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# Behind the Cardboard Sign: An Ethnographic Study of Boulder's Homeless Young Adults

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# Behind the Cardboard Sign

An Ethnographic Study of Boulder's Homeless Young Adults

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Departmental Honors in Anthropology

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative ethnographic study examines why Boulder's homeless young adult community remain living on the streets for extended periods of time. I undertook this project because very few ethnographic studies have been conducted on homeless youth and young adult culture, and even less have been done under the field of anthropology. As a volunteer with this population, I was driven to research why such individuals in Boulder utilize services yet continue to live on the streets. Through a variety of interviews and participant observation, I unveiled several underlying themes. The majority of Boulder's homeless youth share a history of trauma. With this shared background there is a sense of acceptance, belonging, and family that forms within the street community. Although street life is difficult, once an individual finds his/her place within the community, leaving the streets means leaving his/her family and home.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

*Train hopping, wandering, and adventuring the cities of the greater United States, Boxcar has been living, surviving, and braving the streets since he was 13 years old. His name was first introduced to me during the summer of 2011 when I started volunteering at StandUp for Kids, a nonprofit, volunteer based organization that works with homeless and at-risk youth ages 24 and under. He was adopted at the age of two by physically and verbally abusive methamphetamine addicted parents. After years of abuse, he finally decided to take his life into his own hands and run away from home, never to look back on the abusive life he once knew. His entire adolescent, teenage, and young adult life has taken place on the streets, absent from any parental or adult guidance and support. He raised himself the best he could and prided himself on his rule and importance to other kids on the street.<sup>1</sup>*

Boxcar's story is not uncommon in Boulder, Colorado. There are an estimated 143 homeless individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 years old living or squatting in Boulder County at any given time (Metro Denver Homeless Initiative 2012), approximately 45 of which live in the city of Boulder.

The Steward B. McKinney Act defines a person who is homeless as one who "lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence ... and has a primary night time residency that is: (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations ... (B) An institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings" (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). Using this definition, the most recent data show that approximately 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness in any given year (National Coalition for the Homeless

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<sup>1</sup> This is a composite character whose story has been changed to protect his privacy.

2009). A 2002 report conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the U.S. Department of Justice reported there are an estimated 1,682,900 homeless and runaway youth at any given time in the United States. On any given day, there are approximately 1,970 (Wegrzyn 2012) reported homeless individuals in Boulder County, and an estimated 143 of those individuals are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Metro Denver Homeless Initiative 2012). The 18 to 24 year old age range is particularly significant because it is a transitional age where they are old enough to be considered a “legal adult,” but often not yet able to be self-sufficient. While the majority of Americans in this age range are just starting to leave their parents’ nest and possibly attending higher education, homeless young adults—many of whom have already been homeless for several years—have no choice but to be self-sufficient. Like most Americans in this age group, they are in the process of discovering who they are, their purpose in life, and how they perceive the world. Yet homeless youth face the additional challenge of doing this in the midst of living on the streets. Some try to pull their limited resources together in an attempt to adhere to the typical Western standards of success, while others find acceptance on the streets while adhering to some countercultural ideologies (Fox 1987).

Boulder, Colorado is rich with service providers aimed at helping this population exit the street life, yet local advocates have observed that the transition from homelessness to non-homelessness is either a rare occurrence and/or takes an exceptionally long time to achieve. The purpose of this thesis is to listen to the voice of Boulder’s homeless young adults, unveil the complexities of their lifestyles that contribute to their tendencies to remain living on the streets for extended periods of time, address young adult homeless individuals’ involvement with American counterculture, and finally, contribute to the conversations about youth and young adult homelessness.

## **My Personal Experience**

Early in the summer of 2011, my wise and older sister, who is always looking out for my well-being and future development, asked me what I was going to do with my summer vacation from school. I excitedly relayed to her that I was going to work part-time at local pet store. Seemingly annoyed, she responded “Okay, and?,” to which I then replied, “What do you mean?” Disapprovingly, she then added, “Um, duh, aren’t you going to volunteer?” Annoyed because she was probably right, I then replied “Oh yeah, I should probably do that.” Little did I know, this seemingly simple, unsophisticated exchange between my sister and I led to a complete paradigm shift in the way I perceive myself and how I interact with others. Irritated because I didn’t think of it first, I then hung up the phone and casually searched Craigslist.org for possible volunteer opportunities. I stumbled on an advertisement for StandUp for Kids, a nonprofit, all volunteer based organization that serves Boulder’s homeless and at-risk youth ages 24 and under. I was intrigued by the possibility of getting to work with the kids I often see hanging out on the Pearl Street Mall or the park near the Boulder Public Library. During the two initial training sessions, I distinctly remember feeling inferior, pondering how I could possibly help this population while being close to, if not exactly, their age. I never considered myself a mentor, I am certainly not a parent. I am a 24 year old, small-bodied female, college senior trying to figure out what the heck she’s doing with her own life! Although doubtful of my ability to be helpful, I took a leap of faith and agreed to a six month commitment and signed up to volunteer every Monday evening from 6:00-8:30pm.

The next Monday evening at six o’ clock I walked into the StandUp for Kids Center not knowing who was a volunteer and who was a “homeless youth.” I could not even tell myself

apart from those whom I was there to serve. We were all roughly the same age, we all walked in with a backpack, and some, including myself, had a few holes in our clothes. “What set myself apart from them aside from sleeping under a roof?,” I thought. Nervous, I did what I always do when I am placed in a new situation: I learn my surroundings and spark conversation. How’s it goin’? Where are you from? How is the weather treating you? Then eventually leading into: what was your childhood like? To the obvious: what brings you to StandUp? After six months, I got to know almost everyone by name, got a glimpse into their past and their recent travels, yet I knew nothing about why they were homeless, and for goodness sake, if they’re utilizing services, why on earth are they still homeless?

After I hit the seven month mark with volunteering with this population, my frustrations started to build. I noticed that the same homeless individuals I had met my first night volunteering, whom I had learned have been homeless for quite some time and had been coming to StandUp long before I started volunteering, were still homeless seven months later. Clearly, life on the streets can be a lengthy process. I had a vague idea of how some of them became homeless, a mediocre understanding of American homelessness in general, but I still, for the life me, could not grasp what it is like to be in their shoes, what troubles and hurdles they face, and most importantly, why there is a tendency to remain homeless for an extended period of time. I could not find any valuable research that could answer these questions. How could I (we) effectively help them without understanding them first? I wanted answers. Along with my frustrations, I also noticed a strong sense of connection with many of the young people I was working with. I felt that I was identifying with them, understanding them, and, stemming from my Los Angeles, punk rock, slightly rebellious background, speaking their language. Since there is no literature on Boulder’s homeless youth and young adults specifically, I realized I needed to

conduct my own research in order to answer my own questions. Fueled with a yearning to understand this population on a deeper level, this thesis serves as a tool for my own exploration into the world of Boulder's homeless young adults, and to dip a toe into their shoes. The process of preparing this thesis and my volunteer work not only allowed me to gain a more thorough understanding of this population, but it also allowed me to discover my passion, purpose, and love for social justice work.

## Methods

As Hillary Smith notes in the beginning of her methods section in *Searching for Kinship: The Creation of Street Families Among Homeless Youth*,

Studies of young people living on the streets have often relied on quantitative methods. Although the information gleaned from these studies is informative, there is often less emphasis on youth voices and perspectives. Moreover, when relying solely on quantitative methods, one cannot be sure if survey categories correspond to youth's own definitions of their experiences (Ennew 1994).

Aiming to help fill this gap, this thesis is strictly qualitative and uses only real voices and experiences to paint a picture of the homeless life in Boulder.

The subjects chosen to participate in this thesis were drawn from my home away from home: ALLY Youth Services (which replaced StandUp for Kids after it closed due to lack of funding). My research is the sum of two interviews with formerly homeless young adults, Red and Hunter,<sup>2</sup> and one interview with a currently homeless young adult, Zephyr, and one local service advocate, Christopher Senesi, ALLY Youth Services Director of Programs. I specifically

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<sup>2</sup> As previously stated, local advocates (including myself) have observed that exiting the street life in a short period of time is a rare occurrence. Although two out of three of my research subjects are no longer homeless, my (our) observations still hold true. In the 14 months I have been volunteering, I know of only three homeless young adults that have secured housing.

selected these three brave souls because, from my experience volunteering with them, they were the most talkative, honest, and communicative about their socio-economic situation. I also felt the most comfortable and safe interviewing and interacting with these three young adult men outside the security of ALLY's outreach center, which is an important factor for me as a woman. All of their names have been changed to protect their privacy. I recorded each interview with a small audio-recording device, then transcribed each interview word for word. After the tedious transcribing process, I then went back through each interview in search of themes. I separated each theme into two categories: what was relevant to my thesis, and what was rich and insightful yet beyond the scope of this thesis. This process was extremely difficult for me because I found every word of their hour and a half to two hour testimonies to further illustrate their experiences, but I had to constantly remind myself that I could use everything.

I also heavily relied on my personal experience and participant observation while volunteering two to eight hours per week for 14 months in conversation with the homeless youth and young adults who have used our services. Having fourteen months of experience working with this specific population, I was in the unique position to (1) already have a relationship with the individuals I interviewed, elevating their comfort level with me as an interviewer and the information they disclosed, and (2) confidently analyze and understand the context of their testimonies from prior experience and be able to cross reference their testimonies with other youth.

During the process of this thesis, the Boulder chapter of StandUp for Kids was forced to close due to a lack of funding from the national organization. Recognizing the soon to be unfulfilled need in Boulder, the Executive Director and Director of Programs started ALLY Youth Services with leftover donation money and a government stipend in late March of 2012 to

serve the same population. I am currently the Center Support Manager, a member of the Program Development Team, and lead of the Monday night shift of ALLY Youth Services. Due to my heavy involvement with the organization and passion for working directly with the youth, I found it extremely difficult to spend time researching, outlining, talking, and writing about them in a thesis—a document that may end up collecting dust on a shelf—while I could be spending more time working at ground zero with the youth and helping to guide them towards exiting the street life. In the end, though, I discovered that the knowledge I have gained throughout this process is invaluable. This thesis can be shared with others and hopefully be used as an aid in the fight against homelessness, to bring people together, or at the very least be an interesting conversation piece.

Finding the answers to my original questions proved more difficult than I previously thought and will require further research in order to answer them completely, if there are answers to be found. This thesis, then, is the summation of what I did find and my own analysis of it. It is the first study of a much larger research project I plan on doing in my post undergraduate career.

## **Review of the Literature**

A wide range of retrievable studies and ethnographies have been conducted on homeless youth 24 and under (e.g. Kidd & Evans 2011; Rew 2002; Slesnick 2008; Wenzel et al. 2010) and 24 and over (e.g. Smith 2008), however very little have focused on the 18 to 24 year old range specifically (e.g. Ferguson 2009), and very little has been done under the discipline of anthropology (Clatts & Davis 1999; Glasser & Bridgeman 1999). The short two pages dedicated to homeless youth in Irene Glasser and Rae Bridgeman's book *Braving The Street: The Anthropology of Homelessness* published in 1999 say specifically:

There is a great need for further research regarding homeless youth. Among the important questions are how youth become homeless, what is the likelihood of a homeless youth becoming a homeless adult, and, most important, what types of services and interventions help homeless youth become housed and stay housed?" (Glasser & Bridgman 1999).

Although this book was published in 1999, it is still considered among the most recent data in anthropology.

The richness of scholarly qualitative research on homeless youth are under the disciplines of sociology, psychology, child psychology, mental health, orthopsychiatry, public health, and varied government agencies and nonprofits. The conversations around homeless youth include discussion of: whether homelessness is a choice (e.g. Parsell & Parsell 2012), drug use (e.g. Wenzel et al. 2012), mental health (e.g. Merscham et al. 2009; Slegers et al 1998), survival strategies including sex work and drug dealing (e.g. Martino et al. 2011; Tavecchio 1999; Walls et al. 2010), resilience (e.g. Kidd & Shahar 2008), strength (e.g. Bender et al. 2007) and adaptation (Kidd & Davidson 2007), as well as trying to understand the reasons and causes of youth homelessness (e.g. Finfgeld-Connett 2010; Rukmana 2008). The studies investigating causes have focused on: aging out of foster care, unsafe or unstable living conditions, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, and parents choosing drugs over their children.

The literature about Boulder's homeless community includes a book by volunteers from Bridge House (formerly Carriage House), a Boulder day time shelter, and two University of Colorado theses. The book is entitled "Until They Have Faces: Stories of Recovery, Resilience, and Redemption" and is a compilation of 26 biographies of Boulder's homeless adult population. They are all personal stories, featuring their background and views on their individual homeless situation (Page et al. 2011). The two theses focus on the search for dignity and identify within the homeless community of Longmont, Colorado (Zigler 2006), and working to achieve goals at a local homeless shelter in Boulder (Brooker 2001).

The literature I found most relevant, useful, relatable, and inspirational to my thesis were the scholarly works by Kidd, Evans, and Smith. In Kidd and Evans' "Home is Where You Draw Strength and Rest: The Meanings of Home for the Houseless Young People," they address homeless youth's tendency to look within themselves, their friends, and/or significant others for safety and comfort while living on the streets. They concluded: "Home as a 'state of mind' is largely reflective of adaptive strategies that were embedded in the mobile and fluid social networks (or 'street family') that had displaced conventional understandings of home as a source of security, sanctuary, and belonging" (Kidd & Evans 2011). Further, Smith's *Searching for Kinship* was found to be particularly relevant to my thesis because it parallels many of my findings, namely, the creation of *fictive kinships* within the homeless community.

As previously mentioned, no retrievable or published ethnographic studies have been conducted on Boulder's homeless young adults specifically. Almost all of the studies I found took place in larger metropolitan areas, such as New York and Toronto (e.g. Kidd & Davidson 2007; Kidd & Shahar 2008), Los Angeles (e.g. Wenzel 2011), and Denver (e.g. Merscham et al. 2009). This thesis serves as the beginning of the scholarly homeless youth and young adult conversation in Boulder, Colorado.

## The Faces of Boulder's Homeless Young Adults

### Red

*...You start to feel like nuttin's goin' your way, you feel like you just rolled down a 1000 foot crevice and you're stuck in this little hole where you got like an inch of room on each side, and you gotta maneuver your way through it, just to finally get back out into a big open ... big opening of opportunity. But when you're in that little crevice and only an inch to spare on each side, it's just...that much harder for that window of opportunity to open for ya 'cause you're surrounded by just like—metaphorically speaking, the walls more represent stuff blocking you from being able to go out there to your windows of opportunity—but that's just how it was for me for 17 months until I finally found the end of the crevice to let me back out...*

I met Red my first night volunteering at StandUp for Kids. With his shy smile, kind eyes, bright red shaggy hair, and witty yet sometimes inappropriate humor, you can't help but love him. He was born in Ohio and is 23 years old. After one year of service in the United States military from 2008 to 2009, he came to Boulder in August of 2010 in search of employment after his mother kicked him out of his house. With no success finding employment, Red was homeless in Boulder for a total of 17 months. While he was living on the streets and still to this day, Red suffers from bipolar disorder, epilepsy, and acid reflux. Red will openly tell you that his 17 month period of homeless were the worst days of his life. Knowing that some homeless youth and young adults claim to have chosen the homeless lifestyle, when I asked him if he considered himself homeless, he responded: "Homeless! because I was trapped there, and stuck there. It's not like I knew anybody when I first went to Boulder, I knew nobody. I didn't know anything about Boulder when I first went out there. To me it felt more like I was homeless because I was

stuck, and trapped.” After hearing about possible employment opportunities in Idaho Springs, Colorado, Red left the streets of Boulder in search of his window of opportunity. I am pleased to report that Red is now living in an apartment and working two jobs in Idaho Springs.

## **Zephyr**

*...Here in Boulder, I found more people that...when I tell them my story, they understand where I come from. Yes, when I was younger I was a straight up hellion. I broke every rule in the book. I didn't care, my life sucked. At points in my life yeah, I will even admit it. I've been to uh, a psych ward because I tried to kill myself, because I was done with it. I couldn't put up with it anymore. When I finally came back around, I realized this: what doesn't kill me, makes me stronger. I am who I am today because of all of the shit that I went through.*

Zephyr was born in Jacksonville, Florida, he is 23 years old, and has been traveling around the country for the past five years and is currently homeless. He first arrived in Boulder and started coming to ALLY Youth Services in early Summer 2012 with his now ex-girlfriend and his dog named Angel. He prefers to call himself an adventurer or house-free, rather than homeless, because he does not like (nor does he claim to identify with) the stereotypes and stigmas associated with homelessness. He is an adopted middle child, he was sexually abused by his stepfather, and receives absolutely no family support. He first became house-free after he received a discharge from the United States Army for reasons I will not disclose to protect his privacy. He suffers from Attention Hyper Deficient Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, vertigo, Meniere's disease, epilepsy, tinnitus, and cancer. Despite his debilitating health issues, he is street smart, selfless, responsible, protective of homeless women, respectful, charming, and always willing to help a person in need.

## Hunter

*... I miss the freedom. If I wanted to leave, I could just leave. I could do whatever I want man. I could go to bed when I wanted to, no one was there to yell at me. Like, I didn't have to be sober. I didn't have to be anything man, I could just be me. And I'm not saying ... I drink sometimes, I mean I was definitely like a raging alcoholic when I was living on the streets just because that was just how I survived. I had to drink. I've always had to drink. Like, I've always had a drug problem since I could remember ...*

Hunter is also 23 years old and was homeless in Boulder for four years, supposedly by choice, until he transitioned into a house in Longmont, Colorado earlier this year after “the law intervened” with another previously homeless young adult and a friend from high school. He is self-educated, philosophical at times, and passionate about liberal politics, punk rock music, and freelance journalism. His story as a homeless youth, or “hum-bum” as he calls it, began when he escaped from rehab for a drug overdose. His father, the vice president of a multi-million dollar company, and respective family pushed him to pursue a life he did not want for himself. “They just wanted me to be like everyone else and go to college and do what they wanted, and I'm like, that's not for me. I mean I'm not opposed to going to college now, but I just wasn't ready to go to college at that time, I just wanted to be like a teenager for a bit longer.” Although he is content with living in a house for the time being, he misses the freedom and fluidity of the street life.

# The Homeless Community

## The Park

A large portion of homeless individuals in Boulder spend their day “hanging out” in the park in front of the Boulder Public Library. They are divided into five different groups, consisting of the “Pirates” who sit at “A-Camp,<sup>3</sup>” the “Loners,” “Rainbow and Drainbow Kids,” and two groups of locals. Although there is a set structure, there is intermingling between the groups and there does not appear to be a division in age, sex, gender, or race. The “Pirates” usually sit at the table closest to the creek, consisting of, as Zephyr described it, the “drunks and junkies.” The “Loners” sit across the lawn from the Pirate table, with a few scattered here and there, spread out within an area of about 20 square feet near the flag pole. While I was present at the park I noticed that some were taking a nap, some were just sitting on a bench staring off into space, and some were looking down intently at the ground. The “Rainbow Kids” were described to be the peace loving hippies who preach lovingkindness, while the “Drainbow Kids” are those who appear on the outside to be peace-loving hippies through their use of language and dress, but, as Zephyr reports, “actually [cause] trouble and steal people’s stuff.” The titles of the different groups, as well as a good portion of the local lingo, was seeded by the Rainbow Family Gathering.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “A-Camp” is an abbreviation of “Alcohol Camp.”

<sup>4</sup> The Rainbow Family Gatherings are “temporary intentional communities, typically held in outdoor settings, and espousing practicing ideals of peace, love, harmony, freedom, and community as a consciously expressed alternative to mainstream popular culture, consumerism, capitalism, and mass media” (Wikipedia). Those who attend the gatherings are considered to be a Rainbow Kid or part of the Rainbow family.

## Fractured Roots

*I've been alone since I was 14, I haven't been able to...only recently have I been actually able to trust people again. 'Cause I'm sorry, if family is going to stab you in the back, if the first girl that like..come on, if family period is going to stab you in the back and do the shit that they did to me, what makes me believe that nobody else is gonna do it?*

One of the most commonly found themes throughout the homeless young adult community is an extreme lack of family support. Without family support, youth and young adults have no choice but to take control of their own lives on a whim, with the tools they have been given, and the cards they have been dealt. If they have nothing, the end result can be an episode of homelessness. This finding is supported through my personal research, by ALLY Youth Services Director of Programs, Christopher Senesi, and others whom have studied this population (e.g. Ferguson, 2009; Rew 2002). Red, Hunter, Zephyr, and many other homeless young adults I personally know have spoken of some degree of physical, sexual, or verbal abuse, alcohol or drug abuse, trauma, neglect, or poverty within their respected biological, adopted, or fostered household.

Red told me the following about his relationship to his mother in response to my question about how he became homeless:

“Well, the way I got to Boulder was back in 2010 when I was living in Ohio. I ended up moving out here because I wanted to go to college and all that, out in the mountains, so I chose to come out here. I started going to college for like six months and all that and then I was with my mom 'cause I didn't have a job. She kicked me out, so I was homeless. Somebody gave me advice to go to Boulder because that's where they said I should go because I don't have anything. So I ended up getting a ride from somebody to Boulder to where they call the homeless shelter, and I stayed there. So that's basically more how I got to boulder, because my mom ended up kicking me out.”

Even though Red's mother “kicked [him] out” of his house, he still maintains a relationship with her as evident of a conversation I had with him before we sat down for the

interview. He told me he spoke to his mom that day and asked her if she could come to Colorado some time to visit him to see how well he is doing, but she turned down his invitation for seemingly no apparent reason, or at least no reason apparent to him. I know from previous conversations that Red's parents are not necessarily abusive, but from his description of them, his parents are neglectful and unsupportive. From my perspective as an outside observer, I interpret his parents to be uncaring of him and his development, safety, wellbeing, and possibly even his future. Left alone with no money in his pocket and unsupported by his family at 21 years old, Red had no choice but to fend for himself the best he could. He told me he tried to find a job for six months in Boulder, but after being turned down time and time again, he eventually gave up and lost hope. The following excerpt from my interview with ALLY Youth Services Director of Programs, Christopher Senesi, paints a clear picture as to how a youth who does not come from an abusive household per say can experience an episode of homeless if the family is unsupportive.

“A lot of youth who turn 18 that were cared for by their family are kicked out by their family because they can no longer afford them. They're considered an adult, so there's no legal obligation for the parents to keep that kid in their house. A lot of times we see kids go to college, get caught up with drugs and alcohol, and then eventually flunk out of school. Their parents either don't want them or can't take them back, so the kids have to fend for themselves. No money with the economy, its hard to get a job, hard to just survive so they become homeless. You got the spectrum from parents who don't want them, or the parents who do want them but don't have the means in this economy to support a 19 year old. More and more youth are living with their parents. Parents are spending a lot of money on their children at a later age, so if the parents can't afford that, they end up homeless ... I've seen quite a bit of 18 to 24 year olds who have good relationships with their parents who are homeless. It's difficult for the kid to not have a strong connection or guiding connection with parents. It hinders their development.”

On a completely different playing field from Red, Zephyr's family background is what I would consider from my research and observations to be extreme but certainly not unheard of. He previously told me about his family history before my official interview with him while

volunteering. I maintained a high level of professionalism throughout our conversation and throughout the end of the night until I locked our outreach center doors. But the moment I heard the lock click, I broke down in tears with my hands over my face and shook my head side to side, questioning how things like this could possibly happen. It was hard to hear again, but for the sake of research I respectfully asked him to repeat it during the interview so I could share it with my readers.<sup>5</sup> The following is an excerpt from my interview with Zephyr:

*Zephyr:* It's been rough because ever since I was 14 I had family problems. I'm an adopted middle child, um, my mother died at 14 during childbirth, my father rotted in prison because of it. The only reason my stepmom adopted me was so she could rub it in his face so she could be like "ha ha ha, I have your kid."

*SW:* You told me previously that a lot of the homeless kids in Boulder might be running from something, or have past family issues, and then you related that back to yourself. Could you talk about what you told me about your stepdad, and how that led you down your path?

*Zephyr:* Yeah, a lot of the homeless kids that are out here that are 14, 15, 16, and 17, they've all had rough families. Normally they're coming from a family that's overbearing, or has an abusive family member towards them. In my case, it was my stepdad. Uh, he came into the picture a couple years after my [step]mom had adopted me. Between the ages of 14 and 16, I come to find out that this is a common age for this to happen at the household...um, my stepdad raped me. And, I didn't want to go home. I remember that night that I finally got fed up with it, and I didn't want to go home, so, I started hopping from friend's house to friend's house every night, just finding somewhere else to sleep. I think that's when I started being different than most kids my ages was because, there was no love at my house.

Although heartbreaking, Zephyr's traumatic family history gave me a great deal of insight into why he has been homeless for so long. Through no fault of his own, his family trauma forced a separation between him and his peers, leaving him feeling alone and different

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<sup>5</sup> Zephyr disclosed a great deal of information about how his family and past led to his homelessness, but, even though he gave me full permission to share everything he told me in the interview, I did not feel comfortable nor safe repeating and documenting some parts of his story. I want the reader to know there is more to his story than I included in this thesis.

during a critical stage of adolescent development. Several homeless adult women, myself, many other female volunteers at ALLY, and Chris Senesi have either experienced and/or seen evidence of Zephyr fulfilling a role of “care-taker,” always taking care of, respecting, helping, and looking after women. He tells me all the time, “I have no tolerance for women beaters.” I believe Zephyr compares his vulnerable 14-year-old self in relation to his stepfather, to the potential vulnerability of women; he does whatever he can—and finds purpose and value—in keeping his traumatic experience from happening to anyone else in a vulnerable or possibly powerless position. His feelings of difference and loneliness, in combination with filling a care-giver or protector role—which may or may not serve him in the long run but is certainly supportive to the homeless community—gives Zephyr a sense of purpose, value, and belonging on the streets.

Witnessing or experiencing traumatic events in their past has led many youth to an extreme distrust of any person, regardless of age, in any state of authority or power greater than their own, namely, the “home-owners” or “yuppies.”<sup>6</sup> Whether it be a current or future employer or a similar-aged volunteer such as myself, gaining any degree of trust is extremely difficult. Many youth I have spoken to firmly believe quite literally that the world is out to get them, or that they are being “screwed over.” For example, a youth who has known me throughout my entire time volunteering still does not trust me and believes I do not care about him. With that said, the only people they do trust are others who are in their same socio-economic position: homeless. Individuals within the homeless community are all on an equal playing field from a socio-economic standpoint, they are empathetic of each other’s experiences, but maybe, most importantly, they do not represent any one who has wronged them in the past.

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<sup>6</sup> “Yuppies” is a derogatory term the homeless community uses to describe anyone who is not homeless.

## **“Where everybody knows your name”**

*The only good thing about living on the streets is other people living on the streets ... The thing about living on the streets is make friends on the streets with other people that are homeless because that'd help you out. If you don't have anything, they will help you out, and when they don't have anything, you help them out. It's just the way it works, so, as long as you have friends and all that on the streets ...*

From my observations at ALLY Youth Services and from the time I spent “hanging out” on their turf at the park in front of the Boulder Public Library, it is clear that the Boulder homeless community, both young and adult, knows each other by name and at least a little bit about their respective stories. Even though every one does get along, there are still disputes and not everyone likes nor trusts every person. Regardless, if an individual does not “cause trouble,” steal, or snitch, they will generally be accepted into the group. In regards to the homeless community, Zephyr said, “I felt that I didn't have to hide who I was...I didn't have to cover who I was. I didn't have to be an asshole to people just to keep safe. I had friends. I had family.” Zephyr did not have to hide who he was because almost everyone on the streets has experienced some degree of trauma in their past, allowing him to feel accepted and equal amongst his peers. Many of them also have some degree of not-so-socially-acceptable quirkiness, such as Zephyr's love for Magic the Gathering and Dungeons and Dragons, Hunter's love for punk rock music and political philosophy, and Red's sadistic humor. These quirks and off-beat characteristics further allowed a space for connection and friendship building.

The following is Zephyr's experience of his first couple of weeks living on the streets:

“When I first got homeless, I was scared shitless. I'm not even gonna lie. I didn't know where I was getting food, I didn't know where I was getting clothing. I was 18, fresh out of the army ... I was terrified for my life for the first couple weeks. Till I met a couple ‘a people, I got to know them, I started doin’ runs for them ... like running to the liquor store, getting cigarettes ‘cause they don't have I.D. and I had my military I.D. so I got a discount, just, ya know, doin’ little chores for them till they got to like me ... and they were like ‘wait, wait, wait, we’ll send a new guy, you, you stay here ... you relax, you’ve been here a bit.’ And that’s when I realized people on the street, if they’re not your typical drunks that just want to cause hell and just urinate all over themselves, they’re a family. They look out for each other. If one person goes down, two more are going to stand up and defend him. Ya know ... and as I went on, I started to realize that there wasn't anything to be afraid of. And for the first time, and honestly the first time ... I felt that I didn't have to hide who I was. I could be my geeky little nerdy self.”

The following is Red's testimony of his first few days on the streets:

“The very first day I was there, I was so nervous and so worried. Within the second day I didn't really worry about anything. It was more the first day 'cause I didn't know anybody, I didn't know what to do, but because I get along with almost anybody I talk to and all that, I started talking to these couple guys who were like in their 40's, and they like, there's one guy in particular, he's not my real dad but I used to call him my street dad. He's the one who showed me the ropes, and he's the one who showed me everything about Boulder for the first three weeks I was there, I was just hanging out with him and he showed me everything about the streets and everything like that, not even a couple months I knew everything about Boulder...”

Although very different stories, both Red and Zephyr shared a similar experience with other homeless people during their first few days on the streets. While in a time of fear, they both “met a couple people” or “met a couple guys” who showed them the ropes and eventually became family. I am still unclear as to who initiated the initial conversations, but regardless, both Red and Zephyr found engaging with other homeless people who know what they are doing, or what I would call “professional homeless people,” to be key to their survival, both for their physical (e.g. finding food and supplies) and emotional wellbeing (e.g. empathy, finding acceptance and belonging).

## A Community Divided

Boulder's homeless community is divided into two groups: the "locals" and the "travelers." As Zephyr reports, "If you've been here for more than 3 winters, you get what is called 'local status.'... There are main people in charge of the park that take care of everybody out there. They are the head of the family. They look out for the youngsters, they look out for the in-betweens, and they put the travelers and the wayward people that want to cause hell and trouble in their place." The *surviving 3 winters rule* can be negotiated as evident of Zephyr's homeless experience in Boulder. Even though he has only been camping in Boulder for less than a year, he prematurely achieved local status because he fulfills the role of the local. Using his description, a local is one who is very familiar with the Boulder landscape, knows of good "squats," knows of all services and resources, knows where to obtain supplies such as clothing and food, and has a general likability and proven trustworthiness.

The "locals" also treat Boulder with respect and make an extra effort to keep the streets clean. One youth I spoke to about a year ago told me that he and his street family keep the streets clean because the streets are their home, similar to how "home-owners" would keep their houses clean. With this in the back of my mind, I asked Red why the locals take care of Boulder. He had a different yet equally interesting response:

"The reason they care about the town is because they'd be livin' there for a while. Because it's their home and they can make a living there. It's a nice beautiful city, and a lot of tourists like to go there and all that. Without all that, Boulder can't make money, and then they can't support the homeless. The reason they like Boulder so much is because Boulder helps them out. That's the reason they return the favor and help keep the town clean."

Although different, both Red and the other youth illustrate a particular relationship with the city itself. If they take care of Boulder, Boulder will take care of them (hopefully). This relationship is reminiscent of the relationships upon which the “street family” is built, i.e. reciprocity.

The “travelers,” on the other hand, do not tend to hold a special relationship with the city itself, or at least in the eyes of the locals. Both Red and Zephyr (without even mentioning or asking them) shared a number of complaints and grievances about the travelers such as them destroying the park or snitching on the locals. Travelers are those who temporarily “squat” in Boulder while on their way to another city. In other words, Boulder is not their main destination but only a mere stopping point to possibly gather supplies or take a break from hitchhiking across the country. Boulder is an excellent stopping place for three reasons: (1) It is close to the center of the country and is thus geographically a good resting point with plenty of camping spots, (2) It is a beautiful tourist destination in general, and (3) Boulder is service rich. If they can find the services and they play their cards right, they can eat three free meals per day, they can find free clothing and gear from either ALLY Youth Services, The Bridge House, Attention Homes, or Deacon’s Closet.

Most of the locals were travelers before they arrived in Boulder, including Red, Hunter, Zephyr, and Boxcar.

## **The Street Family**

The “head of the family” individuals Zephyr is speaking of in the above section consists of six to seven adult men, some of whom are “street fathers” who hold an established and respected authority among the local homeless community, and a select few local “street moms.” The men establish and enforce “street justice,” meaning they enforce street rules, order,

punishments such as “creeking,<sup>7</sup>” and hold the power to either “EightySix<sup>8</sup>” an individual or group from the park or Boulder entirely. The “street mothers” take care of the younger homeless individuals. Zephyr said they “keep the homeless kids in line and tell them to go back to school.” I am under the impression that some of the “street mothers” and “street fathers” are in a relationship with one another, and I know of one example of a 19 year old woman who took on the responsibility of “street mother” after she and a respected “street father” became engaged to one another.

Even though these street parents are not biologically related to the younger homeless population, the term “street parents” denotes a relationship beyond just that of just a mentor or authority figure. The street mothers and fathers are key figures in the lives of Boulder’s homeless youth and young adults. They have an established relationship built through time based on trust, support, and an equal exchange of giving and receiving. As Smith notes in her conclusion of “Searching for Kinship” in relation to the importance of the street family,

I found that homeless young people adopted the roles of a parent or sibling. Street families played an important role in youth’s daily survival by helping fulfill the need for emotional and material support and companionship, by combating feelings of alienation and loneliness, and by helping mitigate the continuing demands of life on the streets. Although some families were transient in nature, these families addressed real and specific street/survival needs (Smith 2008).

Smith’s findings from wherever her research was conducted (her article was not quite clear), holds true in Boulder as well. To add to the conversation, aside from street families

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<sup>7</sup> “Creeking” is the act of tossing an individual, regardless of age or socioeconomic status, into the Boulder Creek as a form of punishment. They aim away from the rocks as to avoid any serious injury. It can be equated to a warning or slap on the wrist.

<sup>8</sup> To “Eightysix” an individual or group means to expel them from a designated area. An individual might be “eightysixed” if they were caught stealing, snitching, inappropriately looking at or engaging with women or young girls, or were showing unreasonable or overt aggression.

addressing survival needs, I would argue that these fictive kinships also give each family member a sense of purpose, self worth, and emotional guidance and support while “living rough” on the streets, especially in regards to the parent/child relationship.

From my interviews, my participant observation at The Park, and from my participant observation and overhearing conversations while volunteering at ALLY, it is my overall impression that the “street parents” are among the older homeless community in Boulder, while the “street siblings” are among the younger. As Zephyr notes:

“The older people...several different states, you have what is called street mothers and street brothers, street sisters, street dads, all that kind of stuff. It basically fills the role of the family that was never there. Like, I have more street sisters and street aunts, and street brothers than anything else. I don't have a street mother, I don't have a street dad. They can be my brother, they can be my sister, or they can be an aunt or an uncle if they're old enough. I can't put somebody in that place because I never knew my mother and father. Ya know, and my stepmom and stepdad weren't much of parents either.”

My finding is different than Smith's, which leads me to conclude that either the formation of the “street family” differs city by city, or more likely, the current street family is fluid, with members coming and going year by year, creating a difference in age range. In other words, just because “the family” is the way it is now does not necessarily mean it will remain the same over time. I can only hope this fluidity is due to members of the family finding acceptance in places other than the street.

## **Conclusion**

The process of writing this thesis and the information I have uncovered about the young adult homeless community has not only been an invaluable experience for me personally, it also contributes to the limited literature on the topic of homeless youth and young adults. Considering

there is no literature about Boulder's homeless young adults in particular as an area of study, this thesis is a step forward in understanding this city's population.

Undoubtedly, there is still a lot of work to be done on this topic and this thesis only begins to scratch the surface. In order to gain a fuller understanding of this population, a larger sample size of participants will be necessary. This should include more interviews with local advocates, scholars, and law enforcement, as well as more conversations with the homeless young adults. I do not think I could have related their three stories to the wider homeless community with confidence if I did not already have prior experience with this specific population through my volunteer work at ALLY Youth Services.

This thesis—the first iteration of my future work—can be used by local service advocates to have a clearer understanding of the homeless youth who walk through their doors. Moreover, the information I have gathered about where homeless youth and young adults find value and importance could be used to make advocacy programs more effective. The residents of Boulder can use this thesis as a way to understand who they see holding a cardboard sign on their way to and from work. Most importantly, I would like this thesis to communicate the viewpoints of some of Boulder's homeless youth. In return for their time spent talking with me, Zephyr, Hunter, and Red all independently requested that I tell my audience, whomever they may be, to have more compassion for them, their family, and the homeless community in Boulder. They asked me to tell you to talk to them, ask them who they are, and let them tell you their story. I am honored to have had this opportunity to convey this message.

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