

15 MINUTES

On becoming homeless

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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Craig Johnson sat in his tie-dyed T-shirt and watched traffic on Fowler Street Monday morning, talking about some of the things he likes: pretty women, beer and America. He wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere, because he has no job or home.

It wasn't always this way.

When he was 19, Mr. Johnson met his first and only wife, Barbara, at a "hillbilly bar" in Maryland called The Roundup. He still wears the wedding ring, made of sterling silver and blue coral.

"She was full-blooded Apache (Indian)," he said. "A beautiful woman. She was 38 (years old)."

They were married for 11 years. It ended after he was robbed, the ultimate cause of Mr. Johnson's downfall.

For a while, things were good. They had no children, but she was a homemaker and he worked for a landscaping business.

"I like to make things look pretty," he said. "I like to put my hands in the dirt."

After the couple moved to Daytona Beach, he became a roofer, installing asphalt shingles. One night, a robber broke into their house, and in the heat of the moment shot him point blank in the face. Mr. Johnson pulled down his sunglasses to show where the bullet had gone through his nose and taken an eye. The wound became infected.

"I was totally blind for two months," he said. "And that is a bad feeling, man."

While he was out of work and in con-

stant squabbles with his wife over money, the bank took the couple's house and truck. After he recovered, he kicked her out of the house. She divorced him, suing for neglect and desertion, and won.

After the divorce, Mr. Johnson drifted.

"Everywhere," he said. "All over the country — Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi. I've been there, done that, and went back for seconds. Brother, I tell you what. I've had the craziest jobs. I used to be what they called a 'mortuary transport.'"

That job in Houston involved taking dead people to a mortuary. He also drove a truck for a day-labor service in Tennessee until he sideswiped a UPS truck coming around a sharp corner. That was before he lost his driver's license to DUIs in 1986.

"Nowadays I just float around," he said. "I'm sitting here trying to figure everything out this morning. I'm thinking about what to do today, thinking about getting a job."

He was listening to a classic rock station on his headphones and sipping a drink.

"I'm an avid AC/DC fan," he said.

Mr. Johnson, 48, rode his bicycle from St. Petersburg to Fort Myers five months ago. He was in and out of day jobs there, and the local police were busting him regularly for minor offenses like public intoxication.

"I'm an alcoholic," he said. "I like my beer."

The ride to Lee County was undertaken mostly on U.S. 41 and took him about two weeks.

"I worked along the way," he said. "I had my tent, my sleeping bag, my blankets. I had (my bicycle) loaded down. I found a little

day work; a day here, a day there, nothing steady though."

He added with a chuckle, "Nothing concrete, except what I'm sitting on."

Mr. Johnson isn't in Fort Myers for any particular reason.

"I just landed here," he said. "I go how the spirit moves me."

Mr. Johnson was born in Washington, D.C. His has unprintable words for his mother, who he called "abusive." His father was a bricklayer.

"Dad was a World War II vet," Mr. Johnson said. "My dad was stern, but he was a good guy. I miss my dad. A stroke got him. Matter of fact, my whole family passed away."

Sometime in the last few decades, his brother died in a car crash and his sister from an overdose. The family moved to southern Maryland when Mr. Johnson was a teenager. The house was off a country road, in the woods near where he liked to hunt and fish.

"I'm a country boy," he said. "A red-blooded American. I'm true blue."

It's hard being homeless, but Mr. Johnson finds no reason to complain.

"I'm on the right side of the ground and breathing," he said. "And it's still early in the day. Something will happen. It always does."

In fact, he doesn't want a permanent job or home.



Craig Johnson

EVAN WILLIAMS/FLORIDA WEEKLY

"I can't do it now," he said. "I feel comfortable out here. I've tried my heart out over the years to do the right thing at the right time. It didn't happen, so therefore that means I'm meant to be out here."

"And I'm having a good time while I'm doing it. Might as well have fun with it, because there's no use cryin'. That's my philosophy."

As for his political stance, he hates all politicians equally. But he does have an eye for the ladies.

"(Gov.) Sarah Palin — I like her," Mr. Johnson said. "She's a beautiful woman."

Mr. Johnson has a "cubby hole" near Palm Beach Boulevard where he sleeps. He also has a cardboard sign he sometimes holds up that says "Homeless and hungry. Will work for food."

He finished the last of a drink and went to look for some cigarette butts in an ash-tray at a gas station. ■

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