

## From 'out there' to indoor life

### Once-homeless brothers trying to adjust to warm rooms, caseworkers' rules

By Colleen Mastony, Chicago Tribune reporter

January 23, 2012



After 30 years of living like ghosts on the streets, sleeping under a bridge and drifting through warming centers, Frank and Anthony Nowotnik are learning to live inside.

There are advantages, including heat and hot water, that come with the move indoors.

But nearly every day, the 43-year-old twin brothers feel the pull of their old life under the bridge. The shopping cart that held their belongings. The bottle of vodka that they tucked under their heads at night. The dull, rhythmic thump of the cars passing — bump, bump — on the expressway overhead.

"I miss it. I actually do miss it," says Anthony, of the years the brothers spent living under the highway. He folds his rough hands and looks down.

"The freedom," adds Frank.

They had lived on the streets since they were 13, two men amid the roughly 1,700 homeless people who shun the city's shelters and instead survive on the margins — parks and underpasses, abandoned cars and cardboard boxes — places the twins call "out there."

Now the brothers have a home at Pathways Safe Haven, a place of last resort for the most desperate homeless. But the transition inside hasn't been easy.

Thrown out of two housing programs in the last year for excessive drinking, the brothers are trying to face down their demons and scrambling once again to gain a foothold inside. The stakes are never far from their minds: At least 50 homeless men and women died in Chicago last year, most of them while living on the street. If not for a place to stay, Anthony says, "I probably would have been dead too."

Now, they pay their rent, have bank accounts and stop at the dry cleaners to have their shirts pressed.

But every night, they open their windows and spread their blankets on the floor. They can't get used to the warmth of the indoors. And it's difficult to sleep in a bed when, as Anthony explains, "I'm so used to sleeping on the ground."

For the last year, that is how the twins have lived — reconciling inside and out — caught between two worlds.

They know they can live on the streets. Now, they wonder, can they navigate a world on the inside?

## **Battling booze**

Born on the South Side, the brothers grew up in a family that, they say, had been blown apart by heroin. They escaped violence at home by sleeping outside and eventually left home altogether. They stole food to survive, dropped out of school and never learned to write.

After serving time in prison for aggravated battery in the 1990s, they returned to the streets, where, for years, they skimmed along, anesthetized on cheap vodka and keeping a wary eye out for the thugs who beat the homeless for fun. Life might have gone on like that. But in July 2010, Anthony was run over by an SUV while sleeping on a sidewalk.

Recovering from head injuries in a nursing home, he was recruited by a fledgling program that sought the most vulnerable homeless and attempted to move them inside. When the Tribune first wrote about the brothers in December 2010, Anthony had been offered a room at the Lake View YMCA but refused to move inside without Frank.

For several bitterly cold weeks, the brothers lived under a bridge at California Avenue and the Kennedy Expressway, counting the days until Frank's room was scheduled to become available and both could move inside, together.

But that move was fraught with challenges. They landed rooms at the Lake View YMCA in January but were kicked out in April for getting drunk and acting rowdy. By October, they had been ejected from a second program by social workers who quickly recognized that the brothers — soaking themselves with vodka — desperately needed more help.

And so, the pair crossed the threshold of Pathways, a program that is unusual in that it doesn't require residents to stop drinking or using drugs in order to live there. The approach is called "housing first," and it is critical, social workers say, when it comes to people like the twins who are in the grips of long-standing addiction and who, without such a program, would likely die on the streets.

Now, instead of bedding down under the bridge, the brothers push through the glass doors of a red brick building in the city's Uptown neighborhood. They pass beneath glass chandeliers and elegant green archways and ride a creaky elevator to the fifth floor. There, they live on a hallway painted lavender and mix among two dozen formerly homeless men and women, all dealing with varying levels of addiction and mental illness.

There is the 47-year-old cocaine addict who is beloved among the residents for her cooking, especially her barbecue ribs, which she always shares and often delivers to the homeless still on the street. And the 52-year-old alcoholic and resident theologian, who leads Bible study on Sundays. Both are bright spots on a floor where alcoholics bob and sway in the line for dinner and glazed-eyed junkies float down the hall on their way to the next fix.

Among them are Frank and Anthony, an inseparable pair whose battered faces give them the look of aging boxers. Anthony's right eye droops from getting kicked in the head. Frank has a scar under his left eye from getting hit with a bat.

Friendly and outgoing, the twins circulate easily among their neighbors, joking with some, inviting others to share a bottle. But they are also quick to argue and sometimes so drunk that caseworkers refuse to let them use the stove. Anthony has been caught with alcohol, which is not allowed inside.

In November, Frank got in a scuffle with another resident over a woman. The confrontation violated one of the few ironclad rules of the program: no violence. If there was another incident, the staff warned, he could be asked to pack his things and leave.

And so, when arguments break out, the brothers are learning to walk away, a skill that Frank grumbles is "easier said than done."

Although they chafe at the rules, they are grateful for the caseworkers and surprised that, as Anthony explains, "someone actually cares."

"We're not used to that," says Frank.

They fill their days with long, rambling walks — often with a bottle but sometimes without one. Both men love to cook, and in the evenings, they whip up huge batches of chicken soup and invite other residents to share a meal. They hope to volunteer at an animal shelter as a way to pass the hours with something besides alcohol.

Both are getting regular medical and psychiatric care for bipolar disorder and a host of physical ailments. Such treatment, along with housing, is believed to save money by keeping the homeless out of hospital emergency rooms.

The brothers don't want to go back outside. Too many friends, they say, have died. Danny, who once shared their stretch of sidewalk, froze to death. Kevin overdosed.

"Every time I go by that bridge," Anthony says, "it's so empty."

### **Feeling human**

And so, they return every evening to Pathways, a place where they hope they can stay until they graduate to an apartment of their own.

Success here is measured in tiny steps — a switch from vodka to Irish Rose wine, or an appearance at a group therapy session. The requirements are few, on the theory that you can't force someone to stop drinking. But the twins say they are motivated, if only for the chance to stay inside.

Anthony lives in Room 510. Frank is around the corner in Room 534.

The rooms are small, with a single bed, a dresser and a private bathroom. But there is space for Frank's paintbrushes and watercolors, which sit on a bedside table, and a place for Anthony's collection of movies, which are stacked neatly against the wall.

The indoor life offers other comforts too.

"Don't have to worry about getting your blankets stolen," says Anthony.

"I can be clean," says Frank.

"Warm meals," continues Anthony. "Feel like a human being."

[www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-homeless-twins-follow-20120123,0,5333838.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-homeless-twins-follow-20120123,0,5333838.story)

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Letter to the Editor – Chicago Tribune – February 1, 2012

We want to thank the Chicago Tribune and reporter Colleen Mastony for "Warming to life indoors; Once-homeless brothers still getting acclimated to cozy rooms and caseworkers' rules" (Page 1, Jan. 23), the story about twin brothers Frank and Anthony Nowotnik. After a lifetime of homelessness, they are now housed and making progress in their recovery process with alcoholism. Mastony artfully showed readers the immense challenges of that transition.

There are two points we would like to add. The Nowotnik brothers are now housed in the Pathways Safe Haven, a program of Heartland Health Outreach, because of the 100,000 Homes Campaign, a national campaign striving to house the most vulnerable homeless people.

Last winter, the city of Chicago selected the AIDS Foundation of Chicago to oversee the implementation of this campaign locally, in collaboration with the Corporation for Supportive Housing and the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services.

More than 200 of the city's most vulnerable homeless people have since been housed as a result.

And it's critical to emphasize this: Housing chronically homeless people means saving significant taxpayer dollars. There is a savings of \$1 million for every 100 chronically homeless people living with chronic medical conditions who are housed in permanent supportive units with intensive case management, according to recently published data in the Journal of Health Services Research.

Permanent housing like Pathways, which also provide intensive supportive services, means fewer trips to the hospital for the homeless, among other reductions in health care and social-services costs.

So housing the homeless is the right thing to do *and* it saves money, a solution that works for the most vulnerable people and for those paying the bill.

— *Arturo V. Bendixen, vice president for Housing Partnerships, AIDS Foundation of Chicago*

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