

## SPECIAL REPORT

## How charity services helped

TEARS,  
FEARS AND  
LIFE ON  
THE EDGE

Paul Ashenden

**C**hristopher, a 49-year-old former crane operator, breaks down in tears as he describes his journey back from sleeping in a tent under the Semaphore Jetty for six months.

Mirjana is a 60-year-old grandmother who spent months carting her quilt around the streets of Adelaide, looking for a shelter and a safe place to sleep.

Chelsea is a 22-year-old aspiring hairdresser who was on the brink of ending her life after six years without stable housing.

Their lives are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to presenting the big picture of homelessness in South Australia. There are thousands more like them.

Each story boasts its own unique elements, but they have one common theme: No one wants to be homeless.

Some couch-surf with friends and family for as long as they can. Then they might live in their cars for a while. And if their luck doesn't turn, they'll eventually find themselves sleeping rough, roaming around city streets searching for somewhere dry and safe to put down for the night.

A spiralling rental crisis – fuelled by astronomical cost-of-living increases – is forcing more people out of their homes.

Christopher, Mirjana and Chelsea have agreed to tell their stories in an effort to raise awareness about this escalating issue, and urge South Australians to get behind the



Sunday Mail's annual Blanket Appeal. The appeal has been helping homeless people since 1959, and money raised this year will go to charities the Hutt St Centre and Catherine House.

**C**hristopher cries as he talks about how the Hutt St Centre helped turn his life around after years of living either in his car on the streets or in a tent under the Semaphore Jetty.

It's a cold and drizzly winter's day when we meet on the footpath near the centre's entrance, and he volunteers to tell his story so he can help the people who have helped him so much.

Raised on the beaches of California, in the US, Christopher met and married an Adelaide girl and moved to SA 16 years ago.

The couple have two daughters, but the marriage eventually broke down and his life started spiralling out of control when he lost his job at the start of Covid-19.

Christopher was drinking heavily and, for a while, lived with his dog in the car. After a series of traffic infringements, he lost his licence and found himself "proper homeless".

When asked to describe how he first came across the Hutt St Centre, he becomes visibly emotional.

"I had come into the Hutt St Centre one day because I was in need," he says. "I was in need of food, I was in need of shelter, I was in need of support, and I was ... I was homeless."

Christopher y sobs as the drizzle gets heavier. But then he gathers himself.

"These people are amazing," he continues as he gestures towards the Hutt St Centre. "They're angels. They've helped me, and I know they've helped a lot of other people. They can't throw enough money at this place. There are so many in need. They have helped me become a better person. Because of their help, it's helped me get back to where I should be."

Thanks to the Hutt St Centre's Aspire program, which helps connect people with sustainable housing, employment and community, Christopher now has a permanent home near the CBD.

"They've given me hope. I don't know how or why, but I've been truly blessed to have been given this opportunity. I'll be sure to give anything back for having my home."

"I could only hope and pray that if there was anyone out there that is, or has been, through what I've been through, they were given the opportunity that I've been given."

To that end, Christopher urges people to donate to the Sunday Mail Blanket Appeal.

"This life is f--king difficult," he says. "Every one of us can be in the top penthouse in one moment and then in the next moment be seen as a filthy bum picking up cigarette butts. That's life."

"I just want people to open their hearts and to realise it doesn't take much to actually get to the bottom."

Christopher becomes emotional once more when asked to describe how tough it is to live on the streets.

"It's absolutely f--ked up, man," he says. "You have no idea how lonely and singular a person is who is living on the streets ... the cold."

And tears replace his words yet again.

**T**he loneliness, fears for her safety, cold of winter and heat of summer are the lasting memories of Mirjana's time sleeping rough in the streets of Adelaide.

The Croatian-born grandmother, who moved to Adelaide with her

Hutt St Centre client Christopher, 49. Picture: Dean Martin



# these three people fight back from homelessness



Mirjana, 60, says help from Hutt Street Centre saved her life. Picture: Morgan Sette



Chelsea, 22, is getting her life on track with a stay at Catherine House. Picture: Keryn Stevens

parents when she was seven, found herself homeless during Covid-19 after her time as a live-in carer for a family friend turned toxic.

Like many, she began her homeless journey couch-surfing, but was always conscious of overstaying her welcome.

"You can't stay in people's houses that long, because you are invading their privacy as well," she says.

"They've got lives to live, and you can't expect them to keep you at the same time. So, yeah, my life was spiralling out of control."

Mirjana went from shelter to shelter looking for help as she searched the streets carrying her quilt to find "a little nook and cranny" where she could bed down at night.

"It's cold, very cold, but hot during the summer," she says. "It's also very, very ... it's kind of scary, because people are weird – they look at you really weird when you're out there, and you're wary about them."

"Some people are really good – they'll buy you a bottled drink or something to eat – but a lot of times

you've got voices constantly around you, and you're lying there and you think 'Jeez, what's going on?'."

Mirjana says the best spots to sleep are under shelter in areas that are not "in the middle of nowhere" but are also not too busy with pedestrians.

"When you first go on the street, you look for places like tunnels and similar – where you can have a little area that's tucked away," she says.

"If you're a woman, it's even worse. So, you try to make yourself disappear, and in the morning you get up and move quickly so that you don't get into trouble."

"If you are in the doorway of a private building, you can get into a heck of a lot of trouble, so you have to move around. Apart from the cold, the worse thing about it was just people looking at your life as though you're a piece of s--t, of them not really caring – you're just another number, another statistic."

With the help of the Hutt St Centre, Mirjana now has a permanent roof over her head and has reconnected

with her three children and two grandchildren. She says it's no exaggeration to suggest that the centre has saved her life, urges people to support the blanket appeal, and pleads with everyone to not judge those who are on the streets.

"It (homelessness) can happen to anybody. It can happen to you at any time. You cannot predict what's going to happen to you tomorrow."

It's a sentiment shared by Chelsea, who has found refuge at women's homeless service Catherine House, in the CBD, after spending most of her short adult life searching for stable accommodation.

Her housing nadir came earlier this year and capped a torrid 18 months during which she estimates she lived in eight or nine different houses after her former landlord jacked up the rent of her shared one bedroom, one bathroom apartment (with no laundry or pantry) to \$500 a week.

She coach-surfed at the homes of

friends and family and ended up at her grandmother's – but after a while the imposition became too much and she knew she needed to find an alternative.

"At that point, I was really suicidal," she says. "I was having those thoughts of like 'I don't have a job, I don't have a house, I'm not a beneficial member of society, and if I disappeared, no one would notice', and that it would actually probably be a good thing to take the burden off the system."

One morning, she went for "a stupid run for my stupid mental health" and happened to pass a homeless service in Port Adelaide that put her in touch with Catherine House, where she placed her name on a waiting list for the women's-only, city-based crisis accommodation centre.

About eight weeks later, Chelsea received a phone call while in the middle of a driving lesson with her grandmother.

"I literally pulled the car over and cried," she says. "I was like 'Oh my gosh, I actually have a roof over my head'."

Chelsea's neat and tidy

## HELP SHARE THE WARMTH

**EVERY** winter, the Sunday Mail Blanket Appeal raises funds to help people experiencing – or at risk of – homelessness.

**THIS** year's appeal, with the support of The Advertiser Foundation, will deliver much-needed funds to the Hutt St Centre and Catherine House.

**IT'S** off to a flying start, with the signing of the appeal's first corporate sponsor, Mitsubishi Motors, this week.

**SUNDAY** Mail Editor Paul Ashenden said the appeal was the newspaper's longest-running charitable initiative. "IT began in the Great Depression and was revived in 1959. Over more than six decades, South Australians have opened their hearts and dug deep," he said.

"**THE** appeal has touched the lives of thousands of people at their lowest point. For people sleeping rough, winter can be deadly – staying warm and dry is vital."

**HEAD** of The Advertiser Foundation Dan Demaria said: "We are thrilled to have Mitsubishi Motors



signed on as our first corporate partner for the 2023 appeal – their cash contribution will allow the Hutt St Centre to purchase more waterproof swags for those sleeping rough this winter, and also for Catherine House to help more women escaping domestic violence and poverty."

**DONATE** via this QR code, or cheques may be sent to The Advertiser Foundation, GPO Box 339, Adelaide, 5000.



Sleeping rough in Adelaide.

room at one of Catherine House's three CBD locations offers her the stability she's been desperately searching for.

"I've been used to having the rug pulled out from underneath me when it comes to housing," she says.

"So, it's really nice that I can settle and have a breather and have some space that I can call my own."

"Throughout my whole housing journey, you get the feeling of like 'I'm invading someone's space', or 'I'm an inconvenience', or 'I'm a burden'. But now that I'm here, that's dissolved."

Catherine House, which provides accommodation for up to 54 women each night, also offers mental health programs, a women's centre, outreach support and education and employment advice.

Chelsea is now focusing on improving her mental health, with a view to returning to study and the workforce. And, like Christopher and Mirjana, she urges people to dig deep for the blanket appeal.

"Homelessness is something that can happen to anyone," she says. "I never thought in a million years that I would be in a position that I'm in today."

"So, I guess what I'm saying is don't take your situation for granted. If you can financially contribute, go for it, because it could be your child or it could be your co-worker or it could be a family member or your parents."

"A lot of these people need help."