



[Image Description: Two adults and a child in walk side by side on a clear winter day in Boston Common with the façade of the State House visible in the background. The three people wear winter jackets and hats drawstring backpacks with the Winter Walk logo on them.]

Photos from Winter Walk 2020 were taken by Chris Shane, Evgenia Eliseeva, Stewart Ting Chong & Belinda Soncini.

Don't Walk By **Episode 5**

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Ari Barbanell: There's a thread that connects all those who've bravely shared their stories over the course of this series.

[soft music comes in]

In moments of crisis, Luis, Barbara, Kelly, and Ten expressed a need for help and were met with a lifeline. And behind each of their stories, there's been a supportive community eager to respond.

Andy McCawley: *Every citizen, every vulnerable citizen, resident of our community, of our nation, of our city, you know, we have an obligation to help them if they are struggling.*

AB: That's Andy McCawley. He's the president CEO of the New England Center and Home for Veterans, also known as NECHV.

***AM:** One of the things that I've become to appreciate in the decade almost that I've been here is how disruptive and disabling that condition of homelessness is.*

AB: Help is out there. But taking that first step of reaching out can feel daunting, especially when asking for support doesn't come naturally, as was the case for Bob.

[music fades out]

***Bob:** I didn't ask for help. I just could not really connect with people. I just had a lot of mistrust.*

AB: Ever since we met, Bob has been eager to share his experience with homelessness with the Winter Walk community. But he wasn't always as open as he is now.

***Bob:** I didn't tell people my ideas. I wasn't a collaborative, you know, kind of a person. You know, in a sense, very secretive, right.*

AB: Bob is a Veteran who for years prided himself on his self-sufficiency.

***Bob:** I was like the sort of classic stereotype of the Marlboro man or, you know, like this 'man against the world' in literature.*

AB: And those feelings were reinforced during his time in the military.

***Bob:** I was an officer, saying, 'Oh my gosh, I'm an officer. I should be able to figure this out. I'm a leader I've been trained to be a leader. I shouldn't need that kind of help.' I just assumed that the VA was for people who were injured in a war... people that had serious injuries from combat, only.*

AB: Bob didn't spend time in combat, so he felt that meant he did not qualify for the supportive services out there for Veterans. Even when faced with challenging circumstances years after his time as a Marine officer, Bob was reluctant to ask for help.

[music comes in]

And it turns out, this is a common mentality among Veterans.

AB: Here's Andy again.

AM: *What makes a Veteran is someone who has raised their right hand and sworn to support and defend the constitution and served wearing the cloth of our military.*

I think how we would distinguish veterans as different or distinct in identifying from non-Veteran counterparts is that they are very, very proud of their status as Veterans. They very strongly identify as veterans. And frankly, Veterans are probably less likely to reach out and connect with and stay engaged with supportive services than their non-Veteran counterparts.

AB: We recognize Veterans for their strength and bravery as service members, and as Andy explains, these attributes contribute to the unique circumstance and needs of Veterans experiencing homelessness.

[music fades out]

AM: *And so, they tend to really fall into crisis before they reach out. But Veterans are much more likely to get connected with and stay connected with a service provider that is specifically for them, for Veterans.*

[theme begins]

It is not the conditions that you serve. It's not the type of service or the era. It is not the length of time that you serve. It is the fact that you have stepped forward and served this nation, even if it's for one day in our military, you are a Veteran and you are eligible for a broad array of services that you have earned. We are looking to serve you.

AB: I'm Ari Barbanell. And this is Don't Walk By.

[theme continues and montage comes in – each speaker sharing in quick succession: “Each of us is a beautiful, wonderful creature with so much potential, just waiting to blossom”, “We really pride ourselves and really focus on making sure that we're delivering the most relevant and effective services.”]

[theme fades out]

AM: *The NECVH has been here as an institution in Boston now for more than 30 years. Founded back in 1989 by four visionary, Vietnam Veterans to support and serve Vietnam Veterans who were experiencing homelessness at the time. The center has grown over the last 30 years to be one of the nation's largest and most innovative human service providers to the most vulnerable and challenged Veterans in our community, providing an array of services to enable them to live with independence and dignity*

AB: One-third of men experiencing homelessness and nearly one-quarter of all adults experiencing homelessness have served in the armed forces.

In Massachusetts, there were close to 1,000 unhoused Veterans as of January 2019. But thanks to organizations like NECHV, the state has seen a decrease in the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness in the last decade.

AM: *We really pride ourselves and really focus on making sure that we're delivering the most relevant and effective services. So, as the needs change, as the population of veterans shifts, we want to make sure that we provide the best services. Essentially focusing on preventing and solving the condition of homelessness for veterans both broadly, and then individually for the veterans that we serve. We serve almost 1,500 veterans every year, distinct veterans. Both here at the center and are in our transitional programs. Housing people in permanent apartments and supportive housing here and also connecting with veterans in their homes to keep them stably housed and having successful tenancies.*

AB: Many of the same major risk factors that lead non-Veterans into homelessness impact Veterans, like unemployment, mental health challenges, and substance use disorders.

[music comes in]

And the services offered by NECHV respond to the leading causes of homelessness among Veterans while also considering the unique experiences Veterans face as a population.

Bob: *I was a Marine officer for five years and in the infantry and that I got out and became a civilian and moved back to New Jersey and had a really difficult time career wise, getting a job and staying with it.*

AB: For Bob, the transition out of the military and back into civilian life was jarring. Even with a degree in computer science and the professional skills he had developed, it was difficult for Bob to adjust and settle into a career outside of the military.

Bob: *And, I had a lot of different things— I did technology. I had a web development company for a while, I worked at a mortgage bank, but it was always hard to make ends meet. And at one point, I lost my job. I was in my fifties and just could not find a job.*

AB: To make matters worse, this was during the 2008 recession. For the next five years, Bob struggled to find employment to support himself, his wife and their kids. Without an income, they defaulted on their home mortgage. And from there, things began to snowball at an overwhelming rate.

Bob: *we lived there for about four years, falling behind every month. And then eventually, they put the notice on the door saying the sheriff was going to come*

and take over the house. And at that point - at the time she was my wife - had enough and decided to take the kids and move where she was from. And that's when I went into the homeless shelter.

So, I went into a homeless shelter in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. It was a Christian men's shelter. It was a house. We had about ten guys there at one point. And it was meant to be a place where guys that were separated from their family for various reasons could get their lives together.

So, at the time I was working a low-income job at a big box hardware store and was able to pay the rent 'cause we actually paid rent. So that was part of it, was to try to be as self-supporting as we could. And then when the divorce came through and the child support and alimony payments kicked in, I couldn't pay both.

AB: Bob was doing everything he could to stay afloat. But eventually, he hit a wall. Expenses were piling up. He fell behind on the rent payments at the shelter and had difficulty at work.

[music comes in]

Bob: *I was trying to get promoted. I couldn't get promoted. So, I was really trapped. Eventually it got so bad—I never heard anybody, but I was thinking about, I was just so frustrated, you know. And I was sort of focusing on the boss that I had and realized that wasn't good. You know, I'm a Marine Veteran.*

AB: Realizing he was at a breaking point, Bob courageously reached out for help.

Bob: *So, I ended up calling the 1-800 number for Veterans in crisis and they suggested that I go to the emergency room and check myself in*

AB: Bob decided to check himself in for an inpatient evaluation. And from there, was connected to the VA Homeless Shelter in New Jersey where he began receiving the long-term support he needed to stabilize.

Bob: *I was there for a year and got an awful lot of help. They got me back on track in terms of like my mental health with counseling and some medication.*

AB: While at the VA shelter, Bob was approved for a housing voucher in Massachusetts. And as part of the rehousing process was connected to NECHV.

Bob: *So, I went to the New England Center and Home for Veterans at 17 Court Street, and I lived there from May until November of last year. And eventually that voucher came through. I had a lot of great support from the VA up here in*

terms of finding an apartment. We found a nice one bedroom out in Allston and I've been there for a little over a year now.

AB: Now that he's housed, Bob is able to maintain stability with the continued support of the local aid network for Veterans.

Bob: *Life right now is pretty good. I've got security in terms of where I live because part of the situation was increased amount of fear - where am I going to stay? Am I going to have enough? Is this going to happen again? You know, a fear of recurrence, right.*

But the support that I've gotten has really helped me to feel stable. I do feel fearful sometimes, and maybe there's always sort of an undercurrent of fear. But I'm functional. So, I have the support of the section eight voucher for rent and I pay a portion of that, which they calculate based on the income. I have income from something called Chapter 115, which is a Boston program for veterans that are low income. So, the combination of those two make sure that I always have enough money for rent. I do still have some food insecurity, honestly. So, the SNAP benefit does help, but I'm still going to food pantries to help supplement that. And then I can buy the other things that I need with the food stamps.

AB: And with his basic needs met, Bob has been able to develop a business plan that first occurred to him while he was living in a homeless shelter in New Jersey.

[music fades out]

Bob: *I was like to have quiet time in the morning. So, sit there and think about things or read something inspirational. And the idea came to me that I could write on a t-shirt backwards and then when I looked in the mirror, I would see it.*

And I knew about affirmations. I used to read them and write them and things and say them. But the idea of actually putting it down on a shirt so that I could literally wear it came to me while I was there with the shelter. So, I've got the first one.

[uplifting music comes in]

It was just a white t-shirt I wrote with a black marker backwards and put it on and there it was.

The one I'm wearing now says, 'I am more than my homelessness.' Because there's a tendency when a person's diagnosed or has a difficult situation, to think that that defines them. Because 'Oh, I've got depression or anxiety or homelessness. That's who I am.' So, the idea that it's not who I am but it certainly was a life circumstance that I experienced. So, that's meant to encourage me. And all the shirts are written backwards on the front, so the person gets the affirmation in the mirror. But they're written the normal way on the back. So that

way, if they want to wear it out, they don't have to, but if they want it to wear it out, it also becomes a message of advocacy. That it can start conversations perhaps or other people can see things, you know, to advance the ball. Because part of the whole thing was like homelessness and mental health is the whole idea of the stigma. So that's why having a chance to say, 'You know what, I want to tell my story. I want people to hear it,' you know, is an important part of breaking the stigma down. Each of us is a beautiful, wonderful creature with so much potential, just waiting to blossom.

AB: Bob's right – with a bit of nurturing, everyone can blossom. And that's a chance we all deserve.

[music fades out]

Each year, we ask Winter Walkers to share why they choose to walk with us towards an end to homelessness.

Walkers, you've shared your reasons in person, on social media, on stage and even on signs you've worn proudly on route throughout the years. And this year, your messages have spread even further – to all of Massachusetts, across the country as far as Alaska, to the UK, Australia, even Korea.

[soft music comes in]

[Montage begins – each speaker shares in succession: "I walk because housing is a human right", "I walk because homelessness is important and we all want to help end it", "I walk because every human deserves support", "Yo camino por la gente desposeído sin casa", "I walk because every human deserves love, dignity and respect", "Yo camino porque es un derecho humano tener un hogar"]

[music fades out]

AB: Your words have an impact.

[theme comes in]

The stigma around homelessness is reduced with each message of love and compassion. Thank you for joining us on this journey, for walking with us, for listening to Don't Walk By.

We began this podcast series hoping to tell a few stories. We started with five. We could have shared 500. This is just a beginning. There's more to do and more to share, and if you'll keep walking and listening, we hope to come together again soon.

Don't Walk By is a podcast brought to you by Winter Walk Boston - an event and initiative raising awareness and funds towards an end to homelessness in Greater Boston.

Episodes are written and produced by Isabel Hibbard.

Audio production and sound design is by Kevin O'Connell.

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You can learn more about any of the organizations mentioned in the episode and how you can help at winterwalkboston.org.

I'm Ari Barbanell, the Executive Director of Winter Walk and your host.

Thanks for listening.

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END OF EPISODE.