

# FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

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WEEK OF DECEMBER 16-22, 2015

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Exploring a park off the beaten path. **A26** ▶

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# Faces of the homeless

Terry White

Thousands of Southwest Floridians struggle with homelessness or the threat of it while a network of local agencies tries to deal with the issue. Inside is a view of the struggle from the front lines. **PAGE A8**

Photos by Vandy Major; Story by Evan Williams / Florida Weekly

## High quality hoops players descend on Bishop Verot one last time

BY GLENN MILLER

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Maybe serendipity played a part in the Culligan City of Palms Classic blossoming from a small-town high school basketball tournament into a premier one-of-a-kind tournament.

"It's unlikely we could repeat it if we

started over tomorrow," said Donnie Wilkie, the tournament's vice president.

It starts again Dec. 18 at Bishop Verot High School, its home since 1994. This is the tournament's final year at Bishop Verot's 2,300-seat John Nevins Gymnasium.

"We've just outgrown Bishop Verot," Mr. Naylor said.

The tournament will move into Florida SouthWestern State College's 3,200-seat Suncoast Credit Union Arena next year. The arena is under construction on the college's Fort Myers campus.

Mr. Wilkie appreciates Bishop Verot's work as the tournament host.

SEE HOOPS, **A24** ▶

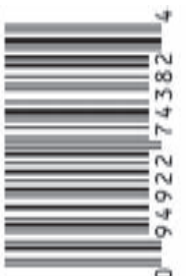
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THE GIVING TREE  
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Perkins RESTAURANT & BAKERY





"You don't have to have a certain look or be a certain person."

— **Tiffany Harris**, who found herself sleeping in a park last year. She has since found a place to live.

# Faces of the homeless

*Photos by Vandy Major; Story by Evan Williams / Florida Weekly*



Roger and Kathy DeWald

**T**HE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAVING A home and being homeless is a matter of specifics for government agencies. But for people, a home is, however temporary, where the heart is.

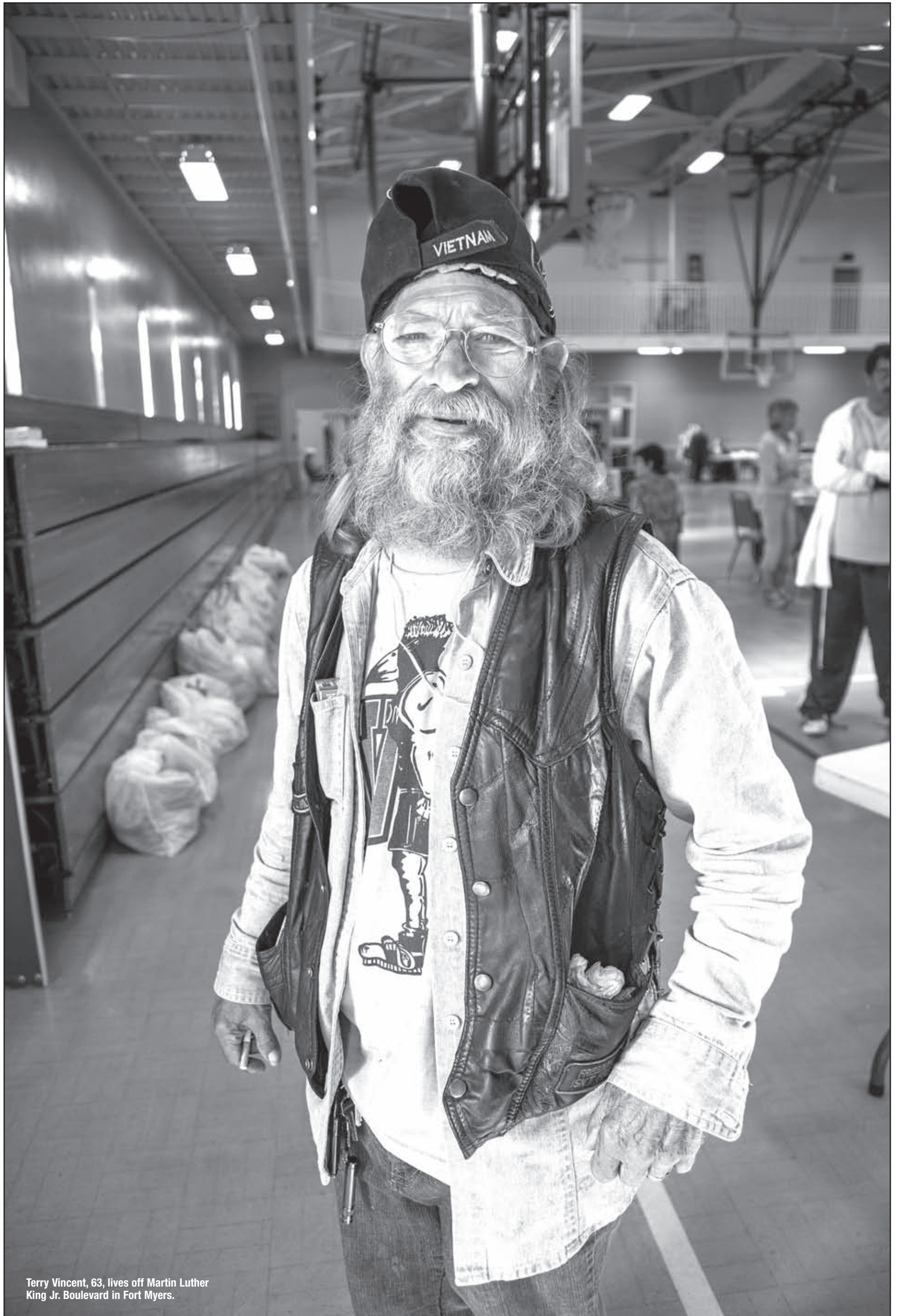
Many sleep in fields, in the woods or cars. Others find refuge at shelters. Some land in jail or crash on a couch or with friends or relatives but soon must move on. For most, it is a temporary condition that might last for a few months or years. For some, the streets will always be home. They are the institutionalized homeless, everywhere and nowhere at home.

Many more live paycheck to paycheck, one illness or divorce or rent hike or job loss away from humility, true for more of us than would like to admit it. But it's also true that one event can't fully describe why someone ends up sleeping at a park.

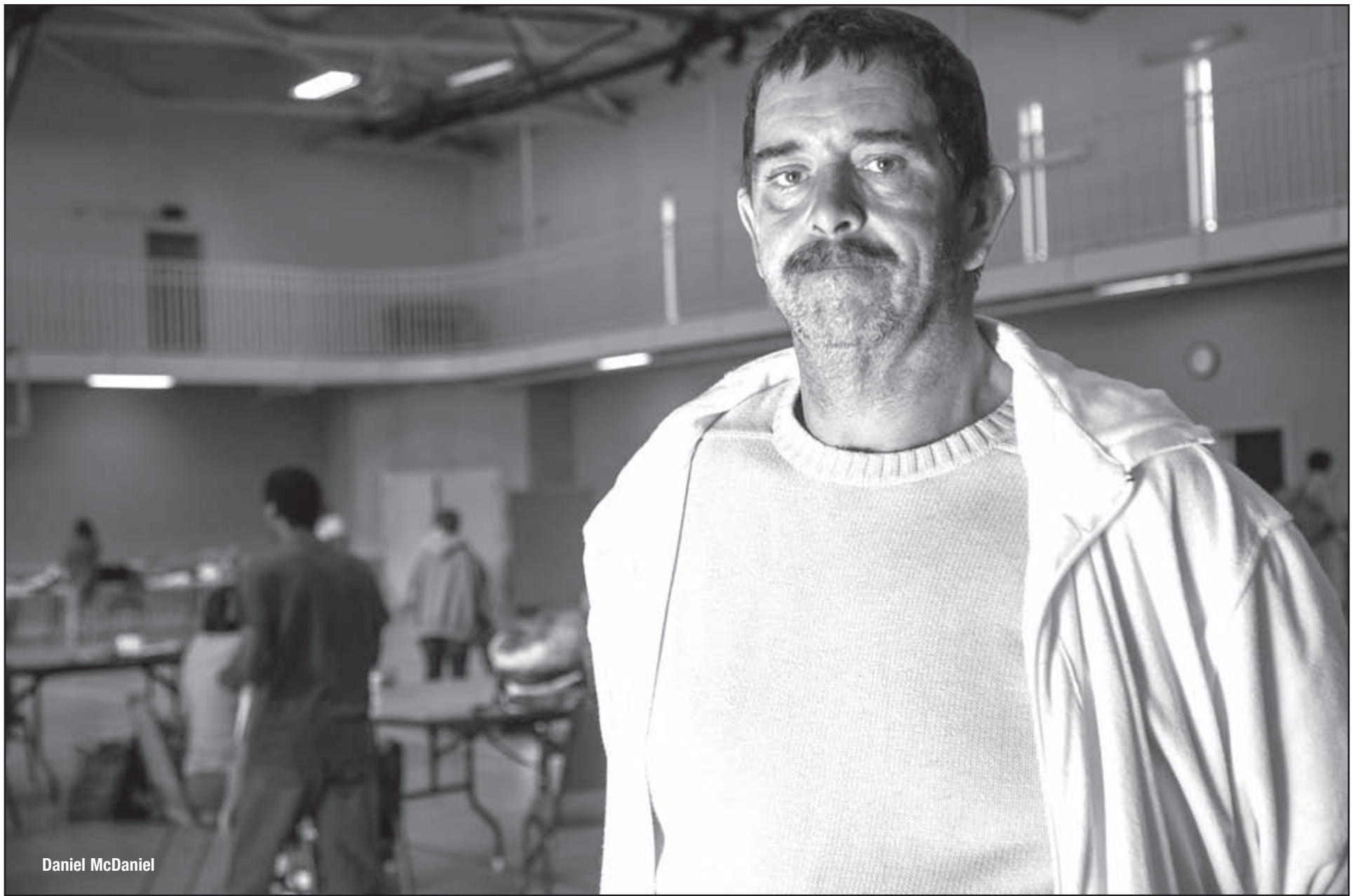
The only rule is that the homeless can be anyone: parents and children, seniors and veterans, volunteers and criminals, a microcosm of society at large but with less money. Social workers say that finding them housing ASAP is key to addressing their needs.

"It's literally cheaper to house somebody first than to treat them in the streets," said Lee County social worker Johnnie Terrell.

SEE HEART, A10 ►



Terry Vincent, 63, lives off Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Fort Myers.



Daniel McDaniel



Patrick Robbins

## HEART

From page 11

These images offer a glimpse into complicated lives in transition and some of the organizations and volunteers who are helping out.

### Cafe of Life, Bonita Springs

Cafe of Life serves a hot lunch for working families and the homeless in Bonita and Estero Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. at 26724 Nomad Drive in Bonita Springs. The group is also in need of toiletries. To donate, call 495-9325 or for more information visit [cafeoflife.org](http://cafeoflife.org)

"It doesn't take much of a setback to send somebody into panic mode," said Yadi Munoz, site manager and volunteer coordinator

Happy birthday to **Gordon Larson**, who turns 56 on Dec. 23. He was once a printing press operator like his dad, and later worked odd jobs. He's living in the woods now after losing his last job when he got the flu.

"I'll be all right," he said. "I'm a survivor. My mother always told me if anybody in the family can survive, it's Gordon."

### Cape Coral

• **Patrick Robbins**, 55, has been homeless off and on since 2008. He sleeps in an empty field, which is better on nights that aren't rainy.



Arynne Morich, center, along with other volunteers at First Christian Church praying.

"It's a heck'uva way to wake up when you suddenly feel that water creeping in on you," he said.

Once a pharmacy technician, he was more recently laid off from a job in a restaurant kitchen when business slowed over the summer. Being homeless is "physically exhausting," he said. Meeting basic needs is a job in itself.

### City Gate Ministries, Fort Myers

City Gate runs a shower and laundry ministry for the homeless on Tuesday mornings from 8 to 11. It also provides breakfast, haircuts, glasses, clothes and other items.

The ministry now needs cold weather gear such as sweatshirts, hoodies, sweatpants and gloves. To donate, call 334-7747, visit City Gate at 1735 Jackson Street in Fort Myers, or for more information, go to [citygateswf.org](http://citygateswf.org)

• **Julie Griffiths**, 32, has slept outside for the last eight months and works day labor jobs. The night before she spoke with us, somebody stole her bag as she slept. It had the key to her bicycle lock and her prescription medication in it. Still, she remained upbeat and shared her outlook for anyone who finds herself without a roof over her head.

"Don't see yourself as being 'homeless,'" Ms. Griffiths said. "Just see yourself as you."

• **Marvin DeArmon** and his dog **Karma**, a female boxer, often visit City Gate Ministries in downtown Fort Myers. "She makes the rounds and they all seem to enjoy having her," he said.

• **Daniel McDaniel**, 48, walked here from Tampa three months ago and lives on the street. He used to run games at a fair that traveled up and down the east coast. "When you're in this position, it's really, really hard to see the light at the



Nicole Sireci



Archie P. Walters



Grady Butler



Jimmy Presley with his grandkids at First Christian for dinner.

Gordon Larson

end of the tunnel," said **Steve Sparks**, 47. Mr. Sparks said struggles with addiction led to his being homeless. Formerly a taxi and limo driver, he also sold cars. Even though he got clean, he has faced other health issues exacerbated by homelessness, including complications from a surgery to clean out an infection from what apparently was a spider bite on his butt. He hopes law enforcement leaders embrace a policy of compassion toward the homeless, and said that finding food in Fort Myers is relatively easy compared to shelter. He looks forward to spending time with his teenage daughter. On recent nights he has slept tucked up under the awning of a church.

**First Christian Church, Fort Myers**

First Christian serves dinner for anyone who needs it on Monday nights at 6 p.m. at 2061 McGregor Blvd. The church also offers bag lunch pickup Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings from 8:30 to 10. For more information on how to donate or volunteer, call 334-0316.

Volunteers gathered for prayer before serving dinner Monday night.

- **Ross Martin**, 57, is a volunteer. "You can't stereotype," he said. "Everyone in this room's story is different."

- **Jimmy Presley**, 57, came on Monday night for a meal with his grandkids, who live with their mom and dad. The family lives paycheck to paycheck, he said. He used to deliver newspapers but is now looking for a job, "anything."

- **Tiffany Harris**, 45, was homeless last year for a while after financial fallout from a divorce. She slept at a park and worried about strange men and the possibility of rape. Eventually she emerged safely after finding housing. She plans to spend the holidays with her kids.

"You don't have to have a certain look or be a certain person," she says about the homeless.

- **Grady Butler**, 56, has been homeless for nearly 18 years.

"It's bad during mosquito season," he said. "If it ain't the cold, it's the mosquitos. if it ain't the mosquitos, it's the rain..."

- **Arynne Morich**, 43, is a volunteer. "They're hungry," she said of people who lined up for food on Monday night, some of them homeless. "The last time many of them ate was Saturday night."

When it's cold and rainy, not as many go find food, she said. "A bed is more important than a hot meal."

- **Shari Landbo**, 49, is a volunteer. "I have named Monday nights for me happy hour because it is the happiest hour of my week."

- **Tyrone Robinson**, 40, was there for dinner. "I'm good," he said.

**Charlotte County Homeless Coalition, Port Charlotte**

The Homeless Coalition provides meals for its residents daily. It offers emergency shelter for men, women and families.

The coalition needs hams and needs them by Friday, Dec. 18, to serve Christmas dinners for families. To donate a ham or other goods, call (941) 627-4313, visit the coalition at 1476 Kenesaw Street in Port Charlotte or go to [cchomelesscoalition.org](http://cchomelesscoalition.org)

"In Florida, homeless families are an epidemic more so than the rest of the country," said director Angela Hogan. "Our shelter primarily at this point in time, it's families and veterans."

- **Ruth Miera**, 33, along with her husband and two children, 6 and 8, became homeless after cascading troubles includ-

# FACES

From page 11

ing lags between jobs and high rents forced them out of an apartment. That in turn created more instability as it forced the family out of Cape Coral and into shelters in Charlotte County. The family especially needs a car, Ms. Miera said, to help with getting a reliable job. They hope to move back to the Cape. A former medical administrative assistant in the U.S. Air Force, Ms. Miera was honorably discharged in 2003.

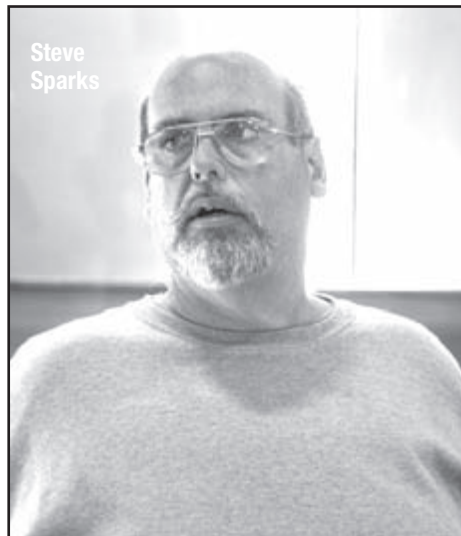
• **Miguel Martinez**, 24, became homeless after the relationship he was in with his girlfriend fell apart. A former sales manager at a furniture store, he slept in cars before being admitted to the shelter and is now saving up money at a job selling windows so he can move out.

“It’s always about money,” he said. “You can’t do anything without it.”

### St. Matthew’s House, Naples

Men, women and families who stay at the St. Mathew’s House shelter in Naples find a combination of compassion and discipline to help them recover from homelessness, addiction, and other struggles.

Often, one of their first stops is the dining room for a hot meal. Executive chef Kristofer Jubinville and his team cooked 441,000 meals last year, enough to feed a sold-out Germain Arena 53 times. The kitchen is on track to beat that number this year.



Steve Sparks



Aryne Morich

St. Matthew’s House needs blankets, socks, bedsheets, diapers of all sizes and baby formula. To donate, call 774-0500, visit 2001 Airport Pulling Road S. or go to [stmatthewshouse.org](http://stmatthewshouse.org)

• **Harry Fentress**, 49, established a successful business, Fiberglass Services Unlimited. But then addiction troubles landed him in jail for five months and he decided to seek help. Staying at the shelter for 11 months, he got clean and was able to reestablish his company.

“St. Mathew’s is a blessing from God,” he said. “They keep you accountable.”

• **Nicole Sireci**, 34, once again faced old struggles with addiction after her husband passed away three years ago in December. Now she’s getting back on her feet — or foot, after injuring the other one at her job at a busy hotel kitchen — and plans to visit her kids in Cape Coral for the holidays. ■



Miguel Martinez

*Photos by Vandy Major; Story by Evan Williams / Florida Weekly*

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