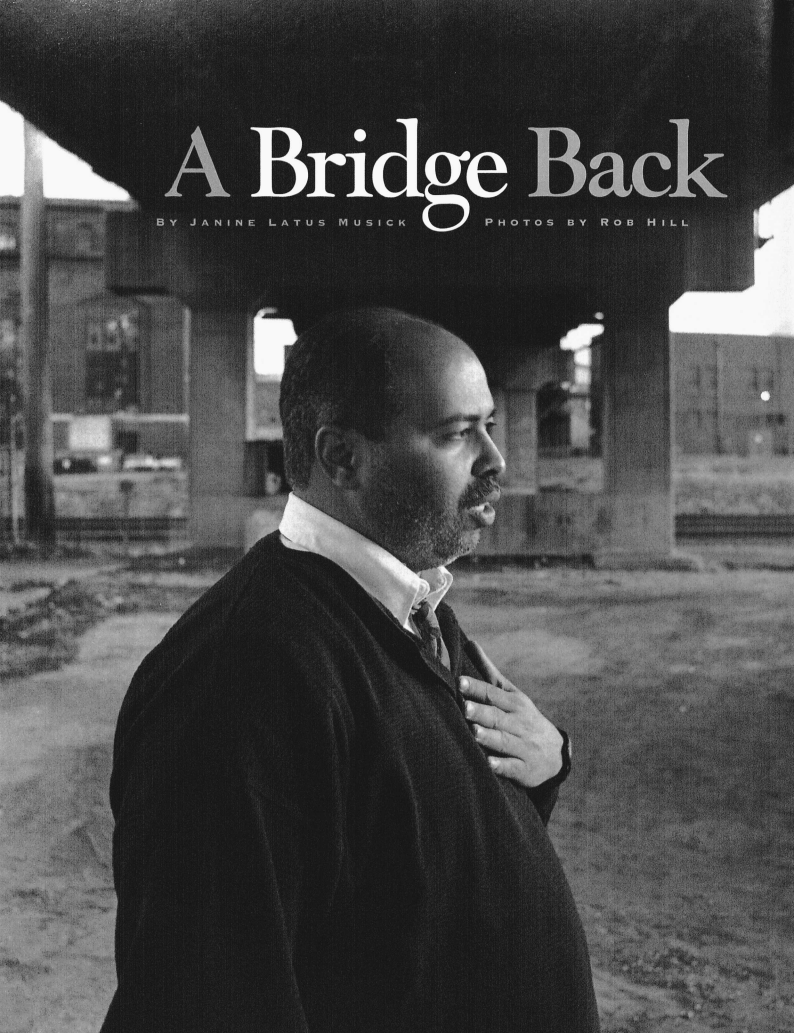
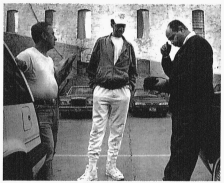
A Bridge Back

By Janine Latus Musick Photos by Rob Hill



On this cold winter night Bruce Burgo warms his hands over a fire in a trash barrel under a bridge. Freight trains rumble within reach. Men in mismatched clothes sit in the dirt, leaning against rocks or the walls of the viaduct, in this, the front porch of their little community. This bare patch between the Missouri River and the train tracks is where they come to share a fire, have a smoke, and take a swig off a bottle before wandering off to dark corners to sleep.

And it is to this place and others like it that Burgo, MSW '92, goes some nights trying to help homeless veterans. Burgo coordinates the Health Care for Homeless Veterans program at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Kansas City, Mo. As such, he divides his time between negotiating in the tidy offices of the federal bureaucracy and trolling the forgotten corners of the city.



In the parking lot of the Kansas City Rescue Mission, Bruce Burgo, right, and mission employee James Morris, left, help a veteran with landlord problems.

Eating Government Cheese

Burgo's empathy for homeless veterans stems from a combination of his life experience and his Christian faith. He was raised by his mother, and together they knew winters when they couldn't pay the heating bill and times when there was no water and they had to sleep at friends' houses.

His mother was a seamstress in a factory during the day. By night, she was a student earning a high-school diploma.

"As a young child I'd see my mother wake up early in the morning to go to the factory," Burgo says. "I'd go to school, and my mother would be there for dinner. Then I'd see my mother go to night school, and I'd go to bed and I wouldn't see her until the next day. What struck me was the hard work and diligence. The message was, if you worked hard, you could be a success."

Because of his background, Burgo thinks about the homeless men he serves as he might a family member.

Bruce Burgo walks the riverfront looking for a homeless veteran.

"I don't think I'm better than they are. I have been on welfare, I have eaten government cheese. I look at myself as having come from that place," Burgo says. "The reason I'm not where they are is a mixture of opportunities that have come my way and my work to take advantage of those opportunities."

Burgo once wanted to become a priest. But as a young adult he converted to the Church of the Nazarene, earned a bachelor's degree in religion and became an associate pastor in his home church in Massachusetts. From there he moved to the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, where he earned a master's degree in divinity.

He did much of his studying for that degree in a small apartment on the second floor of the Kansas City Rescue Mission, where he was resident supervisor. In the evening, as the men dragged in for dinner and a bed, Burgo would break up fights, get medical attention for the injured, or help others get into a detox program. Sometimes, he'd fill in as preacher.

"I didn't have a strong desire to be a minister, to preach, to be a leader of the church. But the more I walked with Jesus, the more I opened my life and made it available to everything He had for me," Burgo says. "I remember asking Him one time in prayer, 'What service can I do for you?' And I remember Him speaking to me, or bringing that thought to my mind in a strong way, saying 'I want you to speak for me.'

"I didn't know what all that meant at the time, but I think sometimes it means speaking for Him behind a pulpit and preaching a message from the scriptures, and sometimes it means speaking for Him by giving someone a sandwich or a bed." In everyday life, Burgo rarely preaches. He clearly knows how to talk the talk, but he prefers to just walk the walk.

He paraphrases Matthew 25:35-40 from the Bible: "For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me water; I was a stranger and you invited me into your homes; naked and you clothed me; sick and in prison, and you visited me." Burgo isn't just dusting off an old Bible lesson; he continues the tale like a fascinating story or the plot to a movie he just saw. "And when the men asked, 'When did we do these things?' Jesus answers, 'When you did it to these my brothers you were doing it to me.' "

Burgo, in his preaching and praying, was always searching for other ways to help the homeless men he saw every day. "When the need is very great, you want to be at your very best," he says.

So he entered MU's social work program and spent 12 hours a day two days a week working on a second master's degree. He graduated in 1992 and started as a clinical social worker in Kansas City with the homeless program. Two years later, he was promoted to coordinator, marking one of the fastest rises to social work management in VA history.

Looking back, Burgo cites an interven-

tion strategies class taught by Associate Professor Joanne Mermelstein. "On exams, she'd give us real-life problems and scenarios to work with, and make us come up with solutions," Burgo says. "It really forced us to look at all of our resources and trained us to be problem solvers. And that's what I'm doing every day now that I'm out in the real world."

Still in Foxholes

On any given day, as many as 250,000 veterans live on the streets or in shelters across this country. Many are addicted to alcohol or other drugs, and most have lost whatever job or family they once had. They make up about a third of America's homeless population.

That's why the Department of Veterans Affairs established the Health Care for Homeless Veterans program a decade ago. It now has 73 sites across the country.

"We have a program in which veterans can go from raw off the streets to their own apartment without any gaps," Burgo says.

Often it is through the gaps that homeless men fall back in with their old crowd, pick up where they left off with drugs and alcohol, and return to their briefly halted downhill slide.

Bobby* was one such man. Counselors talked with him over and over again under the bridge, trying to convince him to come into the homeless program. Time and again he refused, saying, "Help my buddy first, come back for me later."

Then one day, he was ready to come in from the cold. He spent three months working with the homeless program, staying sober, finding a job, working toward re-entering society. But something was bugging him. For whatever reason, he needed to reconcile with his father.

Program staff thought he should stay in Kansas City and keep working toward his goals, but Bobby left anyway. He got together with his dad, Burgo says, but he never returned to the program. Over the next few months, counselors talked with him again and again under that bridge, and every time he was just about ready to come back to the program. Then one day, Bobby was killed while trying to catch a train out of town. Even though he had jumped freighters dozens of times before, that day he slipped. Burgo talked with his family at the funeral.

"His mother was truly grateful for his time with us," Burgo says. "She said that when he had been sober for those few months in our program, it was like having the old Bobby back."

The Rules and the Rules

Treatment starts with detox—short for detoxification—the lonely and painful time addicts and alcoholics endure to rid their bodies of their chemical demons.

Some homeless veterans choose to go through detox in the veterans hospital. Chris*, 60, spent it burrowed under the covers in a room crowded with beds on the ground floor of SOS, the Shield of Service home run by the Salvation Army in Kansas City, Kan.

Chris used to be a truck driver. But long years of drinking had wracked his body, making him unable to drive the long hauls. He ended up on the streets, trusting no one, isolating himself from the world.

Eventually he agreed to enter the VA's homeless program, where he began some of the toughest work of his life. "It's not, 'Here's a bed, here's a sandwich,' " Burgo says. "This is a program. The VA's paying for you, and they're not paying for you to come and relax."

The rules are strict. Beds must be made, shoes lined up neatly underneath and each man's narrow metal locker closed and locked. There is a kitchen with a cook, a few pinball games, two pay phones and a TV room. The men have to be in by 10:30 p.m.—unless they're at work—because, as Burgo says, there's nothing for them but trouble on the streets after that.

The VA pays for up to six months of treatment, and expects the veteran to work and stash most of his earnings so he'll have money for an apartment and a new start in life.

Chris eventually moved on to a less-restrictive home run by the homeless program. But he still had to undergo blood and urine tests every time he came back from a weekend leave, and randomly throughout the year.

The written rules in the homeless program are clear: If you relapse into alcohol

Burgo looks for camps north of Kansas City's River Market area.

and drugs, you're out. The unwritten rules are a little different: If you relapse and you use your mistake as a springboard toward greater dedication to your own recovery, you may be able to stay.

"We keep the no-relapse rule as a foundation, but then we go to a person who has made a mistake and allow our clinical skills and our compassion to give him an opportunity to rebuild," Burgo says.

Chris joined the program twice, and twice he left. Each time he relapsed and returned to drinking on the streets, sleeping on cardboard mattresses, using old clothes for a pillow. Finally, counselors moved him to a longer-term program at another VA hospital. "We realized he needed longer therapeutic support in order to arrive at the type of stability that would allow him to stay strong on his own," Burgo says.

Chris will never be a truck driver again, but today he is at least ready to hold a steady job, maintain his own apartment, and rebuild his tattered life.

Flipping Burgers

Andy* was a successful advertising executive accustomed to a six-figure salary.

"He was very skilled and successful," Burgo says, "but in the area of substance abuse, he was very unskilled."

Over time he drank away his job, alienated his family and ended up on the streets. He came into the program and did well, but the hard work that was needed to repair family relationships knocked him backward, and he relapsed into a drinking binge. He came back into the program and redoubled his efforts, taking a job flipping burgers at a fast-food restaurant to ease his way back into the world of work.

"He knew he couldn't return right away to the kind of work he had before," Burgo says. "He felt if he went in too fast he'd be affected by the stress and he'd reach for the bottle."

Andy, who has been sober for almost two years now, has moved up to a more responsible job—he was even named "Employee of the Month"—and is slowly repairing relationships with his family.

"We work with the guys so much," Burgo says, "that a person who is kicked out is really kicking himself out because he's been given opportunities to change his life around."

Too Much of Not Enough

So far, federal cutbacks have spared the homeless program, though Burgo frequently finds himself in meetings defending how money is spent and how treatment plans are devised.

"The homeless program is controversial," he says. "Some folks say we're not doing enough. Others say we're doing too much."

Burgo, of course, would like to do more. He has pushed hard for a similar program for women and families that is slated to begin this year.

"One of Bruce's strongest points is being diplomatic with the powers that be," says Pat Durham, a social worker with the program. "He can go to the hospital director, the Congress, the higher ups, and present fairly and be a good negotiator. That's where I see one of his greatest strengths."

Burgo attends a lot of meetings and files a whole lot of reports, but in between he's back out at shelters, soup kitchens and on the streets with his coworkers, trying to connect veterans with services.

"When you live on the streets it kind of beats you up," Burgo says.

"Sometimes they'll tell me how old they are and they're the same age as I am, but they look old."

Some of them, of course, truly are old, having traveled the country by boxcar much of their lives.

"You find that some of these folks are historians," Burgo says. "You show them a little bit of genuine human interest and you find they're carrying around in their minds and their hearts the history of the nation.

"I try to meet these people where they are," he says. "I come to them as a novice and let them be the expert on their life. I try to give them the respect they deserve as another human being, as another citizen of this country." ❋

** The names of the veterans have been changed to protect their privacy.*