



FACING HOMELESSNESS

*The issue doesn't have one look or feeling. It doesn't discriminate race, age or gender in our community. These five stories — straight from Oklahoma City residents — illustrate how homelessness affects a variety of our neighbors. **Story and photos by Nathan Poppe***

KRISTI, 51

Domestic abuse survivor

Kristi wanted to leave her abuser, but where do you run without anywhere to go? At age 50, she first experienced homelessness, living out of her car and relying on the YWCA for shelter. Domestic abuse drove her out of stable housing. She went from living comfortably in an apartment to having nearly nothing to her name.

"I was numb," Kristi said. "I was in survival mode. ... Not living — there was no living — it was survival. I'm still in that mode. I'm trying to get out of it, but that's hard to shake."

Kristi looks like she could be anyone's mother, and that's mean that in the kindest way. Her smile is as warm and inviting as morning coffee. She's petit but bursting at the seams with conversation and hospitality, a clear nod to her Texas upbringing.

Kristi was a single mother several years before meeting her abuser. Getting by with two boys was often stressful. She said Dallas was a rat race. So, she left her home state to give her kids a better life and eventually wound up in Oklahoma around 2007. Baseball became a lifeline for the family of three. Kristi was careful to pick a team with a coach that could act as her boys' role model.

That's how she met Shane, another parent close to the team. He seemed friendly enough. Plus, his kids got along with hers. When Kristi's boys were grown and out of the house, she didn't hesitate to reconnect and grab lunch with him. He made it seem like they still had a lot in common outside of sports. At the same time, Kristi was recovering from a fight with breast cancer. Shane claimed to need heart surgery. Both were empty nesters.

"We were gonna team up and help each other out," Kristi said. "Within a couple of months, the relationship started changing. ... We never parted, which was very unhealthy. To me, he was a predator. He was looking for someone that was vulnerable. He would even say, 'I like to rescue.'"

Kristi overlooked other red flags — like how he was secretive on his phone and was controlling of her schedule. Before long, the couple

lived under the same roof. Trading in her hard-won independence was a challenge but nothing like the first time an argument turned physical.

It's a long story, but it started when Kristi was stranded in Eufaula. Shane had disregarded picking her up from a weekend trip. She was stranded but managed to find a ride home to Yukon. Kristi pushed for answers. Shane pushed back.

"He jumped up, grabbed me by my throat and threw me through a bedroom door," she said. "I landed in the corner, screaming. He said, 'Shut your mouth, don't you ever question me again or you're gonna make me lose it because you're the reason I'm acting like this.'"

She'd often leave Shane for a few days and return, stuck in his gravity. Her shelter, transportation and job prospects were controlled by her then-partner. The abuse was taking a heavy toll on Kristi's physical and mental health. But Kristi found hope, in herself, a Red Rock behavioral health counselor and continued therapy.

Her luck changed for the better after a friend donated a car. Also, Kristi started cleaning houses to get by and before long she started working with the Homeless Alliance to secure an apartment.

Today, you won't find a cozier, better decorated space — her original paintings lining the walls. Best of all, it's safer than sleeping outside, and Kristi regained her independence. One small step at a time.

"I'm so thankful," she said. "People look at me here like I'm OK because I have a car. Most of them don't realize that was my house for a long time. ... When I first got here I was afraid. I didn't know why. Afraid of what? This is a stepping stone. I can't tell you where I'm gonna step next, but I'm gonna step."