



***HELPING OLDER AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WHO ARE HOMELESS THROUGH VISUAL IMAGES AND CREATIVE STRATEGIES***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines cultural and gendered perceptions of homelessness, and the *Leaving Homelessness Intervention Research Project (LHIRP)* aimed at helping older African American women leave and remain out of homelessness. Gendered perceptions of homelessness and the interaction between race and poor health can heighten risk of homelessness and exacerbate the process of emerging out of it. The use of visual images, performance, and creative strategies (VIPCS) in amplifying women's voices along with providing social support are identified as important elements of the helping process. VIPCS—which can contribute to helping women leave homelessness, sustain their domiciled status, and educate the public about the exigencies of homelessness—are intervention strategies that improve the participants' situations.

**Introduction**

The number of homeless women is increasing in the United States (Kisor & Kendal-Wilson, 2002), with African American women disproportionately represented among this too vulnerable population (Cohen, 1999; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2007). The number of homeless people approaching 50 years of age is expected to increase dramatically, and older African American women are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Reasons associated with increased homelessness include unmet need for affordable housing and growing numbers of baby boomers reaching older adulthood, especially prior to qualifying for entitlements available to those classified as being legally old (Cohen, 1999). The current economic crisis and the ripple effects of problematic housing policies are likely to accelerate the number of homeless people and include those taking refuge on the streets, in shelters, and in homes of friends and extended family.

Homelessness among older African American women also poses substantial personal threats, including poor nutrition, harsh living conditions, and serious mental health consequences, all of which can reduce their overall health status. Homelessness at midlife among African American women often results from poverty, changes in marital status, unanticipated circumstances, the absence of a living wage, scarce or non-existent affordable housing, and unethical or predatory mortgage practices (Washington, Moxley, & Taylor, 2009). According to Ross (2000), the greatest challenge for older African Americans may be poverty, as they have the highest poverty rate of all races. He indicated that more than 30% of older African Americans live in poverty compared with 10% of elderly Whites. Older women who are at risk for poverty often live alone and are at greater risk for becoming homeless (Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2006; Ross, 2000).

Homelessness for older African American women also may reflect the culmination of a process that involves exposure to gender-based disadvantages in family life, work, and welfare. African American women experience the triple threat of race, poverty, and gender-based negative effects on their mental and emotional well-being more than men or women of other racial or ethnic groups (Brown, 2003). This group generally is assigned a diminished social status within the larger society

that does not perceive itself as having to honor any obligation to help them (Freddolino, Moxley, & Hyduk, 2004). African American women also live in a society that frequently draws negative social conclusions about them, and they experience serious inequities in almost all areas of daily life—especially those women who have low incomes or are otherwise socioeconomically disadvantaged (Belle & Doucet, 2003). In general, women earn less, work fewer years, are more likely to work part-time, and are less likely to participate in pension plans than men. A majority of time spent out of the labor force is devoted to their role as caregivers for children and elderly relatives (Angel, Jiménez, & Angel, 2007). Consequently, as they grow older, the impact of family dissolution through separation, widowhood, or divorce can have grave consequences for African American women (Washington, Moxley, & Taylor, 2009). Although women have a longer life expectancy than men, many women lose this survival advantage when they are homeless (Cheung & Hwang, 2004).

Working with older homeless African American women involves addressing their diminished status within society. Often times the process that results in such diminished status breeds mistrust and the absence of hope. The research we report in this paper is designed to counteract such situations and accentuate the strengths and virtues of the participants. The incorporation of visual imagery is one of several important strategies the project uses not only to understand the dilemmas and predicaments participants faced, but also to valorize the efforts of the women to remove themselves from homelessness and from harm's way. This paper describes VIPCS interventions, as well as selected experiences of eight women who were study participants at the inception of this project. These women now serve as advisors to subsequent LHIRP research projects. The current article also features the LHIRP subproject, *Telling My Story* (TMS), a social action art installation and educational forum described later in this paper (Fulmer, Washington, & Moxley, 2006).

## Overview of Research Design and Methods

Located in a large Midwestern city in the United States, LHIRP, now in its 10th year, is a multi-level, multi-intervention action research project that blends social science research methods with the visual and performing arts, crafts, and peer support. LHIRP's principal research aims are developmental in nature: The project has sought to design and evaluate strategies useful for improving services and supports for older homeless African American women. This developmental research process is undertaken in partnership with participants who serve in multiple roles within the project (e.g., governance, advisement, interpretative, and analytic roles) imbuing the project with participatory action research features. The project itself works at multiple system levels by developing and evaluating strategies for their usefulness at individual, group, and community levels. The project incorporates multiple methods including quantitative and qualitative research procedures that incorporate intervention, narratives, as well as experimental designs. For example, the project has invested considerably in helping participants tell their stories of homelessness through narrative methods, and while therapeutic in their intent participants also have worked with the researchers to use these stories in educating members of the larger community. Their stories expand public awareness of the plight of homelessness among older African American women. To date the project has realized promising interventions in the areas of outreach, screening and assessment, advocacy, group work, and community-building. The LHIRP is comprised of substudies on which researchers work closely with participants who help govern the project and identify promising avenues of inquiry. Subsequent research is undertaken to develop and test practices through various action research cycles.

Since its inception in 2000, 514 women have participated in one or more intervention substudies of LHIRP. The LHIRP brings together older homeless African American women, community members, and service providers to (a) build public awareness of the emerging and growing problem of homelessness among older women, (b) provide visual representations of the women's trauma and recovery from homelessness, (c) document recovery from homelessness that employ the women's creative

abilities and personal resources, (d) demonstrate how art and science can be integrated to put a human face on serious social problems, and (e) use visual images and other creative strategies to increase understanding of problems associated with homelessness. The use of visual imagery from the first-person experiences of participants infuses the project with realism and poignancy. Additional tools useful to women in their recovery from homelessness have also included the use of verse, narrative, and performance. Such creative strategies offer women ways to express their perspectives and amplify their personal experiences. In addition, illumination of common themes across visual images can facilitate public awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of recovery from homelessness that often is misunderstood and inaccurately portrayed.

The recovery process within LHIRP is treated at both individual and collective levels, with women locating themselves and their narratives within the greater context of what the group perceives as the homeless experience among older African American women. Within this context, participants identify their own processes for emerging out of what can be dangerous and degrading situations, transcending life-threatening situations, and accentuating strength and virtues that the women cull from their personal stories and histories. We use Glendinning's (2001) interpretation of Heidegger's conception of aesthetics that involves the revealing of a rich essence of the actuality of a phenomenon. In the case of LHIRP, we (participants and researchers) seek to reveal exigencies of homelessness, as well as the essence of recovery (i.e., a healing of the spirit and self through proactive action leading to self-fulfillment, an intrinsic essence that must be defined by the individual participant).

This aesthetic competes with the deprivation inherent in homelessness, a negative aesthetic in which environmental degradation is a dominant theme. Helping women move from the negative aesthetic (and all of its distressing experiences) to embracing the essence of fulfillment is a primary aim of the project. This strategy links recovery to empowerment. Further, visual images, performances, and other creative strategies (VIPCS) hold promise both individually and collectively, in meeting this aim found in the movement a woman can make from a negative aesthetic to one that captures her inherent beauty, strengths, and resilience.

### **The Importance of Visual and Narrative Forms to the Recovery Process**

Poverty and its extreme variant, homelessness, can literally degrade both personal and environmental aesthetics leaving women without an internalized image of the richness and beauty they seek for themselves and others. Visual imagery is used in LHIRP activities in two important ways: (a) to document participants' exposure to environmental or personal deprivation, and (b) to help participants form their valued aesthetic that includes projecting and envisioning themselves experiencing richer, productive lives in environments they find supportive.

Visual images along with performative and narrative art forms can help participants share the stress they accumulate over the course of their homelessness. When integrated with statistics and other traditional quantitative research data, visual arts can provide a comprehensive picture of issues associated with homelessness as a personal dilemma and social issue. This integration also increases researchers, helping professionals, and the public's awareness of homelessness that might not be achieved through other forms of representation (e.g., a research report; Grimshaw, 2001). Moreover, the image of the bag lady or the mentally ill crone that endures in collective consciousness (Kisor & Kendal-Wilson, 2002) is an inaccurate description of many, if not most, homeless women. Because the response to this image of older homeless women does not resonate with the public, Kisor and Kendal-Wilson (2002) suggest the need to reframe this image so more positive assessments and sympathetic actions ensue. Such representations often fail to recognize the social dynamics that influence poverty, ones that can result in homelessness for many African American women.

Homelessness is a trauma that touches every aspect of human functioning; the sense of self can become eroded, confused, damaged, and depressed (Farrington & Robinson, 1999). Recovery from homelessness, like other traumas, as Herman (1992) suggests, occurs in stages. Ultimately, recovery from homelessness requires reintegrating aspects of the personality, and developing a new sense of identity with "post-resolution coping skills" (p. 156).

VIPCS can facilitate this process: representing experiences in

visual form offers a new perspective, helps to validate the experience for the artist, and contributes to self-awareness and self-efficacy. Visual expression often aids communication by providing a more comprehensive picture than words alone can convey (Linesch, 1988). The process of objectifying feelings or other experiences by externalizing them makes feelings more manageable (Malchiodi, 2007).

Consequently, LHIRP has adopted VIPCS for several reasons. On a personal level, VIPCS offers women opportunities to frame their representations of catastrophic experiences in their movement in and out of homelessness. On a collective level (through action research), these images can offer alternative perceptions of the homeless experience, provide images that can counter popular negative stereotypes of older homeless women, and foster community change.

Several VIPCS strategies effective on a personal level include the involvement of participants in creating self-portraits and scrapbooks. Portraits are effective in exploring identity, helping people to see themselves through alternative lenses (Wallace, 1997). Portraits provide ways to contend with reality and face painful truths (Hanes, 2007). The permanent quality of the self-portrait can be a distinct benefit because it documents ideas and perceptions for review and provides comparisons with other images (Malchiodi, 2007; Naumburg, 1966). The construction of scrapbooks (Washington & Moxley, 2003a, 2003b, 2004), as memoirs, helps people who are homeless document their homeless experiences and “reauthor” their stories with outcomes they seek (Carlson, 1997). Additional art interventions such as a cooperatively constructed quilt (Moxley, Washington, & Feen-Calligan, 2008), photography, and narrative interviewing (Washington & Moxley, 2008) also contribute to women’s recovery from the trauma of homelessness.

On a collective level, although art and visual imagery have been used to draw attention to homelessness as a social problem (Allen, 2007; Timm-Bottos, 2001), published research has neglected first-person experiences with homelessness among older African American women. The women’s visual and narrative expressions about their homeless experiences represented in the *Telling My Story* exhibit corresponds to a new genre of public art (Lacy, 1995) engaging audiences personally and provocatively in the experience of a serious social issue.

VIPCS contributes to an “aesthetics of recovery” in which homeless women work to find a course of action that brings them satisfaction and pleasure, as they move toward emergence from homelessness. Such work is often collaborative involving mutual support and new ways of interacting with credentialed health and mental health professionals. Participants can find beauty in envisioning new images of themselves, replete with envisioned content of new life styles, and personally productive living situations. Such images contribute to the recovery as a process of redefining self, and remain mindful of the wisdom acquired from overcoming the exigencies of homelessness. This introduction of potential and new images are controlled by each woman and it offers all participants additional tools that can help sustain their actions and achieve important recovery outcomes (e.g., changes in their personal resolve, enhanced health and well being, stabilized housing, and linkage to community supports). VIPCS can offer important interventions that empower homeless participants as part of a greater effort among the women themselves to support one another, resolve the issues they face, and educate the public about the serious causes and consequences of homelessness. Such outcomes likely help participants strengthen their self-efficacy.

### **Visual Representation as Intervention on a Personal Level**

#### ***Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention***

An earlier LHIRP project involved 40 women who participated in a cognitive-behavioral treatment group described as the *Life Management Enhancement* (LME) group intervention (Washington, et al., 2009). This therapeutic group was aimed at increasing personal control, building self-efficacy, and developing new expectations that could facilitate improved functioning among a group of older homeless African American women (Cipher, Clifford, & Roper, 2007; Washington & Moxley, 2001). The group model incorporated various approaches to group work including: (a) cognitive approaches that taught the women how homelessness influences their thinking; (b) approaches that engaged the women in identifying actions required to resolve homelessness, and (c) mutual support options in which the women supported one another. The LME

group also included the use of modalities such as prayer, relaxation, and massage. Group participants focused on positive attributes. They learned to increase awareness of how negative thoughts affected their behaviors and feelings as well as fostered their use of strategies for frustration tolerance, problem-solving skills, and assertiveness. To enrich their narratives, participants augmented their stories through VIPCS that included photography, visualization, and scrapbooks. In addition, selected participants from this group later participated in narrative storytelling and construction of a group quilt (see Table 1).

Participants were asked to use imagery to visualize what they saw themselves wearing and doing, and where they saw themselves living if they were able to successfully reverse their homeless conditions. Long used in healthcare settings (e.g., cancer treatment and birthing centers), visualization or imagery empowers people to improve their quality of life by providing a mental picture of pertinent goals (Achterberg, 1985; Hiltbrand, 1999; Siegel, 1986; Thwaite, 1996). In the LME project, visualization was used in conjunction with asking project participants to write letters describing situations in which they would like to see themselves six months later. Upon completion of the project, the investigators mailed those letters to addresses (e.g., relatives' addresses) that the women provided.

In a subsequent group session, the LME women were given glossy print portraits of prominent Black women who changed the United States, a practice consistent with the work of photographer Brian Lanker (1989, 2009). On the back of these portraits the authors summarized biographies of selected women from Lanker's interviews with the women in his documentary. The short rich text of Lanker's women (e.g., Althea Gibson, Jewel Plummer Cobb, and Leontyne Price) described in his book are accompanied by photos of the women exhibited in his series, *I Dream a World*. This series and their accompanying text can be viewed at <http://www.brianlanker.com/portfolio.html>

Each LME woman also selected a portrait to keep and share in group discussions with peers. During these discussions participants shared what they learned about their selection that inspired them to continue efforts to change their circumstances. Later, we supplied participants with print media (e.g., newspapers and assorted magazines) and

scissors. They were asked to collect pictures and develop scrapbooks reflective of the kinds of jobs and living circumstances they aspired to obtain. Members were asked to continue working on this project during the ensuing week and bring additional pictures to the next session.

We also provided binders filled with blank sheets of colored paper on which the women could paste their images. "My Scrapbook: How I Want to Live and Work" appeared at the top of each of the blank pages. The scrapbooks were comprised of three primary sections. In section one, participants created magazine collages from images they had collected using the theme, how I want to live and work. In the second section, they inserted photographs depicting images that would inspire their leaving homelessness. In addition to verbally sharing reasons why they selected particular images, participants also labeled the images to reflect what interested and inspired their efforts to leave homelessness. In the third section of their scrapbooks, the women used various items to depict their situations (e.g., original poetry and drawings, family photographs, song lyrics, and a variety of other original materials).

For example, ZoAnne (a pseudonym) voiced a desire to do something about social structures that bred poverty and homelessness in her hometown. ZoAnne's personal experiences with homelessness added to her sense of victimization and activism, which is evident in her life story.

VIPCS METHODOLOGIES	PURPOSE	BENEFIT/RESULT
<b>PHOTOGRAPHY</b> WOMEN WORKED IN PAIRS TO PHOTOGRAPH IMAGES THAT INSPIRED THEM TO CHANGE THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES, BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE.	EXPLORE WHAT INSPIRES WOMEN TO COPE WITH AND OVERCOME THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES.	THE PHOTOGRAPHS FACILITATED TELLING THE WOMEN'S STORIES AND ALLOWED THEM OPPORTUNITIES TO REWRITE THEIR NARRATIVES BY ASSIGNING NEW MEANING TO THE IMAGES THEY SELECTED.
<b>VISUALIZATION</b> WOMEN WERE ASKED TO VISUALIZE WHERE THEY SEE THEMSELVES LIVING AND WORKING AND WHAT THEY SEE THEMSELVES WEARING, WHEN THEY HAVE REVERSED THEIR HOMELESS CONDITION.	EMPOWER THE WOMEN TO REALIZE THEIR GOALS BY PROVIDING A MENTAL PICTURE OF ACHIEVEMENT.	WOMEN SELECTED SOME OF THEIR VISUALIZATIONS FOR THEIR SCRAPBOOKS. VISUALIZATION HELPED TO FACILITATE SELF-EFFICACY AS WELL AS A CHANGE IN SELF-CONCEPT.
<b>SCRAPBOOKS</b> GIVEN BLACK AND WHITE GLOSSY PHOTOS FROM THE SERIES, <i>PORTRAITS OF BLACK WOMEN WHO CHANGED AMERICA</i> , MAGAZINES, NEWSPAPERS, GLUESTICKS, AND SCISSORS, WOMEN WERE ASKED TO COLLAGE IMAGES THAT DEMONSTRATED HOW THEY WANTED TO LIVE AND WORK. THEY COULD INCLUDE IMAGES AND OTHER ITEMS OF THEIR CHOICE.	RECORD THE PROCESSES LEADING INTO AND THE TRANSITION OUT OF HOMELESSNESS.	WOMEN WERE ABLE TO VISUALIZE AND EXTERNALIZE THE EVENTS THAT LED TO THEIR HOMELESSNESS, TO RECORD THEIR EXPERIENCES, AND PROGRESS IN A CONCRETE AND PERMANENT WAY. ITEMS CHOSEN BY THE WOMEN AND ADDED TO THE SCRAPBOOKS INCLUDED POETRY, SONG LYRICS, PRAYERS, NEWS CLIPPINGS, FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS, AND DRAWINGS.
<b>CONCEPTUAL PORTRAITS</b> DIGITAL GICLEÉ PORTRAITS WERE CREATED BY AN ARTIST, BASED ON THE WOMEN'S NARRATIVES AND PHOTOGRAPHS.	FACILITATE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF HOMELESSNESS.	THE PORTRAITS FACILITATED THE REGENERATIVE NARRATIVE AS A CONTINUATION OF SUPPORT FOR PARTICIPANTS' JOURNEYS OUT OF HOMELESSNESS.
<b>EXHIBIT AND PERFORMANCE</b> EXHIBITS HAVE BEEN HELD IN 6 DIFFERENT VENUES. SEVERAL WOMEN SANG DURING THE OPENING NIGHTS OF THE EXHIBIT. AT LEAST ONE WOMAN PARTICIPATED IN A CHOIR AS PART OF HER RECOVERY FROM HOMELESSNESS.	FACILITATE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF HOMELESSNESS.  OFFER ACTIVITIES THAT PROVIDE JOY AND CONTRIBUTE TO REALIZING ONE'S ASPIRATIONS.	THE PORTRAITS ALLOWED THE WOMEN TO AMPLIFY THE INJUSTICES THEY FACED, AND REFRAME THEIR ROLES FROM PARTICIPANT RESEARCHER TO ADVOCACY AND ACTION FOR ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS. WOMEN WERE ABLE TO FULFILL SOME ASPIRATIONS, EXPERIENCE JOY, EXPRESS THEIR EXPERIENCES AND ENJOY A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT. VOCAL PERFORMANCES HELPED AROUSE AUDIENCES VIEWING THE TMS EXHIBIT.

VIPCS METHODOLOGIES	PURPOSE	BENEFIT/RESULT
<b>POETRY</b> SEVERAL WOMEN WROTE ORIGINAL POETRY AND INCLUDED THE POEMS IN THEIR SCRAPBOOKS. THESE WOMEN ALSO READ THEIR POETRY DURING THE OPENING OF THE TMS EXHIBIT.	EXPRESS THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS, AND EXPRESS FEELINGS THAT ARE OFTEN TOO PAINFUL FOR CASUAL VERBAL COMMUNICATION.	WOMEN WERE ABLE TO EXPRESS THEIR EXPERIENCES, AND REPORTED EXPERIENCING A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT WITH THEIR FINISHED POETRY. POETRY ALSO HELPED AROUSE AUDIENCES VIEWING THE TMS EXHIBIT.
<b>JOURNALING / THERAPY BOOKS</b> WOMEN WERE GIVEN THERAPY BOOKS IN WHICH TO RECORD DAILY EVENTS THAT IMPACTED THEIR FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOR.	RECORD FEELINGS AND EVENTS AS THEY HAPPENED:  INCREASE AWARENESS OF HOW THOSE EVENTS COULD TRIGGER IMPULSIVE REACTIONS VS. THOUGHTFUL BEHAVIORS.	WOMEN WERE ABLE TO PAUSE AND REFLECT, TO GAIN PERSONAL AWARENESS, AND MAKE MORE INFORMED DECISIONS BEFORE ACTING ON THEM.
<b>NARRATIVE STORYTELLING</b> THE RESEARCHERS INTERVIEWED THE WOMEN AND PRODUCED NARRATIVE TRANSCRIPTS 180-350 PAGES IN LENGTH.	INCREASE THE RESEARCHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF COMPLEX ISSUES SURROUNDING THE WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS.  SUPPORT THE EMERGENCE OF A REGENERATIVE NARRATIVE, ON THE PART OF THE WOMEN.	NARRATIVES REVEALED THE PROCESSES THAT MOVED THE WOMEN INTO HOMELESSNESS; FACILITATED THE IDENTIFICATION OF PRESSING ISSUES THAT CHALLENGED THE WOMEN DURING TRANSITIONS; AND FOSTERED CATHARSIS OF THE WOMEN'S PENT UP EMOTIONS. THEY PROVIDE IMPORTANT ADVANCED ORGANIZERS THAT CAN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE SUBSEQUENT INTERVENTIONS.
<b>QUILTING</b> EACH WOMAN CREATED AN INDIVIDUAL QUILT SQUARE THAT DEPICTED HER EXPERIENCES WITH HOMELESSNESS. THE SQUARES WERE ARRANGED TOGETHER TO FORM A GROUP QUILT.	CONTINUE USING GROUP WORK AS A METHOD OF SUPPORT.	WOMEN COULD VISUALIZE EACH INDIVIDUAL'S UNIQUE EXPERIENCES AND STRENGTHS, AS WELL AS EXPERIENCES HELD IN COMMON. WORKING ON THE QUILT ALLOWED WOMEN TO INTERACT CLOSELY WITH ONE ANOTHER, AND TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER. THE COMPLETED QUILT REPRESENTED A TANGIBLE PRODUCT—WHAT CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED BY WOMEN WORKING COOPERATIVELY.

Table 1: Visual Images, Performance, and Creative Strategies (VIPCS): Their Purpose and Benefit

*ZoAnne's Narrative as an Illustrative Case*

ZoAnne's situation represents continuous vulnerabilities and difficulties often encountered by women of diminished status as they try to emerge from homelessness. Powerful negative aesthetics were reflected in her struggle to become domiciled. These aesthetics were evident in this participant's admission to a homeless shelter with her two minor children. They also were depicted in her quilting patchwork, woven into her conceptual portrait, and the *Telling My Story* exhibit (Fulmer, Washington, & Moxley, 2006) as well as her photography in which degraded community life, garbage, and crumbling buildings were dominant. Her visual portrayal of the situation in which she found herself was a metaphor of her homeless situation involving themes of disrepair, destruction, and disorganization.

ZoAnne's parents had been married over 60 years and she described their marriage as one of her inspirations. One of 10 children, ZoAnne made references to family throughout the scrapbook, including a cousin who also was homeless. In addition to the black and white photographs taken while participating in the group sessions, ZoAnne included some photographs from her own collection. Among them she included the observation, "my son's 8th birthday party [was] the year I became homeless trusting in a Work First Advanced Technology Training program."

Depicting a similar theme, in another caption ZoAnne wrote about an "18 year old college student coming home from work" describing her as an "inspiration on the one hand and despair on the other." She also asked, "will she be a victim of discrimination if she proves to be a strong and intelligent African queen that expresses self-determination?" ZoAnne's scrapbook provided many visual representations of her traumas and documented her recovery from homelessness.

As described in her scrapbook, she married in 1972 and separated from her husband in 1988. ZoAnne also reported having "two sets of children." In regard to the three adult children from her first marriage, she stated, "My first set of children was privileged to grow up in a home my husband and I owned for 17 years. Hopefully my second set of children (two boys) will be awarded the same privilege some time in the future." ZoAnne photographed the house in which she raised her family

and labeled it: "Brand new baby, brand new home, brand new job, and a brand new car. The American Dream was then," she wrote.

Prior to becoming homeless, ZoAnne managed the data processing department at a major hotel for five years, explaining, "The experiences [on my job] changed my life forever and good and bad stress brought on homelessness." Her subsequent loss of employment and onset of serious depression literally pushed ZoAnne into homelessness with her two young sons. She then sought refuge in a poorly managed shelter, an environment that failed to recognize—and capitalize on—her strengths and further deepened her depression. In reconstructing her shelter experience, ZoAnne's documentary photographs revealed more of the negative aesthetics. The images reflected her 30 months of homelessness in dramatic form, which she described as "dark," "foreboding," "dangerous," and "inadequate" (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Photograph of ZoAnne standing in front of a dilapidated church depicting the homeless experience as dark, foreboding, dangerous, and inadequate.

Following her transition from the homeless shelter, ZoAnne moved into a substandard apartment in need of repair. This move represented the menacing circumstances that she and her children experienced during her first step out of homelessness. Upon leaving this apartment, ZoAnne removed the mailbox door that appeared in the exhibit as one of her monuments to homelessness (Figure 2).

ZoAnne chose the mailbox as an artifact reflecting her vulnerability. This artifact had a profound effect, amplifying her loss of security, stability, and safety in the most basic ways.

During the extensive interview sessions, ZoAnne used a black and white camera to photograph the route to her junior high school. In reference to her journey, she stated that “40 years ago the homes and apartment buildings were livable. Now this is the scenery. ... the garbage is now two inches deep” (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Remnants of ZoAnne’s initial transition out of homelessness. Following her transition from the shelter, ZoAnne moved into a substandard apartment. The mailbox had no cover or key. The stove blew up; her license plate was stolen from her car and replaced with this one. These and other remnants served as powerful motivators for ZoAnne to move out of homelessness.



Figure 3. ZoAnne traced the route she traveled to junior high school where, 40 years ago, the homes were livable.

Many of ZoAnne’s photographs and writings show caring, and deep concern for raising her boys. She posted a theme from a newspaper that read, “Who fights for the African American Male?” A subsequent entry into



her scrapbook, included a photograph of a young man, slumped over in a chair. She stated that the young man's demeanor reflected hopelessness, discouragement, and worthlessness. In a photograph of her own boys in front of a computer, she asked, "Will they be able to use the superhighway of technology and narrow the digital divide for Blacks to prove to the world that they are capable?" Conceptualizing her business represents ZoAnne's positive aesthetic: the essence of her recovery from homelessness, as well as from a central location of trauma found in diminished status. ZoAnne's social location was shaped by her race, poverty, and gender.

From ZoAnne's perspective, she will overcome these barriers as she continues to plan her emergence as a successful business-person. Later ZoAnne moved into another apartment with a riverfront view that sometimes consoled and inspired her. She related that "inspiration filled my body to go to the next level of recovering from homelessness," which is continuing to work at establishing her 01ZEKE PC (her computer business). ZoAnne's narrative included this new representation, as did her scrapbook, exhibit portrait, and performances. Her compelling story of overcoming and achieving, which included her work ethic, ingenuity, and innovation, comprised important elements of ZoAnne's aesthetic of recovery.

### *Individual Narratives and Photo-Voice Methods*

Counter-productive social forces can threaten and disrupt participants' abilities to move toward positive life-affirming outcomes. Within the project, efforts are made by participants and researchers alike to stimulate metanoia: an inherent transformation from a difficult situation to one of success and triumph. Metanoia is a transpersonal perspective of human beings with naturally adapting values that serve a higher purpose. Such adaptation enables them to transcend substantive barriers, and perform in a constructive, pro-social, and public way (Moxley & Washington, 2001). Although treatment strategies associated with the LME cognitive-behavioral intervention were helpful in teaching skills conducive to building self-efficacy thereby helping participants gain greater control over their lives, we became increasingly aware that we did not fully understand the complexity or extent of issues these women found

most challenging. In other words, we did not fully understand nor appreciate the difficult journeys each woman had to make in order to transform themselves and their situations for the better. "Better" here is different for each woman but likely incorporates outcomes that we all seek: stability, supportive environments, and meaningful lives.

Following the termination of the LME intervention, eight group participants were selected to engage in a qualitative study to more fully understand homeless women's issues. We conducted extensive narrative interviews with these women who provided the initial "Telling My Story" (TMS) content. We worked with these eight women for more than 350 hours. Our documentation of this work produced narrative transcripts ranging from 180 to 300 pages in length. These qualitative data allowed us a better understanding of circumstances leading to the women's homeless conditions and illuminating their strategies for emerging from homelessness.

### *Telling My Story Photography*

Following their participation in the interviews, the women in the TMS study also were given additional opportunities to use photography to augment their stories, visualize their hopes, and make plans for their lives through collages and other methods. Research assistants helped these women photograph monuments to their homelessness: places that either helped or hindered their transitions into and out of homelessness.

The eight TMS participants were given black and white disposable cameras and were asked to photograph what interested and inspired them to cope with and overcome their current homeless circumstances. Two kinds of photos were taken: photos documenting monuments to healthcare and social service agencies/institutions that were perceived as enhancing the women's recovery from homelessness, as well as those that participants did not perceive as helpful. For example, among the images representing supportive institutions and helpful resources were health care facilities, small grassroots social service organizations, religious institutions, family members, and members of the research team; locations where the narrative interviews were held, inspirational poetry (i.e., the poem *Footprints*), and a monument marker indicating the Civil War era site of the *Underground Railroad*. Institutions that were not con-

sidered helpful or were seen as barriers to the women leaving homelessness included: large public and nonprofit bureaucracies (e.g., a Family Independence Agency, and various work programs). Shelters, although instrumental in the journey out of homelessness, often symbolized a negative aesthetic. The women did not want to live in shelters permanently. Several women took photographs of areas where they had grown up or once lived. Areas that had now deteriorated were negative motivators. Other areas, such as places of worship, were perceived as offering hope, help, and health.

### Visual Representation as Intervention on a Collective Level

Transformation occurring through both individual and collective efforts is central to metanoic practice. A collective story of homelessness among LHIRP women emerged through dialogue about the compilation of each woman's experiences, self-understanding, and products they created as members of LHIRP. Collective products, such as the group quilt or textile banner, enabled the women to find commonalities in their experiences and positioned them to weave their individual narrative products into a whole that resulted in the emergence of the *Telling My Story* exhibit. This artistic component provided an opportunity both for the women as a group and LHIRP as a research project to document social forces producing homelessness. This step also helped create the capacity to educate the general public and specific subgroups (e.g., educators, healthcare professionals, gerontologists, government officials, etc.) about the realities of homelessness among older African American women. Using visual imagery in this way attracted and fostered empathic listening (Gablik, 1995) among new audiences (e.g., business professionals) who may frequently see homeless people, but lack an understanding of conditions associated with or causing homelessness.

### Group Quilt

Benefits of group work for support and learning from one another were evident in the LME group. To extend these benefits, following the completion of the LME group, the TMS women were selected to partici-

pate in several group-quilting sessions. The quilt expressed the women's stories both individually and collectively. Each woman designed a quilt square representative of her recovery from homelessness. The squares were combined into a group quilt constructed in the supportive manner of the old quilting bee (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Details of the group quilt constructed by the *Telling My Story* women.

The cooperation and teamwork inherent in group quilting can help desensitize older homeless women to fears associated with being homeless. They replaced disappointment with hope by establishing goals and objectives to help them move forward, fostering support from their peers, and sharing compelling and often painful stories in more comforting ways. The eight women used this process to support healing for themselves and for each other.

The group named the quilt "Patchwork: One Piece at a Time,

Over 50, and So What.” Each of the eight women’s quilt squares represented social forces that contributed to their homelessness. Sewn together, the patches represented collective struggles associated with their emergence from this circumstance.

### *Art in Social Action: The Telling My Story Exhibit*

Subsequent to the group quilting sessions, a curator, Mara Fulmer, whose prior work focused on examining cross-cultural social issues, was invited to collaborate in the creation of conceptual portraits in partnership with each of the eight TMS women (Fulmer, Washington, & Moxley, 2006). Fulmer met with each of the women who in turn shared their artifacts and personal stories with her. By combining the women’s photographs, collages, drawings, and poetry, the artist worked with each woman to create personal photo montages of her homeless experiences. Assisting the women with developing their conceptual portraits allowed them to amplify the injustices they encountered, as well as opportunities to reframe their roles from participant-researcher to self-advocates and activists for addressing homelessness.

The *Telling My Story* exhibit debuted in 2006, consisting of eight 3 feet high by 14 feet long (framed) digital gicleé panels. The prints were encased in semi-circular frames to give viewers the impression of stepping into the lives of each woman (Figure 5).

As of July 2009, the exhibit has been shown in six different venues. These venues were similar to the *City Sites: Artists and Urban Strategies* series of lectures and exhibits held in nontraditional sites by artists whose work addressed issues related to such locations (Lacy, 1995). The TMS venues have included the corporate headquarters of a large health insurer; a community service agency serving people who are homeless and unemployed; a community college; a Museum of African American History; a sports facility; and a university and its College of Nursing. The purpose of the exhibit is to support the recovery of people from homelessness, as well as to educate the public, and gain support for creating conditions that can help to sustain the women’s domiciled status.

Individuals cannot recover from homelessness in isolation; the environment, and the surrounding community must also recover and heal (Gablik, 1995) by overcoming the degradation inherent in homelessness

as both a social and physical state. Educating the public (individual viewers of the exhibit) about issues of older homeless women can enhance their efforts to leave homelessness. According to Gablik (1995), “world healing begins with the individual who welcomes the other” (p. 86).



Figure 5. University students examining ZoAnne’s conceptual portrait during one of the *Telling My Story* exhibits. The black and white photos (Figures 1 and 3), as well as additional photos of ZoAnne’s are visible in her portrait.

To understand the impact of the exhibit on viewers and how the exhibit can be improved and expanded, viewers were asked to complete evaluations of the exhibit. A number of viewers also made comments in a guest viewing book. One hundred-nineteen evaluation forms were part of a preliminary analysis of how the public viewers received the exhibit. The evaluations documented how the exhibit increased awareness of homelessness among older African American women, started people thinking about how to solve the problem, dispelled negative stereotypes that some viewers had about homelessness, and showed that respondents believed the exhibit was effective in communicating the need for re-

search on homelessness. For example, one person wrote, “[I] loved how the women’s voices came through the art.” Another wrote, “The exhibit made me look, the images made me read, the words made me think, the thoughts made me cry, and the tears made me explain to a classmate why I was so moved. Thank you for the art.” A number of the comments were about how easily this can happen to any of us: “The exhibit reminds me that we are all only a breath away from homelessness,” as one respondent wrote.” Another wrote, “I myself could be on the edge of homelessness.”

In narrative therapy it is important to share stories publicly before an audience, so that the participant is able to rehearse the new lifestyle and witness the evocative effects of her words and phrases. Such was the case when the women in the LME and TMS groups were able to tell their stories—past, present, and future—to each other, and then in larger groups at the exhibit’s opening forums. The *Telling My Story* exhibit was designed to feature each of the women standing or sitting by her portrait, and acting as a docent of her own story. Secondly, a formal presentation featured participants serving as a panel to educate visitors about the exigencies of homelessness and its social causes.

Each woman spoke formally, read poetry or sang, and answered questions from the audience. The exhibit visitation experience was well-planned and the women sought to place visitors in a position of vulnerability, first by exposing them to the range of artifacts and portraits that induce a strong emotional reaction, and then through educational content that amplified the facts that are well grounded in the lives of each woman. Exhibit evaluations underscore this vulnerability: guests reported not only learning much from the women, but also emotionally learning about what it means to descend into homelessness. Multiple visual representations combined with performance and creative portrayal, strengthen the delivery of content as well as the central message: how can communities put a stop to homelessness? The exhibit continues to provide an avenue for sharing stories of homelessness, and for communities to dialog about how to end homelessness, in increasingly larger and more public audiences. The women realized that they also were entering into positions where their own stories served to advocate for other people who were homeless.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Older homeless African American women comprise a population that has been affected by a number of factors that negatively influence this cohort—e.g., economic and social depression, class and gender-based distinctions, poverty, and continued dominance by the larger society (Sanders & Bradley, 2002; Williams & Wright, 1992). The capacity of the VIPCS intervention is metanoic when it facilitates a participant’s positive transformation in service to life situations that bring them the satisfaction and richness that they envision for themselves and their loved ones. VIPCS also become instrumental in the realization of metanoic capacity when such strategies set the stage for catharsis by facilitating self-expression of the negative aesthetic (that which diminishes one’s environment and oneself). These strategies can help a participant like ZoAnne capture her positive aesthetic: the life direction that brings personal value and fulfillment.

Sound metanoic practice enables the conditions that can help older African American women to function in a manner that brings fulfillment. It does so by closely and completely documenting their narratives and by helping them to construct their preferred direction in graphic detail that can incorporate inspiring visual images. ZoAnne’s scrapbook stood out as a positive portrayal of her personal aesthetic. Thus, metanoia is a transpersonal perspective that perceives human beings as naturally incorporating values that serve a higher purpose for themselves and others, enables them to transcend substantive barriers, and helps them to construct the aesthetic they prefer (Moxley & Washington, 2001).

Most of all, the LHIRP respects the necessity for each woman to define her own experience and translate her definition into her own aesthetic of daily life. The experience of homelessness transforms older African American women physically, emotionally, cognitively, and interpersonally. Thus, recovery means pushing the old cognitive and emotional structures of homelessness into the background and amplifying a new narrative full of potential and possibility. While it remains present, the negative aesthetic takes a back seat to the essence of a new and positive aesthetic. Such is the role of the VIPCS (e.g., the narrative and its associated techniques, photography and participants’ visual documentations

and interpretations of the life process of homelessness). The use of visual images, performance, and creative strategies seek the externalization of the experience of the negative aesthetic of homelessness and potentially transforms this state into a productive and life enhancing positive aesthetic. This reinterpretation of the negative aesthetic of the women's recovery sufficiently altered their perspective so that a new positive aesthetic could emerge, one with the capacity to provide hope, enhance movement, and catalyze meaning in the face of adversity. LHIRP recognizes the strong linkage between recovery and aesthetics. The collage assignment, *How I want to Live and Work* is an example of how visual imagery undertaken externally can be incorporated internally as a symbol of the object that a person seeks.

The VIPCS were beneficial in a number of ways. Photographing scenes from the homeless experience inspired the women, and co-constructing their portraits helped them ascribe meaning to their homelessness as one part of their lives, but not their whole lives. Since becoming domiciled, all eight of the TMS participants have taken on activist roles in the LHIRP project, thus integrating their homeless experience into leadership that helps others directly. The scrapbooks as a permanent record of the homeless experience allowed each participant-artist to see changes and patterns in their thoughts feelings and themes (Malchiodi, 2007). In addition to the creative products, the process of creativity inherent in change mobilized positive energy, helped to counteract depression, and fostered a sense of empowerment, in contrast to the helplessness many participants felt while homeless. The arts in their many forms have served an important role in human evolution: their power in facilitating positive transformation among those coping with the causes and consequences of homelessness is yet another application of powerful media, ones that can alter lives substantively in their service to human development.

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