

From homeless to prosperous: One man's tale

By **RICK MURRAY**
Staff Writer

For a long time, Rick Sheldon had a problem with love.

His father had been a veteran of numerous wars, but the combat had made him hard.

"My dad said he loved me and he beat me up all the time, so I didn't want to have much to do with love," said Sheldon, 52, husband of Madelyn Mears-Sheldon, director of the Christian Caring Center on Lakehurst Road in Browns Mills.

Sheldon says he changed his view of love, when he first found his wife, and then recovered a tattered and dormant faith.

But his journey to recovery was a path he doesn't recommend be traveled. It was, to say the least, a bumpy ride — one that led him to using and selling drugs, robbing and assaulting people, and languishing in prison.

It ultimately left him alone and freezing under a makeshift cardboard tent in the woods not far from downtown Browns Mills.

"I grew up all over the place," he says. "My father was in the Army, and I was born in Germany, where he was then stationed."

By 12, still in Germany, he was "already an" adolescent alcoholic. And by the time his father retired to Browns Mills in the late 60s, he'd discovered hard drugs.

"It was back in late sixties

and drugs were a rampant scene," he recalls. "I worked at the time as a hospital orderly and I had access to syringes."

In no time he was selling them to Vietnam vets hooked on heroin and meth.

"I got a girl pregnant, didn't think much of myself from my father beating me, so it wasn't long before I started following these syringes down to the basements where they were being used," he said. "I eventually started getting high myself."

He then tread the familiar path of selling drugs to support his meth habit. His new job as a taxi cab driver working Fort Dix made his lifestyle all too easy.

"I'd take soldiers to party in Wrightstown, which back then, was full of bars and prostitutes," he says. "It was a soldier's playtown."

Before long, though, he got nabbed and convicted on drug charges, getting three concurrent five-year prison terms.

"I came in as a hippie and came out a very mean, hurt person," he says. "There, I learned how to fight, how to stab people, how to do armed robberies, how to do burglaries. Yeah, I got a real education in there."

Once he got out, he says, he began to apply what he had learned. There followed multiple busts for robbery, drugs and assault.

In one case, he took revenge on a guy who'd stolen

his mother's wedding ring. The revenge entailed him poking the man's eye out.

"Nobody died, but some of them were pretty well wounded," he says, adding that in the blur of misery that followed, he was in and out of jail numerous times.

Sheldon says he didn't mind the jail time much because it allowed him to get in out of the cold and partake of regular meals.

"It was like a health spa for me," he says. "When I wasn't in jail, I was in the woods."

At first, there were several dozen other men just like him, wasting away on booze and drugs, then waddling back to the local woods to collapse without any concern for what the weather was like or what shelter was available.

"We were so high we really didn't care," he recalls.

Soon, most all the other lost souls were dead, succumbing to heart attacks and liver failure. His mother and father and sister, all had died, as well.

"I knew about Jesus," he says. "In all those jails, they had all these Bibles, and I read about him. It just never took."

Then one day, he says, his current wife showed up with a few members of her staff, including the Rev. Debbie McIlhenny.

"These people would come out with food talking about God, but they never pushed it down anybody's throat," he says. "They'd come out in all



DORAMN WEBER

Rick Sheldon helps a volunteer at the Christian Caring Center.

kinds of weather. It didn't matter whether it was raining or snowing or whatever."

Came a night about eight years ago when it was 15 degrees out and Rick Sheldon, well into his 40s, decided he'd finally hit rock bottom.

"I realized I had to change my life," he says.

The ladies from the center took him in and after awhile he caught on as a cook. Then something happened between him and Madelyn Mears, and now Rick Sheldon has God, a wife, a total of 13 kids (some hers, some his, many foster), and a steady job as a portable

toilet maintenance man.

"I'm a happy family man, now," he says.

Lots of people born again, the record shows, sin again. It's the way of things. Experts call its recidivism. Cynics call it a sure thing.

But Sheldon knows what he knows. And what he knows, he says, is that his wife led him to the kind of faith that sticks to the ribs.

"They didn't just talk the talk," he says of his wife and her center colleagues. "I could see they walked the walk of Jesus in their lives. A lot of people talk it. They walk it."