

Housing Agency and Family Lift Man From Life in the Street



Jason Cohn for The New York Times

Once homeless, Tyrone Taylor, 57, reunited with his granddaughter Shyan Coleman, 8, and his daughter Charmale Cockrell.

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PITTSBURGH, July 24 — Walking through Pittsburgh International Airport in a retro Steelers jersey recently, Tyrone Taylor looked like just another native son returning home.

The smiles and hugs he exchanged with his two daughters and two grandchildren only added to a scene typical of airports everywhere. But if one listened closely, it was clear this was not a typical reunion.

“Thank you. Thank you for saving my life,” Mr. Taylor, 57, told his younger daughter, Shawnta Taylor, 26, as he embraced her.

Mr. Taylor’s return was the culmination of a 21-year descent into addiction, alcoholism and homelessness that ended only with his daughter’s outreach.

Though the fit, neatly dressed Mr. Taylor bore none of the markings from it, he had spent 16 of the last 18 years on the streets of skid row in Los Angeles, a 55-square-block neighborhood that is home to one of the highest concentrations of homeless people in

the nation.

“Unfortunately, Tyrone is a success story that is not replicated in higher numbers because there is not enough housing for homeless people,” said Mike Alvidrez, executive director of the Skid Row Housing Trust, a nonprofit agency that builds and operates permanent supportive housing in Los Angeles, including Mr. Taylor’s current home.

Since the late 1990s, advocacy groups like the Skid Row Housing Trust have been trying to increase the number of permanent supportive housing units, which provide treatment support and monitor tenants’ progress. The federal [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) reported this year that such units increased to 208,700 in 2005 from 114,000 in 1996.

“I needed a home, and Rainbow gave one to me,” Mr. Taylor said of Rainbow Apartments, where he lives on the edge of skid row. “The rest of my time, I go to my meetings.”

For Mr. Taylor those meetings include Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and giving testimonials to others starting the process that he began on April 1, 2005 — “My sobriety day,” he said proudly.

Mr. Taylor was raised by his maternal grandfather, pastor of a Pentecostal church in Pittsburgh, after his mother died of complications from asthma when he was 4.

When he lost his job at a steel plant outside of Pittsburgh in 1983, he began drinking and using cocaine.

“After the plant closed, some of the guys I worked with committed suicide when they couldn’t find work,” Mr. Taylor said. “I tried to do it with drinking and drugs.”

His family tried to rally around him and persuaded him to go live with his older brother, Allen, who was in the Army and living in Las Vegas. He left behind his three young daughters and their mothers, one of them his former wife.

There was short-lived improvement, but in 1989, he lost his job at a casino, he said, after drinking and drugs caused his hands to shake.

Someone told Mr. Taylor that he could live free in Los Angeles, and do as he pleased — which then meant “following that demon in the bottle,” he said. And that is what he did for 16 years.

Then, in late 2004, Allen Taylor was visiting Los Angeles and decided to go looking for his brother at the last address he had for him on skid row. He found him walking the

streets of the nearby garment district, about 70 pounds lighter and dressed in torn clothes and dirty sneakers, one without laces. It was a situation that would have once been unthinkable for Mr. Taylor, who had been known as an immaculate dresser.

They talked, and Allen Taylor, now 58, said he realized for the first time how far his brother had fallen. “He barely looked like himself,” he recalled. He called Shawnta Taylor, and a few months later, on Valentine’s Day 2005, they went in search of her father. It took a day of searching.

When Shawnta Taylor approached her father, she told him who she was and started to embrace him, but he pulled back.

“Baby, don’t hug me,” he told her, “I’m dirty.”

“Daddy, don’t do that. I came too far for you to turn away from me,” she said, pulling him close.

Soon afterward Mr. Taylor checked himself into a rehabilitation center and began the road back that led to his first trip to his hometown in more than two decades.

The plane trip was paid for by a Fannie Mae board member after the board heard Mr. Taylor speak in February about his recovery and the role played by his new home at Rainbow Apartments, which Fannie Mae helped finance.

It is only a monthlong visit here. Mr. Taylor said Los Angeles is his home for now and, “I still have work to do on myself.”

He lists a half dozen counselors and staff members at the rehabilitation and housing centers he has been in who have helped him, but Mr. Taylor said the real key to his recovery was obvious.

“It was her unconditional love,” he said of his daughter. “I took a look at my 50 years of life and realized all I had left was my children. I had to get back to them.”

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