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## Homeless in Ann Arbor

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# homeless

madeline halpert

**D**anielle Chavez sits quietly on the cement near the corner of State and Liberty with nothing but a small jar in her hand. She does not speak, other than to say “good morning” to the occasional passerby. Her only request comes from a small cardboard sign, perched on a milk crate that sits next to her and reads “Seeking Human Kindness.”

“Go f\*\*\* yourself,” a young man yells at her as he runs by. Chavez still sits quietly and does not respond.

“People have a bad day and they feel like they should take it out on the homeless,” said Danielle. Chavez is one of Ann Arbor’s 510 homeless people.



Danielle and her husband Mat have been living in Ann Arbor for over a year now, after a series of unlucky housing and job situations. When Danielle and Mat first met, they moved to an apartment in Westland, Mich. with Danielle's two children, Julia and Abigail.

"It had rained for an entire weekend, and our building flooded with sewage," said Danielle. "We had to pack up everything and move from there."

They then relocated to a duplex home in Dearborn Heights in an area with a high crime rate, but did not stay for long.

"The final straw was when there were gunshots in the neighborhood," she said. "It was before I got home from work, and my daughter was really scared. It was just too much. I said, 'This is not healthy. This is not safe. We need to leave here.'"

They decided to head to Belleville to be closer to Danielle's parents, where the van that Mat used to lay carpet broke down, and subsequently, his business of fifteen years plummeted.

Weeks of couchsurfing led the couple to a friend's house in Taylor, who told the Chavezes of multiple opportunities in Ann Arbor. Mat and Danielle packed all of their belongings in a car, left the girls with reliable guardians, Danielle's parents, and made the 40 minute journey to Ann Arbor.

They applied for multiple jobs in downtown Ann Arbor, along with a couple gas stations and a Meijer, to no avail, since they had no working cell phone for potential employers to reach them.

Mathew now busks (plays guitar for money) on the corner of North University Ave. and State St., while Danielle "spangings" (asks for spare change) across the street.

The hardest part about being homeless for the couple has nothing to do with making day-to-day ends meet, however. It was having to leave their children behind on their search for stability that hurt the most.

"I felt like someone had ripped my heart out," said Danielle. "I just completely shut down."

While Danielle's parents have a stable income and suitable living situation, falling back on them is not an option for her.

"I don't have a relationship with my parents at all," she said. "Strangers will tell me, 'Your mom loves you,' and I know she doesn't. She has told me she doesn't. There are some people that don't love their children, and she's one of them."

Staying at Mat's mother's house is not a suitable environment either. Danielle says this is because, although Mat's mother loves him, in many ways she has not accepted him for who he really is: homeless. With the additional problem of her mental health issues, this leaves the couple with nowhere to turn to for a place to stay.

## How do they cope?

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The Chavezes say the only way to survive on the streets is to focus on the day at hand.

"We had to realize, 'What are we doing tonight?'" said Danielle. "'How are we getting gas in our car?'" You can't even think about tomorrow."

This has made it difficult for them to search for permanent work. The irony of the situation is that, for them, trying to find a job, while already jobless, is near impossible.

"Where am I going to shower for the interview?" said Mat. "What address am I going to put on the application?"

Because of this lack of permanency, Danielle has found ways to adapt to her life on the streets with rules to follow.

"I try not to lie to people," she said. "There are a lot of people that lie out here, and I think that's disrespectful. You're asking people for help, and if you're lying to them, you're almost stealing from them. I have so many regulars that come by and help me out because of that."

At night, they try and scrape together around \$50 to stay at the Embassy Hotel on Huron St. They have stayed at nearly every motel room during their time in Ann Arbor, however, when they can't come up with the money, they are forced to resort to other options: their tent on State Street by the Gandy Dancer.

"It's uncomfortable," said Mat. "It's unsafe. I spend most of my night up watching for the door. When it rains, the tent stays wet for two weeks and it smells like mildew."

Since they have no residence, the tent is where they store their few possessions. However, this has proven unsuitable, since another homeless man comes around from time to time to take what he wants. The Chavezes say he likes to do this with other tenters as well.

Despite the few who steal, the homeless people of Ann Arbor tend to look out for each other. Although it is unconventional, Danielle and Mat have found a support system.

"They're kind of like a family," she said. "We don't have TV or things like that, so we have to keep each other entertained."

Danielle adds that, although this is helpful, there are many times where she wishes for a different kind of support.

"When I'm having a really bad day, I wish I could call my mom," she said. "I don't have that option."

## How does Ann Arbor help?

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The city has several programs available to help the homeless, however the Chavez-

es have found these services to be inadequate. Danielle says PORT (Project Outreach Team) is most helpful.

PORT is run by the County of Washtenaw, and they do anything from provide sleeping bags and tents to scheduling psychiatry appointments for the homeless.

She says that, although this is one of Ann Arbor's more useful services, their funds are incredibly limited.

"They have a set budget that they get at the beginning of the year," said Danielle. "Last year, because of the winter, they were out of money by January. They bought hotel rooms for people for a week and then ran out of money for the summer."

Mat adds that 60 beds for over 500 homeless people provided by the Delonis Center is a start, but is not enough to make a dent in the growing issue of homelessness. He feels their strict policies can be unnecessary, and sometimes harsh.

"When we stay there, we're not even allowed to hug each other," said Mat.

He adds that, even though there is reason for permitting people who have been drinking or who are drinking from entering the Delonis Center, it leaves them without a roof during the coldest time of year.

"Alcoholics are people too," said Mat. "They don't deserve to freeze to death outside. No one does."

## What can the city do better?

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Danielle says that, in terms of what needs to be done for better services, the list goes on and on.

"There needs to be a better shelter, more beds, better rules and letting more people in [the shelters]," she said. "[The city] just doesn't have a solution."

There is work to be done by the people of Ann Arbor, as well. They encourage passersby not to make assumptions about their reasons for homelessness.

"People will say to me, 'Why don't you get a job?'" said Mat. "And then they run away. I say, 'Sure. Can I use your shower for the interview?' They've never once had a good comeback. If people were willing to say those things to my face, then they'd realize that I have an actual answer."

Even just the simple act of caring can make their day a little bit better.

"Treat everyone like human beings," said Mat. "Homeless people are human beings too."

Mat and Danielle try to remain hopeful for their future. They keep one goal in the back of their minds as they move forward: getting their children back. In the meantime, they're just glad to have the support of someone else to get through the day.

"As long as we have each other, we'll be okay," said Mathew.