

# HOMeward BOUND

Determined activists and volunteers  
assist those who have nowhere to  
call their own.

*by Jessie Jones*



# THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME.

**B**ut for some, there's no home to speak of. For them, there's no place—no place to celebrate, no place to gather, no place to rest.

Across the country, more than 600,000 Americans are without a place to rest their heads on any given night, a problem that has only increased during the nation's recent economic downswing. Over the course of a year, that number balloons to more than 1.5 million people who experience homelessness.

Some spend the nights in their cars or in spare space at the houses of friends, and others seek out cots in shelters maintained by medical, church and civic organizations. Still others are relegated to the outdoors.

"I think the problem is an epidemic today. Homelessness ebbs and flows throughout our history, and we've been in a huge spike in homelessness for the last 30 years," said Jeff Olivet, the CEO of the Center for Social Innovation in Boston. "The recession that began in 2008 had a huge impact on families, and many people slipped over the edge into homelessness when they never thought they'd be there."

Each day, University of Alabama students and alumni are working to change those statistics and to offer comfort and support for those with nowhere to go, through programs that make a difference, one meal, one bed and one life at a time.

## The power of knowledge

Olivet, who earned his bachelor's in English and French from the University in 1993, knows how hard it can be to try to enact change and provide help to multitudes of people, so he's made it his life's mission to make the job easier for others.

"I've always been aware of and committed to ending poverty, racism and injustice," Olivet said. "When I was studying literature and languages, I realized that while I loved Shakespeare and John Keats, I wondered why I was going to spend all my time in academia when I'm called to focus on fighting poverty and trying to end homelessness. It found me in my early 20s and hasn't really let go. I never considered it as a career until I stumbled into it."

It is a passion—and career—Olivet has not strayed from. Since his graduation, he has stayed involved in homelessness work one way or another, as an outreach worker, case manager, advocate and national policy thinker.

The Center for Social Innovation, started in 2006, is an organization that promotes best practices for serving vulnerable populations, including people who have experienced homelessness, mental illness, addiction and trauma. The center is able to reach out to groups in a variety of ways, offering much-needed training and technical assistance, distance-learning opportunities, Web-based solutions, research and evaluation, as well as support with strategic planning and



organizational design.

Olivet has focused his energy on sharing what works for one organization with others who might be able to implement the same approach, and the center has continued to increase its impact by spreading best practices across the country. "We think through how nonprofit organizations can do their work better and figure out what kinds of models have been proven to be effective in ending homelessness," he said. "Basically, what we do is find those best practices and use any vehicles at our disposal to spread those best practices."

Before stepping into the role of CEO, Olivet ran the National Homelessness Resource Center, one of the center's projects. The HRC is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and it is an interactive learning community dedicated to disseminating knowledge and best practices aimed to prevent and end homelessness. It includes providers, consumers, policymakers, researchers and public agencies at all levels. The HRC's website includes a

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10,000-item library, the likes of which never existed before, according to Olivet. "We were able to bring together all of the best manuals, research articles, interviews and testimonials, and consolidate them in one site," he said. "We have 25,000 unique visitors a month. Our online training reaches thousands."

The information housed there is what can have a real impact in ending homelessness, he said. "We're seeing exciting trends take off across the country around programs that are really working, so it doesn't feel like every community we go to is reinventing the wheel," he explained. "The local providers have access to information that they didn't have 10 years ago. I certainly see the impact of our work."

## On the front lines

Within the Tuscaloosa community, a good deal of homeless outreach work takes place through the Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and its office is teeming with UA grads who are passionate about their work. While the VA was established to serve veterans, when it comes to reaching out to the homeless, no one from the local area—veteran or not—hears the word "no."

This was never more apparent than on a sunny Friday in October 2012, when more than 200 homeless Tuscaloosans made their way to the VA's annual "Stand Down for Homeless Veterans" event. Veterans made up roughly half of those who came for a hot meal, to collect needed items, to seek medical help and to meet with local community partners, including the Salvation Army and Temporary Emergency Services. "We still provide them with services, with the goal of getting them permanent housing and employment within their capacity," said Scott Martin, chief of social work



service at the medical center, of the non-veterans whom the VA aids.

Five years ago, Martin, who earned his master of social work degree from UA in 1998, teamed up with David Gay, who earned his BSW in 1980 and MSW in 1982. "That's about the same time that the Department of Veterans Affairs set out a mission to end homelessness among veterans," Martin said. "At the time, we had a good homeless program, but we only had one homeless outreach person."

Gay, the VA's coordinator for health

*The VA Medical Center's "Stand Down for Homeless Veterans" event in October 2012*

care for homeless veterans, brought a wealth of experience with him, having worked in the mental health field for more than 30 years. "I've been a public servant all my life, and when I met Scott and he gave an offer to come to the VA, I took it," Gay said. He had served as the director of the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility, and had worked at Bryce Hospital. His expertise has paid off for the VA's programs.

"David has been the primary leader with Tuscaloosa VA, both meeting and exceeding the VA National Performance Measure Goals for ending homelessness among veterans," Martin said. With homelessness among veterans requiring so many programs to help get them re-established, the VA knew it couldn't do it alone, he said. "At the time, we were working under a presidential order from President [George W.] Bush, and faith-based and community-based organizations began to collaborate with the VA. So we reached out with our community partners and began working with the Housing Authority, the Salvation Army, local ministries and the University."

As with many organizations, getting the work done is just half the





## David GAY



battle. The rest is making sure the VA's message gets heard, and people know they are there to serve. Damon Stevenson, a 1998 public relations graduate of UA and the public affairs officer at the medical center, is tasked with spreading that message. "I get a lot of fulfillment in helping publicize our successes, and I love getting the word out to veterans in the community and the public in general about the homeless programs we have," he said. "When we are able to publicize the successes of our programs, it reinforces to the public and in turn to veterans how great the services are that we offer them."

Stevenson helps make sure those in need know of the work that Martin, Gay and the rest of the VA team are doing. He also hopes to inform those who might be led to help that the VA is ready and willing for them to get involved with its award-winning homeless program, which includes a 48-bed dorm, a 12-bed transition and residence hall, and assistance with finding employment.

Stevenson, along with Martin and Gay, are all former military members, and they've returned to the VA to give back. "I came back because I have a passion for this, and for public service," Gay said. With the three working as a team, they accomplish a lot—and change lives.

"I'm fortunate to work at such a great place, with people who care so much about veterans," Stevenson said. "It is very rewarding to be able to brag about so many successes and the excellent staff we have at the Tuscaloosa VA."

For Martin, continuing his time as a social worker is simply part of who he is. "I could not work a job that wasn't aligned with what I believe my purpose in life is," he said. "There's always been a question about nature versus nurture. Were you born a social

worker or did you develop into one? I think it was both with me. I've always had a natural passion to help others to help themselves."

### The next generation

With virtually unlimited outreach opportunities today, there is a growing focus on service activities for college students at the Capstone, the presumption being that once someone is educated about civic responsibility, they will develop a lifelong passion for it. UA's Community Service Center exists for exactly this reason. The CSC includes multiple divisions, and

with one of those focused on people who are facing hunger and homelessness, it facilitates student involvement in serving those populations in the surrounding community.

Lisa Bochey, the student director of hunger and homelessness at the CSC, helps oversee outreach with Temporary Emergency Services, the West Alabama Food Bank and the Jesus' Way Shelter.

"When students volunteer with us, they get to see an area of Tuscaloosa they might not have seen otherwise," Bochey said. "I think they are sometimes surprised at the number of homeless people in Tuscaloosa. If you're working at West Alabama Food Bank or Temporary Emergency Services, it's not as obvious, but they see the number of people they impact every time they tutor at Jesus' Way Shelter."

At the shelter, students spend time tutoring an average of seven children for an hour each week. "We see

*UA students took part in the annual "Sleep Out on the Quad."*







*Students construct houses with Habitat for Humanity, one of many Community Service Center projects.*

different kids every time,” Bochey said. “The library gets opened up for tutoring, and kids just come to see us. They’re different ages each time, too. Sometimes students don’t even realize the impact they have.”

For Bochey, a senior at UA, her volunteering began when she was a freshman. At the end of her sopho-

more year, she began working at the CSC. Then, the April 27, 2011, tornado hit Tuscaloosa, right after she started her job. “The second I got my job here, so many people were homeless,” she said.

The citywide disaster provided new ways to step up volunteer efforts. “There were different kinds of needs,” Bochey said. “What we like to say is that there was a huge need for things in Tuscaloosa before the tornado. Once the tornado came, it brought attention to that area. It made people realize there were needs before that. There were people living in very sub-standard housing, and people who were homeless.”

In April, Bochey and her team will host the CSC’s annual “Sleep Out on the Quad” to promote awareness of homelessness issues that exist in Alabama and across the nation. In 2011, about 200 students participated. “I think the Sleep Out is one of the coolest things we do,” Bochey said.

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[center4si.com](http://center4si.com)  
 National Homelessness  
 Resource Center  
[homeless.samhsa.gov](http://homeless.samhsa.gov)  
 Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs  
 Medical Center  
[www.tuscaloosa.va.gov](http://www.tuscaloosa.va.gov)  
 UA Community Service Center  
[volunteer.ua.edu](http://volunteer.ua.edu)

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