. "Yes, some of them could have at one point, but they can't now. And for us not to take care of them in some way - we don't have to put them up in the Beverly Hills Hotel - is very discouraging.

"With a person like Paul, you can't really abandon him," he adds, shaking his head. "And I don't even want to. I mean, at this point I'm not doing this out of obligation. Paul is a friend, but it's a different kind of friendship. I feel a closeness to him. It's almost like a big brother taking care of a little brother, making sure that he doesn't get into trouble. I don't want to see bad things happen to him."

Down & out in L.A.

Sitting outside at a Wilshire Boulevard coffee house under a black umbrella with Harry, Paul admits he didn't want to move into some shelter downtown. He had been "jumped" and robbed by gang members before and knew there would be lots more of them preying on skid row residents.

"I didn't like the idea of living down there," Paul, wearing a white shirt and faded jeans, declares between bites of his Hot Cross bun. "It's unsafe. I'm afraid of the gangs. I don't like the gangs selling their rock cocaine."

But he admits living on the street anywhere in Los Angeles is terribly difficult, especially as you get older. He wound up homeless after hurting his hand while employed in a stained-glass factory near the Burbank Airport. That injury sent him on a downward spiral where he could no longer work, pay his bills and, eventually, afford an apartment.

His best time being homeless was living in Balboa Park in San Diego, where the cops were decent and he made a little money as a street artist, painting on-the-spot portraits of people.

Surviving in L.A. was different. He got tickets for drinking and spent time in jail. When he was hanging around his old boyhood neighborhood, LAPD officers were always hassling him about sleeping on the street, telling him he had to move downtown. And, even more immediate, it became harder and harder to find a bathroom to stay clean.

"When I turned about 50, that's when I couldn't live on streets anymore," Paul points out in a flat voice resembling Dustin Hoffman's in the movie Rain Man. "You know, your feet turn rotten after awhile. I could get away with it when I was younger. I had the vitality to do it. But I got too old.

"It's difficult to live on the street. Very difficult. Sometimes I used to sleep where the sprinklers would go off, you know. It's not very comfortable sleeping on the sidewalks, especially if you've got a drinking habit. I'm an Irish Catholic, and I can't drink at all. Not even altar wine at Holy Communion. I know that now."

But Paul believes sleeping outside all those years had another much more damaging effect.

"You know, when you sleep on the street you hear the buses and cars and all the noises," he says. "They call it 'voices.' The medications I get now from Lamp have helped. But every once in awhile I still hear them sometimes, because I lived on the street for a long time. It comes from sleeping on the concrete; and if you get jumped, it gets even worse."

Lamp has also helped Paul see doctors for chronic health problems and a dentist to fix his teeth. Recently, he got glasses, which let him see and read much better. The community's bank takes \$250 out of his \$800 monthly SSI (Supplemental Security Income for the poor aged, blind or disabled) check for housing, and helps him sock away the rest.

"That's the most money I ever made, and they make you save it, which is pretty cool, you know, just in case - an insurance kind of money," he notes. "And they helped me with a bunch of legal things. But it was Harry who helped me get off the street, because I didn't know how to do it alone."

Harry and Lamp also played a role in reconnecting Paul with some of his seven brothers and sisters. Recently, his younger brother Tim and sister Mary took him to L.A.'s celebrated Pacific Dinning Car for his 55th birthday. And Mary now brings him grocery shopping and to a barber to get his hair cut.

"Harry's a nice guy, he's a nice man," Paul says when the businessman walks away from the table to take a cell phone call. Then he adds, "But it's hard to get along with him because he's very tall. He's been very good about doing drive sharing, because taking buses is really hard. After church we go out for coffee and breakfast sometimes."

When Harry returns and sits down, he stresses that many people besides himself have reached out to Paul, including other parishioners at St. Brendan's. Then, looking across the table, he tells his friend how much he's changed.

"You're physically healthy now," he says. "You don't walk stooped over like you once did. And you're much more aware of things. You're quite articulate now. And you have good memories of certain things in your family."

Paul's deadpan expression doesn't change, and he stays silent. But after a moment, and a last sip of coffee, the Lamp Community member nods.