

WITH EFFORT THINGS CAN CHANGE

NEAL MCLAURIN*

My name is Neal McLaurin and in the summer of 2007 I found myself living in the streets of North Philadelphia and Center City Philadelphia. All I had were the clothes on my back, a clover and a black trash bag with the rest of my belongings. As I was laying on the side of Broad and Arch streets a woman walked by with a small child who had to be no more than about six or seven years old. The child locked eyes with me, and then turned to his mother and said: "What's wrong with that man, why is he sleeping right there?" The woman said nothing to the child; she just looked at me and grabbed the child and walked by real fast like I was a bum or something.

I could not believe it. Was I a bum? How could this happen to me? How did I get here? As a child I would have looked at a homeless person as a bum, but was I a bum or what?

I started to cry.

There was an old man sitting on the bench. He looked homeless too. He asked me why I was crying, and I told him I was confused, scared and had nowhere to go. He told me about a shelter down the street called Our Brother's Place. I had never been in a shelter before. You'll be fine, he told me, they will give you a bed and three meals. I was very hungry, so I went to the shelter.

While in the shelter I happened to start watching a television program about an actor named Charles Dutton, who starred in a television series in the '90s called "Roc." The program I was watching was talking about how he was in jail for manslaughter when he was young and wrote and acted in his first play in jail. He changed his life when he got out of jail and went to Broadway. Something changed in me that day; I knew what my calling was—I was going to be an actor.

I told people I was going to be an actor and some people laughed at me. Others said go for it—but where would I start?

I believe that homelessness is sometimes a state of mind and can be broken with changing one's thinking. We can become homeless in our minds years before we are homeless physically. That is why I must start from my beginnings.

From the very beginning I had to fight. I was born February 14, 1979, under fetal distress. The doctor told my mother I had water on my brain and because of this I would most likely have a learning disability such as dyslexia. My mother never let that hold me back from achieving in life.

I remembered as a child I heard of and saw a theatre school in North Philly on Broad Street named Freedom Theatre. Freedom is a powerful word; free to be who you are. So I went there and asked the man at the front office about acting classes. He told me wait at the front desk; he would get one of the acting teachers. A very gentle woman came out. Her name was Diane Lezle, and she asked me why I wanted to come to Freedom Theatre. I said to her I just felt I am supposed to be here. She let me in by just saying that.

*Formerly published in One Step Away, Philadelphia's street newspaper produced and distributed by people experiencing homelessness.

I studied theatre acting for a year and then they gave me a scholarship for a year to study musical theatre. Now I'm at a community college majoring in theatre. We just started studying William Shakespeare. I am in a program to go to Temple to further my theatre.

Where a person starts is not always where he can end up. With effort things can change.