

# INSIGHT MAGAZINE

ISSUE TWO



MAKING POVERTY VISIBLE. MAKING KNOWLEDGE ACTIONABLE.

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# **COPING** **— WITH —** **TRAUMA**

**THE HARSH REALITY FOR  
HOMELESS WOMEN**

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Written by: Alex Cardona  
Photographed by: Sabrina Claros



**G**athered in the shade amongst the Courtyard Transitional Shelter, one of Santa Ana's few year-round emergency shelters, there is a shared unbothered gaze and a lulling sense of silence. The streets are noticeably empty, and police patrol the sidewalks with hands on their hips and stone cold looks on their faces. Despite that every individual that resides in the Courtyard in Santa Ana has a unique story that brought them there, trauma is a common link for many homeless women—and this is especially true for Heaven Bennington.

Heaven is an unaccompanied woman who lives in the Courtyard Transitional Shelter in Santa Ana. After surviving an abusive marriage of 25 years, Heaven has lived homeless on her own for over three years. She seldom eats more than once a week and struggles with constant harassment and the trauma of her own past.

Between 22% to 57% of homeless women attest to domestic violence as the immediate cause of their homelessness. Additionally, women are much more likely to experience violence and assault on the street. For some of the women who come from abusive homes, the streets quickly become their only hope for escape. For Heaven, the root cause of her homelessness was her abusive husband, whom she stayed with throughout the course of their 25-year marriage for the sake of her kids.

"I put up with what I had to, for the kids," she said. Heaven fled to Orange County on a friend's promise of work and a way to get her out of her situation. "There was supposed to be a home with a life and a friend," she said. "I came down here under false pretenses. It was supposed to be work...and when I got down here, I found out the person had lied." Heaven's children were homeless as well and lived in a shelter near her new location. Without work and with no place to return to, Heaven tried to make the best out of her situation. "My kids were already here...so, I try to be there, for them."

Heaven frequently walks the streets tired and alone and was recently assaulted in the dead of night by a man who wanted to take the pillows she was sleeping on. Layered on top of all her physical hardships, the emotional trauma she faces are some of the hardest to overcome. "You can't," she said when asked if she had a way to cope with her trauma. "You can't have people see you cry like that. You would have to turn against the wall. They take advantage of that...I just

got to hold it in." For women seeking an escape from abusive homes, organizations like WISEPlace in Santa Ana are important for helping these individuals get back on their feet.

WISEPlace is an organization that offers transitional housing to help unaccompanied women become independent again. The organization is unique in that it caters to women specifically, as it offers them a safe place amongst fellow women who often have similar trauma and experiences. Carrying over her prior leadership experience of the last 14 years, Executive Director Brateil Aghasi has spent the last few months ensuring the comfort of the women at WISEPlace. Taking ambition by the reigns, Brateil seeks to build programs that have a long-term and meaningful impact on the women who take refuge there.

"One in every four homeless individuals is an unaccompanied woman," Brateil said as she gave a tour of the facility. "The root of homelessness is that they don't have an affordable place to go. And the biggest commonality for homelessness is trauma—it's important for our society to remember that."

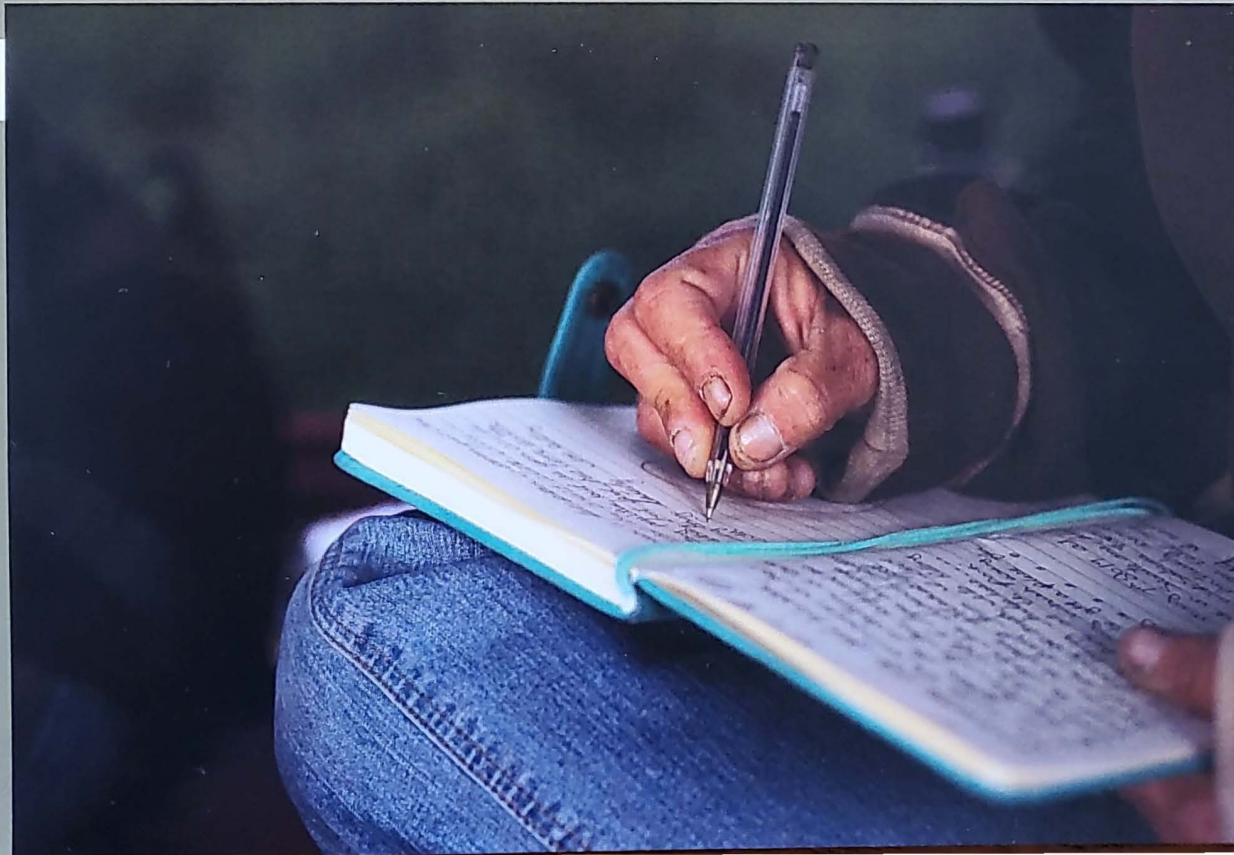
In addition to transitional housing, WISEPlace offers group therapy sessions for women to discuss and navigate their past experiences, but more importantly, to provide solace and show that they are not alone in their struggles. In times of dire need, WISEPlace also serves as an emergency shelter for women.

Heaven herself struggles to turn to resources in her times of need. "I just thought, you know, people needed it more than me," she said. She has difficulty bringing herself to check-in to a hospital. Reliving the

**" NO MATTER HOW BAD IT GOT, I WAS RAISED TO BE A TROOPER. YOU JUST - YOU WORK THROUGH IT, NO MATTER HOW BAD IT GETS OR WHAT PEOPLE DO TO YOU. "**



I  
YOU  
, NO  
WHAT



mental stress of watching her mother pass away in her hospital bed is something she cannot bear, and it keeps her from seeking the help she craves.

Heaven continues to face constant trauma while living on her own. Only 30 minutes before I spoke to her, she was attacked on the street. She was pushing her belongings on her walker down the sidewalk when she was punched in the face by a man passing by. "He hit me with everything he had, you know, put his weight behind it." This happened as onlookers passed by, unwilling to come to her aid. "And old people were coming out of the church. No one would call 9-1-1 and I just felt like I was nobody you know? They just kept looking at me like that. That's scary. When you know somebody won't even call the police to help you."

Despite this reality, emergency shelters can only provide a temporary escape for homeless individuals. WISEPlace makes the effort to break the mold by supporting these women, and leading them down a path toward self-sustainability, said Brateil. WISEPlace offers many workshops taught by volunteers, enabling these women to acquire skills which can help them jump back into the competitive flow of the workplace. Workshops ranging from job coaching, interpersonal skill building, computer classes, marketing, and social media classes are just some of the many resources that WISEPlace offers.

One of the requirements of the transitional housing program is that the homeless individual must work. So as an individual

gains a steady source of income, she will hopefully be able to excel and achieve more by the time she exits the transitional housing. "On average, women spend about four to six months in transitional housing," Brateil said. Ideally, the homeless individuals should be ready to part ways with WISEPlace by this time, but Brateil has an even more ambitious and heartfelt goal for WISEPlace's housing program.

"Our goal is a total reconstruction of this building with one of the key highlights being that we'll create almost 40 rooms of permanent supportive housing here," she said. Brateil hopes to completely redesign the old YMCA building into a modern space with 40 transitional housing units and 40 permanent supportive housing units. "Under one roof, you have an emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing...is just a dream come true," she beams. With the implementation of additional housing, she hopes to make a stark difference in the Orange County community.

One step at a time, Brateil is working hard towards combating homelessness. However, there are still so many people out there that need help. People like Heaven, her kids, and many more who manage to persevere through their trauma-filled situations.

"You know, no matter how bad it got, I was raised to be a trooper," Heaven said. "You just work through it, no matter how bad it gets or what people do to you."

**THE BIGGEST COMMONALITY FOR HOMELESSNESS  
IS TRAUMA. IT'S IMPORTANT FOR OUR SOCIETY  
TO REMEMBER THAT.**

