



© Lindsay Gilmore Illustration

Paul's Story on Hunger and Hope

About a year ago, I found myself living on the streets in Portland, not sure where life would bring me the next day.

I grew up in Upstate New York to a working-class Catholic family. The values I learned growing up were about working hard, caring for your neighbor and always having hope. I was lucky to have the kind of childhood where I never worried about being loved and never worried about being well-fed. I took those things for granted.

By the time I was in college though, I was experiencing a lot of stress and anxiety at school. I started drinking to cope with the stress, and eventually dropped out of school to travel and work odd jobs. In my early 30s I got sober, got a degree, found work as an engineer, married, bought a house and had three beautiful kids. I had it all.

But life has a way of coming back at you. Work became more and more stressful, and I was putting more and more pressure on myself to be the perfect husband, the provider, and father. I started drinking again. When my marriage fell apart, my mental health fell apart, and I spiraled into

depression, addiction and psychosis. That's how I found myself on the streets—after I had burned through all the resources I had. But somehow, that spark of hope, love and work ethic my family instilled in me so long ago remained. I think that's how I survived. I'm lucky I'm alive today.

To me, when people talk about hunger, they're not just talking about food. Hunger is interconnected with so many other issues—like whether someone is able to have a warm, stable roof over their head or access to mental health services and addiction counseling. When I was living on the streets, I knew how to find a hot meal or a food box. But it was harder to find affordable housing and support for my mental health—and ultimately, that's what impacted my access to food, to transportation and to so many other important things. Even basic human things like hope.

When we talk about social supports, and whether or not people “deserve” to get help, we shouldn't be talking about what people have accomplished, or even who they are. We should be talking about how hard they try. People out there on the streets are trying really hard. Trying to sign up for SNAP. Trying to find a place to sleep. Trying to find some basic human connection. But when you try and you try and you don't get anywhere, you lose hope. And that's when things get harder.

Everyone needs to have a little spark of hope every day to survive—at least, that's how it is for me. I need to feel like the work I'm doing is good, like I'm helping people out and building community, like I'm contributing something to the world, however small it might be. That's what I want for everyone—just a little spark of hope.