

OCTOBER 26, 2018

Homeless women are the sexual assault survivors no one talks about. Here's my story.



Lori Yearwood, 53, in Salt Lake City. Yearwood wrote a first person piece about her two years in homelessness, her experience climbing out and her current period of transition. (Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

Story by Lori Teresa Yearwood

After nearly two years of homelessness, I could no longer bear sleeping, let alone bathing, in the shelter where I had spent too many nights. Its shower stalls were often littered with used toilet tissue and tampons. Drug paraphernalia — needles and syringes — were sometimes strewn across the bathroom floors. On the night that I found human feces smeared across the stall where I was attempting to clean myself, I walked out of the shelter and started sleeping on a bench in a park near downtown Salt Lake City.

My bathing spot: a rushing river that ran through Memory Grove Park. On a September morning in 2016, I took off my clothes and entered the freezing water.

As I dried off with a T-shirt and got dressed, I remembered how, not so long ago, I had bathed in privacy and peace, in a porcelain claw-foot tub in my own farmhouse.

Exhausted and hungry, I began walking toward a nearby church that offered free coffee and sack lunches when a police officer commanded me to stop.

“Someone saw you bathing naked and called the police,” he said.

I stood in front of him, my hair sopping wet.

“You have done this more than once,” he said.

Passersby stared at the spectacle of the police officer arresting me, a garbage bag with my belongings at my feet. I felt deep shame, but I did not respond. Except for perfunctory answers to mandatory questions — such as name, age and Social Security number — I mostly stopped talking when I became homeless. What I had to say no longer seemed to matter.

It had not always been this way. I grew up with loving parents who worked hard so that I could attend the best schools. I graduated from college with honors and went on to a successful career as a full-time journalist who had been published in Oprah Winfrey’s magazine. Later, I became a business owner and, for nearly a decade, lived on a mountainside ranch where my horses roamed freely.

Then, suddenly, my life spiraled away from me, and I lost everything. For the first time, I became surrounded by crime and abuse and insanity. The trauma I suffered before the homelessness, followed by the trauma of homelessness itself — which included physical, psychological and sexual abuse — left me numb and defenseless.

By the time the police officer found me after I had bathed in the river, I had been held hostage, beaten and repeatedly threatened with rape by a transient man. I had also, on numerous occasions, been locked up in hospital psychiatric wards and the county jail.

At 52, I could not grasp how I had fallen so far, so fast, and so hard.

If you had passed me on the streets of Salt Lake City during the two years I was homeless, you would have seen someone who appeared to fit a dehumanizing stereotype: a woman who huddled in the corners of public buildings to keep warm and wandered around silent and with eyes averted, mostly detached from the world around her. Today, 23 months since I emerged from homelessness and began restoring my life, I am uniquely able and eager to tell the story of how I got there and how I managed to get out. It's a story about a devastating collapse that often occurs before homelessness, and the particular brutality of life as a homeless woman. And it's a story that comes with a warning.

As someone who had a stable, prosperous life before the plates shifted, I am here to tell you that denying it could ever happen to you may not save you. It did not save me.

That fall morning at the river, the police officer handcuffed me and drove me to the county jail, where I spent the next six months in a cell on charges of public lewdness. Aside from thanking the guards and inmates when they put my meals through the slot in my door, I remained in my silence.

I had yet to experience failure

I was a 34-year-old reporter at the Miami Herald in 2000 when my father died of cancer. Emboldened by my inheritance, I quit the paper and co-founded a nonprofit children's writing organization. After a couple of years, I decided to move to Oregon to pursue a dream of working as a freelance journalist and living on a ranch with horses.

Looking back, I wish I hadn't abandoned a stable job with benefits to move to a place where I knew almost no one. But I had yet to experience failure.





After Lori Yearwood bought her first horse, Vashka (top, with Yearwood, and above with Yearwood's mom), she purchased a ranch in Oregon in 2004, where she and the white Arabian would race through trails, streams and mountains. After Vashka almost died in 2006 from eating high-sugar grasses, Yearwood founded a company that made treats for sugar-sensitive horses and spent long hours baking, shipping and managing the website. (Courtesy Lori Yearwood)

For as long as I can remember, I have had the gift of being able to understand and comfort horses. I bought my first horse, Vashka — a beautiful white Arabian with a long, flowing mane and pale eyelashes — while still in Florida. After I settled on a ranch I purchased in southern Oregon in 2004, Vashka and I would race through trails and streams and surrounding mountains. I later bought him a friend, a beautiful black filly I named Raya.

After Vashka almost died in 2006 from eating the high-sugar grasses on my property, I founded a company that made treats for sugar-sensitive horses. By that time, a promising book project I had been working on had fallen apart, and I decided to devote

everything I had to the company, spending long hours each day baking and shipping treats and managing the website.

In the years before the housing market crashed, it wasn't difficult to find banks that would allow me to refinance, and so I took advantage of the easy credit to keep it going, until, finally, I was living off credit cards.

In 2008, the bank foreclosed on my house. I rented a tiny carpentry shed on my mother's property next door, where I worked and lived for five years.

By the spring of 2013, I had built enough of a customer base to contract with a professional bakery in Eugene, Ore., and I moved with my animal family — which by then also included three cats and two dogs — to a sheep farm, where I rented a little cottage.

On May 9, just two weeks after I moved in, I was lying in bed about 11 p.m. when I heard a snapping sound that seemed to be coming from the wall behind me. I got out of bed to peer into the adjacent kitchen. Flames were jutting out of the wall. I ran to the sink and began filling pots with water to throw at the fire. Then I grabbed my pets, one by one, and tossed them out the front door.

I ran next door to my landlord's house and banged on her door. She ran back with me and dashed into the smoke-filled house. A few minutes later, I found her seemingly paralyzed with shock in the burning kitchen and pulled her out before the fire consumed the house.

I lost everything, save for my animals and the clothes I was wearing. Fortunately, my mother said I could move back onto her property. Her ranch was too far from the bakery for me to continue contracting with it, so I went back to baking the horse treats myself. By that point, I had not had a day off work in seven years.

About six months later, my mother found out she had late-stage cancer. Looking back, I remember her complaining of not feeling well, but as a devout Christian Scientist, she

believed prayer could overcome any physical travail. In her final days that December, I sat by her bed and held her hand as her mouth contorted in a soundless scream.

I didn't have much time to grieve. There was a reverse mortgage on her property, and I needed to leave. One of my most loyal customers invited me to rent a room in her house on a 100-acre ranch. I moved in with my animals on Christmas Day 2013.

Still, my life kept unraveling.

Luna, my beloved beagle, received a diagnosis of terminal cancer. Emotionally and physically spent, I put my struggling company up for sale and attempted to resurrect my career in journalism. No one made any offers, and my writing website and job applications were ignored.

Unable to pay my rent, my housemate understandably asked me to move out, and I turned over to her ownership of my horses, my horse trailer and all my horse accessories.

I had taken care of Vashka for 16 years and I had raised Raya since she was six months old.

"Thank you," I said as I stroked their manes one last time.

On that same day in July, I buried Luna. Then I drove away.

I was estranged from my half-siblings and had no extended family to turn to. My friends told me they had done all they could to help me and were facing their own pressures. I couch-surfed at friends of friends' homes before someone suggested I travel to Utah to stay at a spiritual retreat. Eventually, I had to leave there, too. By the time I wound up at a hotel in Salt Lake City, the only thing left of my belongings was a beautiful soft, tan leather satchel with brass clasps that had belonged to my mother, and a few bags of clothes.

On Nov. 18, 2014, 18 months after the fire that essentially destroyed my livelihood, I was unable to foot the hotel bill and the manager called the police. An officer then called for

a taxi to take me to the city's shelter and I stuffed what little I still possessed into my satchel and walked out to the curb.

F a r f r o m t h e c o m f o r t I h a d k n o w n

The taxi driver stopped at the entrance to the Road Home, a homeless shelter in Salt Lake City. As I climbed out of the car, clothes and hangers spilled out of my bag and onto the street.

“You sure got some good taste!” a woman yelled as I picked up my things.

The curbs and sidewalks around the shelter's entrance were crowded with knots of people, sitting or splayed on the ground. The acrid smell of urine wafted through the air.

Inside, a shelter employee told me that all the beds were taken for the night. I would have to sleep on a cot in the hall, beneath a strip of fluorescent lights.

“Keep an eye on your things,” he warned as he ushered me into a world so far from the comfort I had always known.

In that other life, I had thought homeless shelters were places of refuge. The Road Home, though, turned out to be an intensified replication of the chaos on the streets — the same desperation, the same violence — concentrated in a single building.

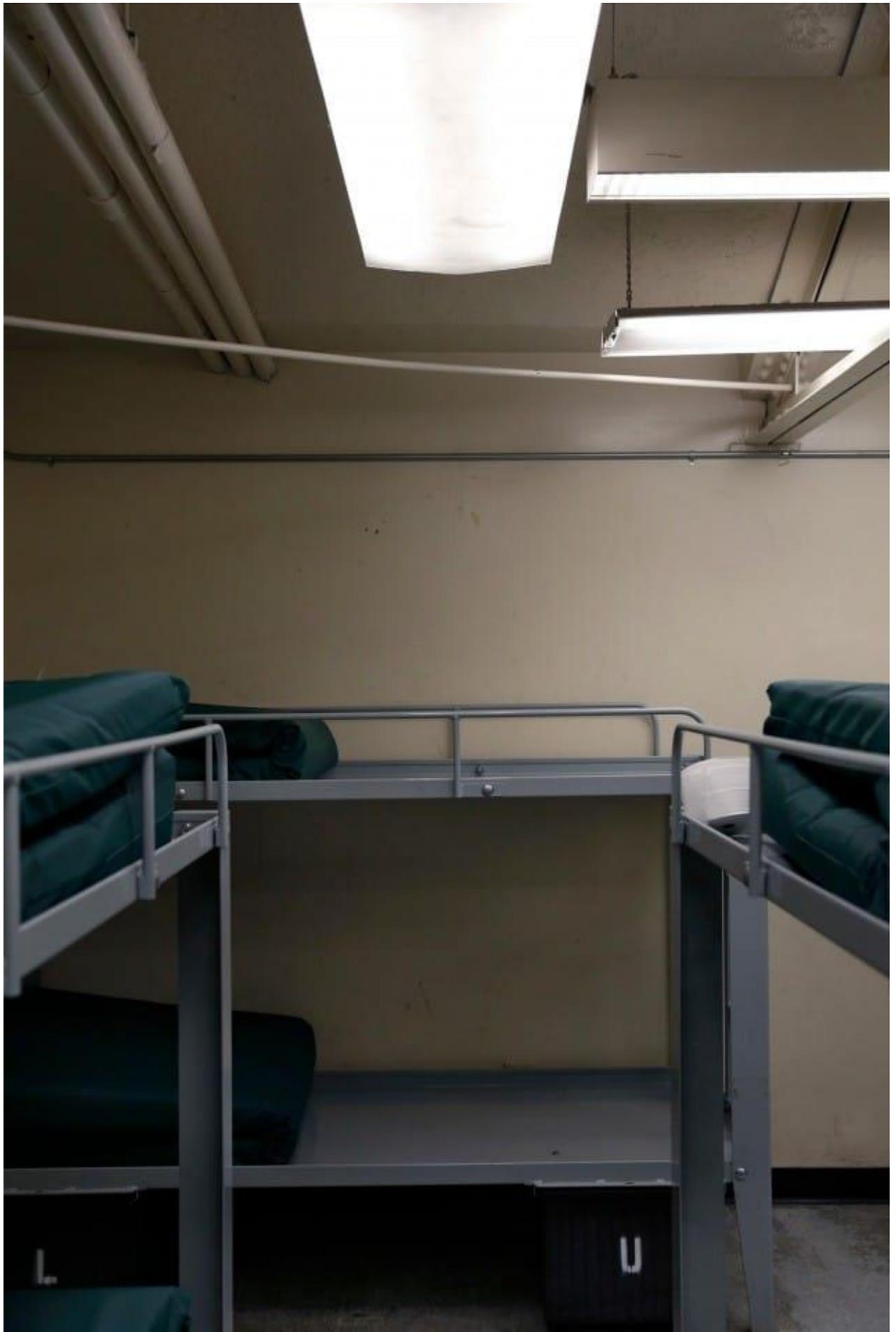
The women in that shelter were so afraid of having their belongings stolen by other residents that they lay in their beds with their shoes on and their backpacks rolled beneath their heads. Every few hours, security guards patrolled the rooms.

Sleep was rare. The fluorescent lighting was merely dimmed at night in an attempt to cut down on theft and violence.

Many nights, when the beds were full, I, along with dozens of other women, curled up on the tiled floors in the laundry and family rooms on thin rubber mats, inches apart from one another. Angry residents slammed bathroom and dormitory doors throughout the

night. (Shelter management later told The Washington Post that steps have since been taken to improve conditions.)







After she was unable to pay the bill at a hotel where she had been staying and the manager called the police, Yearwood went to the Road Home, a homeless shelter in Salt Lake City. She spent 422 days there. The bathroom was often littered with trash and drug paraphernalia and she sometimes had to sleep on the laundry room floor when all the beds were taken. (Photos by Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

Sleep deprivation, I was to learn, plagues people living in homelessness, compounding the effects of trauma and mental illness and thwarting our ability to put our lives back together.

As though that weren't enough, I also was negotiating my way through my new surroundings without the ability to see more than a few feet in front of me. Terribly nearsighted, I had not been able to afford eyeglasses since I left Oregon six months earlier. Everything merged into an almost indistinguishable blur of color and I stumbled on uneven ground, sometimes even over cracks in the sidewalk. Once, I fell into a heap in the street because I could not see the curb.

I closed my eyes and prayed

In the traumatic months after my mother died, I had begun convincing myself that the tsunami of destruction that was engulfing my life was God's will for me. Now, I latched on to this coping mechanism, dissociating from my body and creating an elaborate world inside my mind in which things made sense. If I continued to learn the lessons God put before me, even the extreme lessons of homelessness, He would lead me out, I told myself. In the face of unbearable uncertainty, surrender seemed to be the only tactical move I had left.

This kind of broken passivity was often mirrored around me. Once, as I was waiting in line for coffee, I witnessed a man walk up to another man and kick him in the groin for no apparent reason. The man who was assaulted crumpled over but did not otherwise react, and his assailant sauntered away as though nothing had happened.

I closed my eyes and prayed. I prayed in parks. I prayed at the library. I prayed in churches.

I was always on the lookout for the ways in which God might be showing me love even in my difficult circumstances. I thanked the shelter employees who sometimes handed me an extra blanket and the volunteers in the food lines who gave me an extra muffin or glass of juice.

Just a few weeks after I arrived at the shelter, I was standing in line at the outreach center across the street when a man walked up to me, bowed in a gentlemanly way, and offered me a pair of gloves. It was December and snowing, and I didn't have a winter coat, let alone a pair of gloves.

N o o n e h a d e v e r h u r t m e b e f o r e

The man, who appeared to be in his 50s, was lean and very muscular and wore a red bandanna on his head. He introduced himself as John and told me that God wanted him to extend kindness to me. (I am still too fearful to report him to police, so will refer to him in this story by his first name only.)

That day, John took me to breakfast at a nearby Denny's. I remember how hungry I was for good food, how I relished the hot eggs and sausage. He wanted to move to Seattle, he told me, but he had fallen on hard times and was temporarily in Salt Lake City, working nearby and living in the men's homeless shelter. I nodded and offered a few words in response, thanking him for the meal.

In the beginning, John stood outside the doors of the women's shelter, waiting for me to emerge every morning. Then he would walk me to the library, where homeless people went to stay warm after the shelter ushered us out every day at 8.

He lent me his duffel bag after the clasp on my satchel broke, but it was too small to hold all my belongings so he offered to keep my other things in his storage unit a few blocks away from the shelter.

On a spring day in 2015, I went into the dimly lit rented unit — about the size of a very small bedroom — to retrieve my belongings. John quickly pulled down the metal door and locked me inside with him.

I told him I wanted to leave, but he stretched out his arms and blocked me. When I tried to shove him away, he grabbed me so tightly that he left black and blue marks on my arms. Then he told me not to move and rubbed himself against me.

I was overwhelmed by fear and confusion. No one had ever hurt me before. I remember John screaming vile things. I remember him overwhelming me physically to keep me from escaping. I remember him making up a bed of old plastic saying it was for us to share. I don't remember much else.

Finally, John told me I could go and rolled open the door. I asked a man on the street what day it was. Friday, he said. Two days had passed.

Any vestiges of mental health I possessed had been stripped away. I stopped talking after that, retreating into my mind to a God whom I saw as the source of everything, including all my trials — even John.

I had relied throughout life on my faith on the existence of a higher power that gives meaning to life, partly influenced by my parents' beliefs. This reliance grew more fervent after the fire, when to cope with my trauma I began turning obsessively to "A Course in Miracles" published by the Foundation for Inner Peace, an enduringly popular self-help book that emphasizes forgiveness as a means to spiritual transformation.

I made sense of John's constant surveillance and abuse by believing that this God wanted me to endure lessons in forgiveness involving John. If I succeeded, I thought, God would somehow intercede on my behalf and lift me out of homelessness.

A few months later on a rainy summer day, I was lying on the ground in the park in back of the Salt Lake City library, praying, when John suddenly appeared.

"Follow me," he beckoned. Every instinct I had argued against doing so, but I believed God wanted me to push past my fears to trust Him completely, and so I mechanically obeyed.



Yearwood would get her meals -- mostly ham-and-cheese sandwiches, even though she doesn't like ham -- at the Good Samaritan House. She was banned from a nearby convenience store for taking small packets of condiments to add to the sandwiches. (Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

John led me to an apartment that he had secured through stints as an itinerant construction worker and, once inside, screamed at me to take off my clothes. I stripped down to my underwear and he pushed me into a chair and cut off my bra and underwear with scissors. Then he told me to hug him. When I hesitated, he pushed his fingers into my lower lip until I bled.

“Now I am going to cut your hair off,” he said, as he wielded an electric razor over me.

I was sitting on the edge of his bed, naked and with half of my hair missing, my lips black and blue, when the doorbell rang. John yelled at the man to come in, and the two of them chatted casually, as though I did not exist.

“Looks like you are going to be at this for a while,” the man said before leaving.

That night, John whipped me with a rope, kicked me with his steel-toe work boots and made me stand for hours on end in front of him. I prayed harder than I had ever prayed until he finally said I could go. I reached for my clothes.

“No, you must go naked,” he told me.

So I did. A man in a truck in the parking lot handed me a long sweatshirt. I put it on and walked to the homeless shelter, many miles away. People looked at me — a badly bruised woman wearing nothing but a sweatshirt in the middle of the night — and then they looked away. I talked to God on my way back. I told Him that I was tired and that I needed His help.

When I arrived at the shelter, a woman behind the front counter handed me a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and shoes. She did not ask what had happened to me.

“I’m sorry,” I prayed to God the next morning, tears streaming down my face, “I can’t go on like this.”

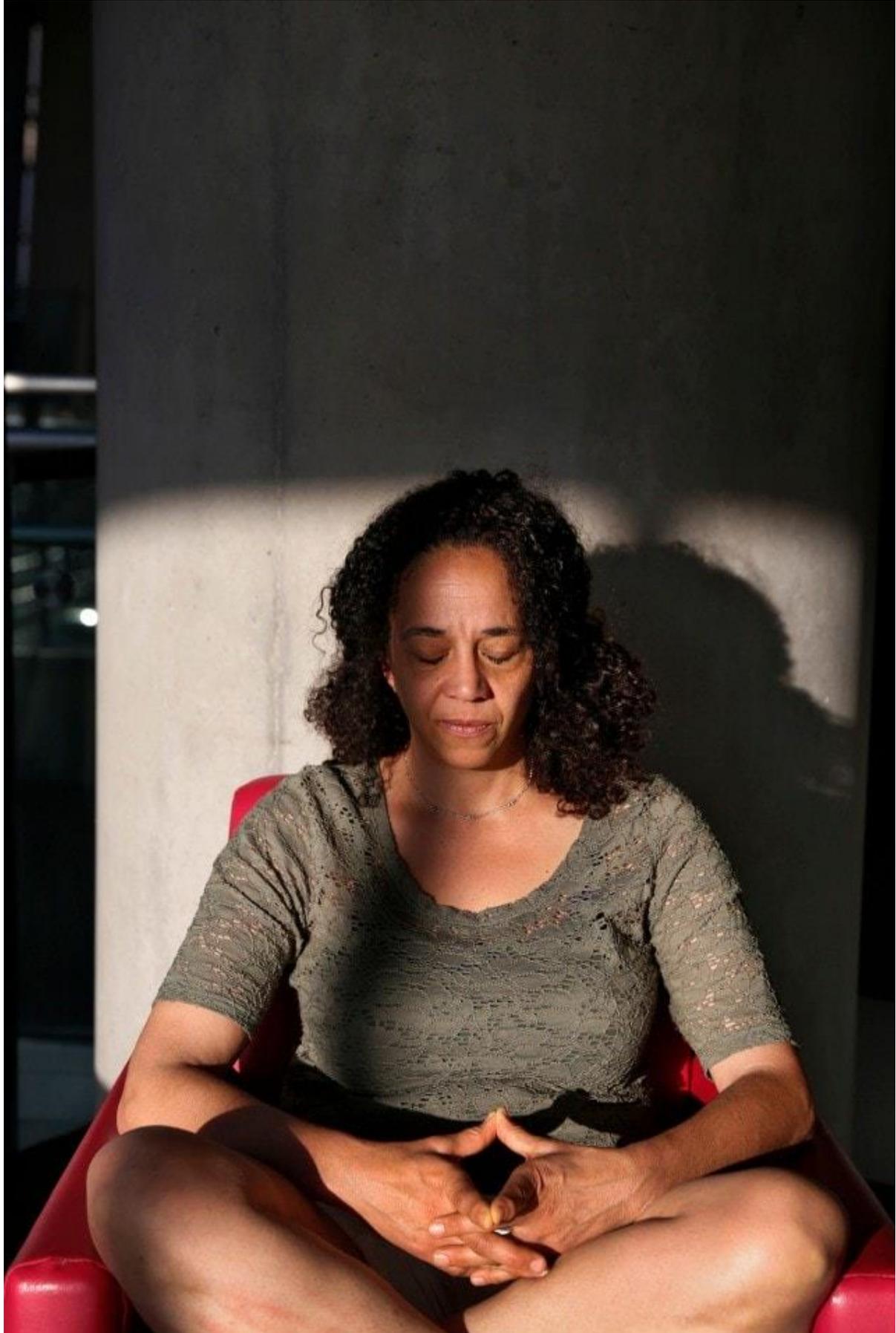
As John continued to stalk and dominate me, I waited for God to give me a sign that I had earned my deliverance. Convinced for the moment that He had heard my prayers, I mustered the strength to tell John on a January afternoon in 2016 that I was never going to spend time with him again.

John appeared to accept it. Then he ordered me to take off my shoes. I robotically obeyed, believing it was what God wanted, and John followed me as I walked, intermittently shoving me into bushes as I made my way to a church about a mile away.

C o n f u s e d a n d d i s t r a u g h t

After that, John vanished from my life. I thought at the time that my prayers had been fulfilled, but I later learned that he was most likely working construction in a nearby town. He had not disappeared for good, and my trials were not over.

One afternoon in the spring, I was sitting cross-legged in front of a fireplace in the library when a homeless man came up behind me and cupped his hands around my breasts. Another time, as I was standing in front of a fountain outside the library, one of the men from the storage unit where John had held me hostage hugged me and wouldn't let go for many seconds after I tried to pull away. Then, as I was praying in a park near the Road Home, still another stranger walked up to me, stooped down as if he was going to talk to me, and grabbed one of my breasts.



Lori Yearwood demonstrates how she was sitting cross-legged in a library in Salt Lake City when a homeless man came up behind her and grabbed her breasts. She says the trauma she suffered before becoming homelessness, followed by the trauma of homelessness itself, left her numb and defenseless. (Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

None of this had happened when John was around, and I later learned why: Being homeless is like living in a very small town, and people run into one another constantly. It's typical for a man to "claim" a woman, and for the other men to see that and stay away. With John gone, the homeless men thought it was open season on me.

"If one more person touches me, I am going to die," a woman in the Road Home yelled from one of the bunk beds in the middle of the night.

I listened with sympathy, my words by now gone. But for the first time, I felt a kinship with the other homeless women who talked about encounters with abuse like mine.

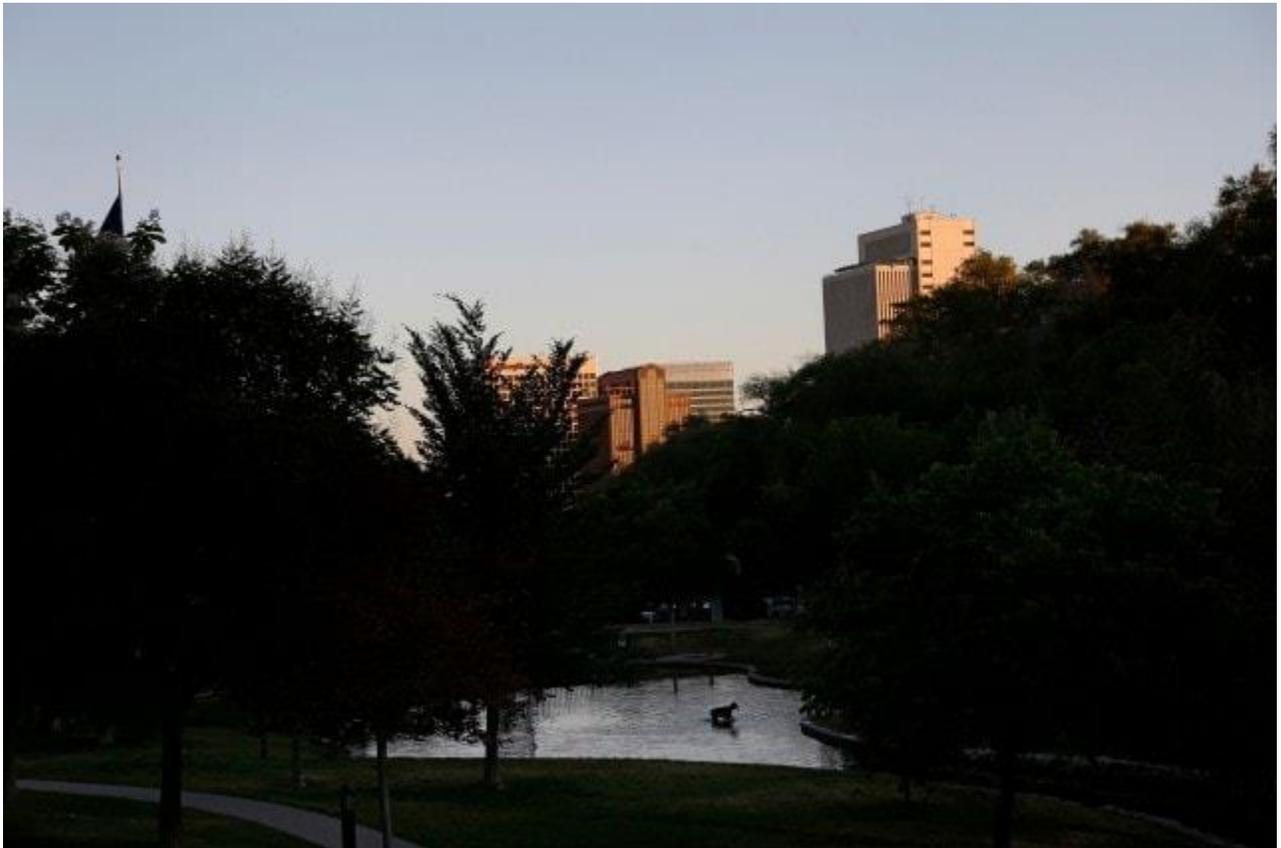
Later I would learn that women account for about 40 percent of the homeless population and are the fastest-growing segment of it. A survey of nearly 300 homeless women conducted by medical researchers over several years and published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2014 found that just under a third of the women reported that they had recently experienced physical violence, and the same proportion said they had recently experienced sexual violence. When asked whether they had recently been the victims of "emotional violence," such as aggressive threats, about two-thirds of them said yes. The same study also found that homeless women are more apt to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, sometimes caused by abuse suffered before their homelessness, but also often as a result of their experiences on the streets, making it even more difficult for them to fend off abuse and get out of homelessness.

Although I didn't talk to anyone about it, I was becoming increasingly confused and distraught. I thought I had done everything God wanted me to do. Yet He still had not released me from my nightmare. I convinced myself that there must be another test I needed to pass. Only in retrospect would I see that the creation of this intricate and irrational spiritual construct was my attempt to establish some sense of control in an insanely chaotic environment — an environment in which I felt like a worthless object.

All my life, I had been incredibly shy and self-conscious about my body. Even my mother had told me as an adult that it would “be okay to show your body a little more.”

Now I would show God that I would trust Him completely, I thought.

On April 3, 2016, according to my psychiatric records, I undressed and laid naked on a grassy embankment by the side of a street.





After leaving a homeless shelter where she had been staying, Yearwood began sleeping on a bench — and bathing in a cold river — in Memory Grove Park on and off for months, sometimes with snow still on the ground. She was lying on the bench, wearing every piece of clothing and the one blanket she had, in May 2017 when she realized that everything she was doing to try to persuade God to free her from her horrible experience was not working. (Photos by Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

I stayed in my silence

I was arrested and charged with public lewdness seven times in six months for either undressing in a park or in a church bathroom or, as happened on that day in the summer of 2016, to bathe in the river. Sometimes I was committed to a psychiatric ward. Other times, I was sent to jail.

Once, according to my psychiatric records, I was simply labeled as having shown “bizarre behavior.” But other times I received diagnoses such as bipolar disorder and schizoaffective disorder. Each came with medication I was forced to take, but the pills

seemed to have little effect on my state of mind. I was terrified; I had never received a diagnosis of or taken medication for a serious mental illness before.

I stayed in my silence, but I wish I had talked to the doctors — told them about the fire and my mom and my horses, and John. I wish someone had helped me feel safe enough to talk about my traumas.

People have three main reactions when they suffer trauma, I would later learn: fight, flight or freeze. I froze.

This posed a significant problem: Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder can't be diagnosed on symptoms alone. A PTSD diagnosis requires the identification of an actual traumatic event.

Running back into the burning house to save my landlord would have been enough to give me PTSD, said Michael Mithoefer, a South Carolina psychiatrist I interviewed who has treated people with the disorder since the mid-1990s.

“The average person who finally gets diagnosed as having PTSD has had an average of six prior misdiagnoses,” Mithoefer said.

If my PTSD had been diagnosed properly, perhaps events would have unfolded very differently. Instead, my condition worsened as I was traumatized again on the streets. At times, doctors asked whether I was inebriated. But my tests always came back negative; I am not a drinker or a drug abuser.

On Sept. 2, 2016, I began what turned into a six-month stay at the county jail to await a hearing on lewdness charges.

Even there, John's obsession with me continued: He sent me cards and letters doused with his cologne.

“You are not alone,” he wrote. I pushed his cards back under my cell door.

When I walked out of my jail cell and into the courtroom the following March, I saw John sitting in the back. He had been tracking my court proceedings, a defense attorney would tell me, and he variously told that attorney that he was my “boyfriend” and “husband.” The attorney offered to help me file a restraining order, but I was too afraid.

Later that day, John was waiting for me in the lobby.

“Give me a hug,” he demanded.

I did. He followed me down the street and onto a public train, and he asked me to get coffee with him. “No,” I said, and a look of resignation came over him and he got off the train. Many stops later, I walked back to the only place I knew to sleep: the park bench.

I n e e d e d t o d o s o m e t h i n g d i f f e r e n t

Two months later, in mid-May of last year, I was lying on that bench, swaddled in every piece of clothing and the one blanket I had. I could hear the clattering of a squirrel, and the sound of the rushing river, full of just-melted snow. I was so cold that I was shaking.

In my suffering, I came to a mind-stopping, heartbreaking realization: All that I thought I had to do to persuade God to release me from this horrific existence was not working. It was never going to work.

In one achingly empty moment, I allowed myself to have absolutely no idea why God would allow me to be homeless. And in the next breath, I let go of the elaborate mental construct I’d used. I stood up and looked around. I knew I needed to do something different. I just didn’t know what.

I still didn’t have glasses. I had no identification — it had been stolen. I did not have a penny to my name.

But I did have a memory of my previous life. It was of my father telling me that when you don’t know what to do, just take a step in the direction you want to go. Then take another.

Slowly, methodically, I freed myself from the many layers of clothes: socks over socks, nylon stretch pants beneath jeans, sweaters and sweatshirts on top of T-shirts, and wool scarves wrapped around my midriff like bandages.

Down to a pair of cargo pants and a sweatshirt, I slung my garbage bag and backpack over my shoulders, and made my way through the blur of wilderness to the stream where I washed my face and brushed my teeth, and then to the park exit.

“I have obviously misunderstood You,” I told God. “Help me understand what to do next.”

The next morning, the idea came to me to walk to the homeless outreach center across the street from the Road Home. I hadn’t been there in months and didn’t want to go back. But the thought was persistent and I followed it to the doughnut line outside the center.

There, two men who volunteered for the Salt Lake City Mission, which brought the food, approached me and prayed with me.



Lori Yearwood and her mentor/case manager Shannon Miller Cox talk before a lunch meeting in Salt Lake City. Miller Cox helped her set up a nonprofit organization to help other harmed women.



Yearwood landed her first steady job out of homeless working at a grocery store. The former journalist has been writing for various publications to reestablish herself as a writer, and she recently put down a deposit on her own apartment. (Photos by Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

One of them introduced me to a pastor at the Mission, a church and outreach center for the homeless. I told the pastor that I was once a professional reporter. He hired me on the spot to write for a publication called the Street News, a newspaper about people living in homelessness. As payment for my first story, the Mission bought me contact lenses.

I started to feel safe and began talking a little bit more each day. The words came out in hushed, careful tones. I had always had a confident, animated voice.

Another pastor at the church, the Rev. Shawn Clay, would later tell me: “You looked like a lost, scared kitten who was afraid to trust people. And yet there was a strength about you. I noticed that right away, too. It was like an inner reserve.”

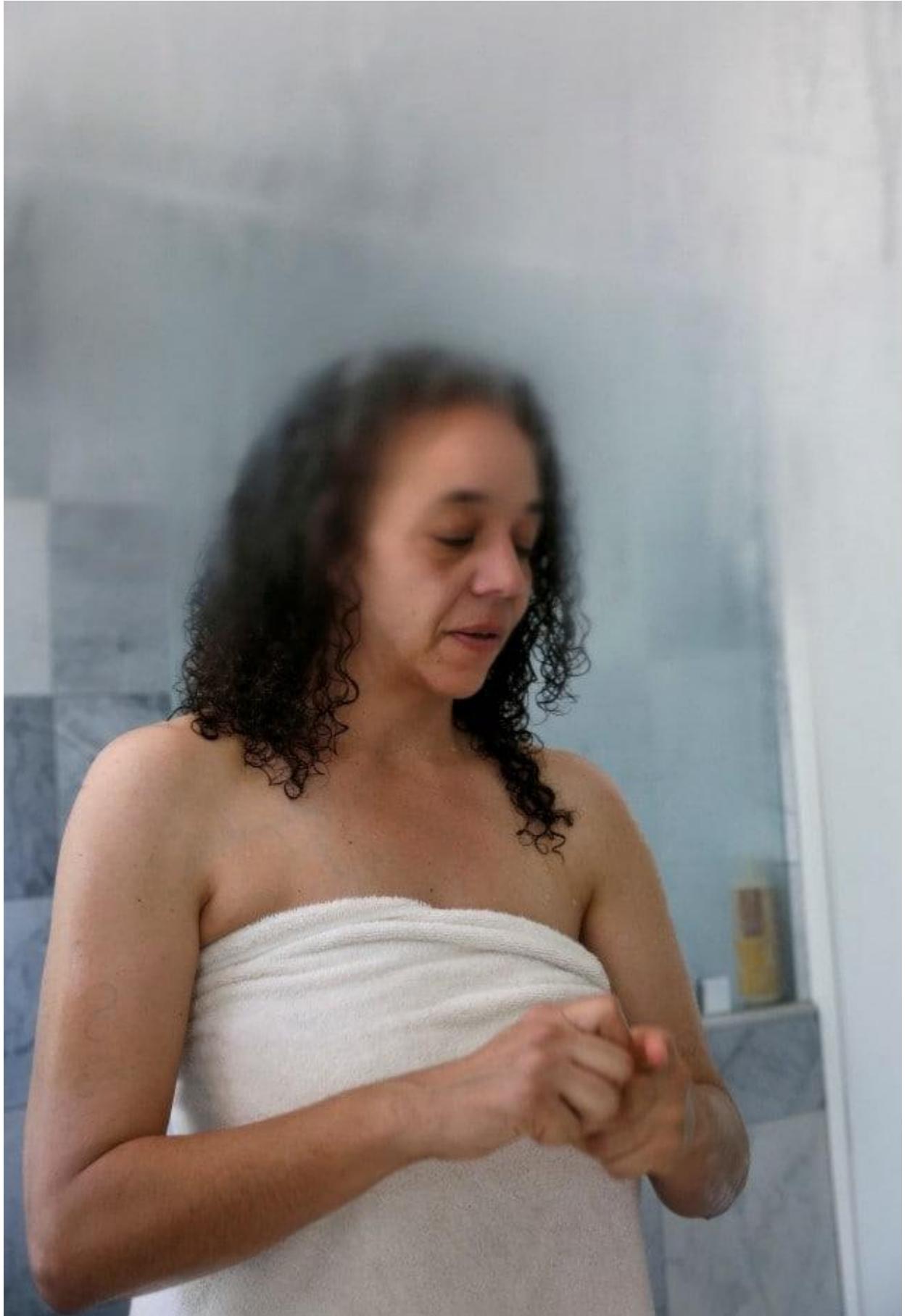
Within a week of my epiphany on the park bench, Pastor Shawn drove me to Journey of Hope, a nonprofit organization that helps harmed women start new lives, to meet its founder, Shannon Miller Cox.

Miller Cox sat across from me in her office. At first I barely spoke, but as soon as she started talking about trauma, I began sharing my story with her.

Later, in that same meeting, Miller Cox pulled up one of my old newspaper articles on her computer and said: “You’re amazing. I can tell from your prior successes that once you get safe, you are going to be fine.”

She told me that my empathy for women who had endured trauma and the fact that I did not suffer from addiction made me a perfect candidate to oversee a sober-living house that she and a friend were opening in suburban Salt Lake City.

In exchange for rent, I would help the house run smoothly, talk to women about their daily struggles, hold house meetings and ensure everyone stayed sober.



Lori Yearwood once bathed in a claw-foot tub in the farmhouse she owned. After she became homeless, she couldn't bear to shower at the shelter where she stayed, so she began bathing in a river in a park. She was arrested and charged with public lewdness seven times in six months. She now rents a room in the home of a college professor, and once again showers in privacy and peace. (Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

I remember my first shower there, which recalled for me the porcelain claw-foot tub in my farmhouse. I remember how grateful I felt to wash myself with hot water and sage-mint-scented soap. I didn't have to worry about anyone seeing me. I didn't have to worry about being arrested.

Over the next few weeks, Miller Cox did what no one else had ever done with me: She continued to ask me about my life. Finally, I began to trust her, and I told her about John. I told her how I couldn't believe I had stayed in such an abusive situation for so long. She talked about how trauma affects the brain's ability to function, substituting primitive, survival-oriented thinking for rational, higher-level decision-making. And without a safe home to provide stability, it can be all but impossible to begin healing, she said. Yet I had been blaming myself for not reacting normally.

“One hundred percent of the homeless women who come to me have been sexually assaulted,” Miller Cox, a rape survivor and former police officer, told me later. “It's just a given.”

I stayed in the sober living house for four months before it closed because of a lack of funding. During that time, I went to a private gathering at a woman's house. There, a college professor heard my story and invited me to live in her Airbnb for six weeks — free of charge. A few weeks later, I landed my first steady job out of homelessness, as a cashier at a grocery store, and the professor offered me a room to rent in her house. I moved in just before Christmas.

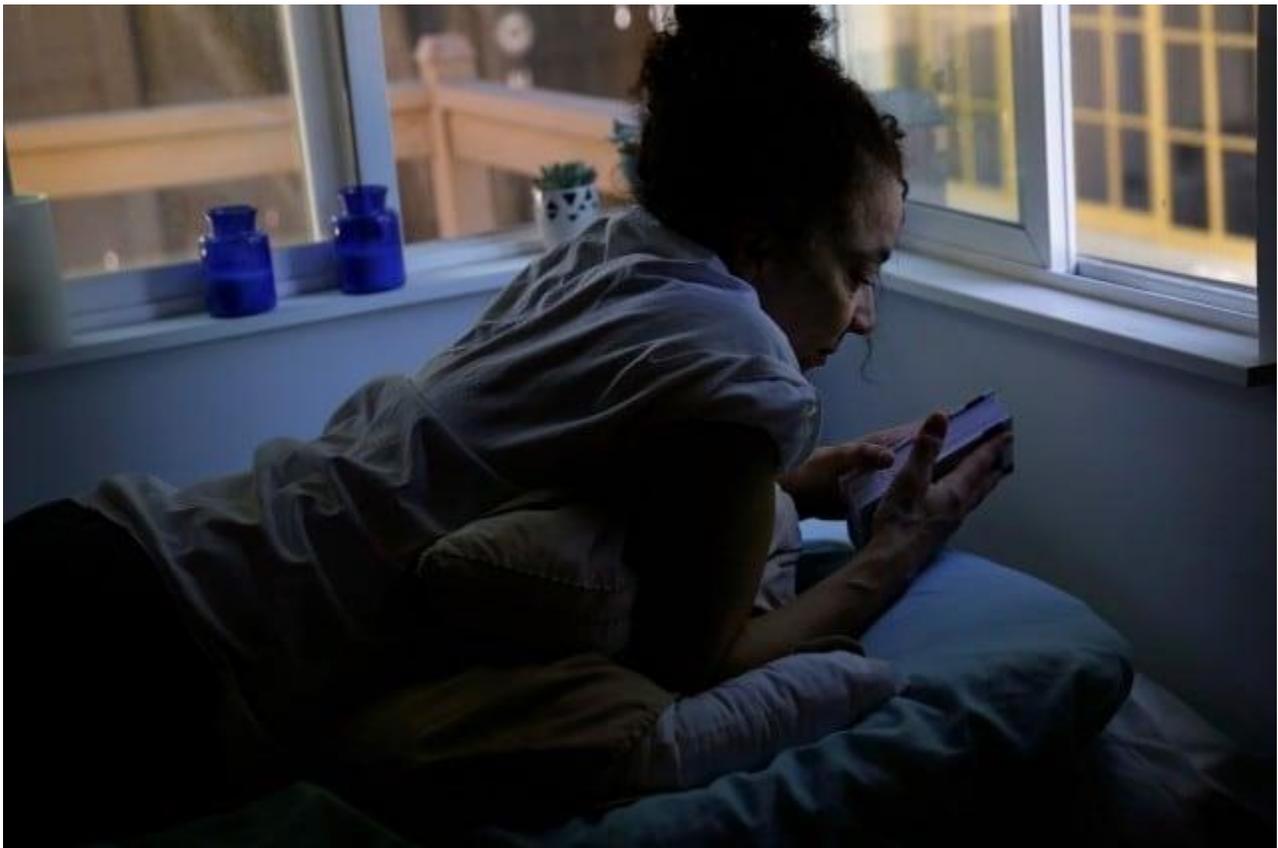
Since then, I've continued to regain my footing. In July, I was hired as a part-time program assistant. Then in September, I got a second part-time job as a grant writer, allowing me to stop working at the grocery store. I've also started a nonprofit group to help prevent other women from becoming homeless. All the while, I've been writing for

various publications to reestablish myself as a writer. Last month, I put down a deposit for my own apartment.

As my life moved forward, Miller Cox went to court with me to talk to a judge about my arrests.

Miller Cox told her that my case was not one of willful wrongdoing. Rather, she pointed out, I had undergone a tremendous amount of trauma, and my actions reflected that. But now I was safe and I was healing.

Six of the seven lewdness arrests were dismissed as part of a plea agreement, which required me to attend a weekly self-inquiry group, among other things. I have done so well in meeting or surpassing the court's criteria, including hiring my own therapist, that on July 20, a judge agreed to dismiss the last Class B misdemeanor six months early.



Yearwood reads from a meditation book after waking up. After her mother died and

during her homelessness, she convinced herself that the unraveling of her life was God's will for her. (Preston Gannaway for The Washington Post)

It took a full year to feel the grief and loss that I couldn't feel during my homelessness. For many months, I awoke in the middle of the night crying about my animals, particularly the horses. I have checked on them and know they're well, and I can still feel and see and smell them, as though they were standing next to me. I still sometimes have panic attacks from John's abuse.

Mostly though, I experience a calming, present-moment groundedness.

Never before have I so profoundly appreciated such simple things as going to lunch with a friend or doing laundry in a washing machine. Or the softness of a real bed, next to a picture window that I can keep open without fear of violence. I have begun to sing along with the radio again, and dare to dream.

I n o w k n o w t h e r e i s a b r e a k i n g p o i n t

Yet I am no longer the person I was before I lived in homelessness.

Back then, I believed that God or people would always be around to catch me when I fell. Although I still believe in God, my definition of that Being has changed from that of a wish-granter to something ineffable, a kind of undercurrent of support that no longer robs me of the agency I need to direct my life.

A drive to succeed, I have also learned, is not a strength when it means pushing myself beyond all reason. I now know there is a breaking point. Especially during stressful times, I must care for myself.

These days, that looks like this: I do not repress my emotions, but express myself freely to people who are supportive. I take long walks with friends. Once a week, I talk to a therapist. All of this helps me stay anchored in my body, something that is very difficult to do as a homeless person because it's too painful to feel your body when you can't house it or feed it or feel safe in it.

It's a weird feeling to live out people's worst nightmares, and to emerge from the circumstances that so many never leave. When I go to the free health clinic to get my monthly probiotics, I always see a familiar face, someone I know who is still living on the streets. We acknowledge each other with a nod, perhaps a few words. They sometimes express amazement at how much better I look, and yet I never lose sight of how thin the line is between us.

But for the grace of God.

"Shannon, why do you think I am doing so well?" I recently asked Miller Cox. "I mean, why did you think I started talking and writing and working again?"

She paused.

You were more fortunate than many homeless people. You had been successful before and you were able to tap into that well of strengths, she said. But why now, I persisted, when for nearly two years I couldn't access those strengths?

She looked at me intently, as though I should have known already.

"That's simple," she told me. "You have a home."

Jennifer Jenkins contributed to this report. To offer feedback on this story, email us at socialissues@washpost.com

Credits: Story by Lori Yearwood. Designed by [Victoria Adams Fogg](#). Photo Editing by Mark Miller.