

no place to call home

homeless man finds refuge in Finlay Park

Leaning into his cane, Jerome Graham walked down Park St and turned left. *Are you girls lost?*

"I seen y'all way up on Park street," Graham said. "When I see y'all coming down, I said they must be lost, so I'mma ask what they're trying to find."

Graham shifted his weight onto his good knee and waved at the woman with the red shopping cart.

"Well, I'm homeless, I'm out here on the street," Graham said. "I'm surviving, you know. Trying to stay out of trouble, hang with the right people, and leave the roamers alone. It's kind of hard, but I get by."

Ten years before, Graham had hopped on a Greyhound bus for 18 dollars and left Augusta, Georgia in the middle of the night. He didn't say a word to anyone; he just wanted to get out.

"Well my mother had passed away when I was staying with her. It really hurt me, I couldn't tell you, I couldn't explain it to you," Graham said. "I went and stayed with my sister for a while, and you know, if you stay with somebody you gotta follow their rules, and I - I just couldn't put up with it. I was grown, and I said 'well it's best for me to just get out of here and get out on my own.'"

Two weeks later, Graham called his sister and nephew to tell them where he was.

"They were kinda a little upset because I didn't tell them where I was so they were

worried about me. I should've told them I was leaving, you know, but I knew they'd probably try and stop me," Graham said. "They really don't know I'm on the streets. I haven't told them. They don't ask me though. They just know I'm in Columbia."

Graham gestured toward what he called his bench and turned to face the fountain in

"As long as I can breathe in the morning, the good Lord woke me up, I'm happy for that." // Jerome Graham

Finlay Park.

"I'mma sit down here until somebody come up and aggravate me, and then I'm going to move over there and over there all around," Graham said. "Sometimes you wanna be by yourself and you don't feel like being bothered. When they come, I just get up and leave, you know."

"You see a whole lot of stuff going on around here," Graham said. "Stuff you know ain't supposed to be happening in the park. People walking around drinking, smoking, doing something in the bathroom. You gotta be careful going into the bathrooms cause weird activities

THE COLONEL Although Graham liked to keep to himself, he stayed at Finlay Park because of his friends. He called them "real nuts," but in a good way. "They really don't know my real name," Graham said. "They call me 'The Colonel.' The guy at the barbershop said I don't like taking orders, but I like giving orders so he started calling me 'The Colonel.'"



OUR BENCH While resting after an interview, Graham was joined by his friend "Michael B." "It's crazy for y'all to come out here and explore something that y'all never knew existed. I don't know y'all's situation and idea for coming. But anyway, it was a pleasure meeting y'all," B. said.



COUNTERFEIT CLINTON Graham kept all his real money in his back pocket. He filled his wallet with business cards and fake 100 dollar bills covered with pink Chinese lettering. "The man that we worked for, he liked playing games with me and things," Graham said. "He had six dollar bills, seven dollar bills. I had about ten of them but I said I need to stop that before I got my head bust open. One got dead. They called him 'Hook.' He got his skull bust open."

be going in there — there's no telling what you might see. There's some things I couldn't say because there's weird stuff going on around here. About two months ago they just caught somebody dead out of that pond."

Ever since his mother's death, Graham has struggled.

"Especially, when my twin brother passed away," Graham said. "That really hurted (sp?) me too. Police shot him, shot him in the head."

Graham paused, inhaled sharply, and blinked back tears. "I'm going to leave, I don't want to talk no more. Thank y'all," Graham said.

As he turned away, his cane clicked on the sidewalk. He settled on the next bench over, where his friends Joe and Bobby were waiting for him. And after awhile,

they started laughing again. Then he came back.

"I ain't got to be homeless. I can go back home anytime." Nobody put me out here. I just like being outside," Graham said. "I can go home anytime but all my friends are here. Out here on the streets you got to look out for one another. If we got something to eat, I'll give it to him. If I can't wear this, I'll give it to him if he can wear it, like hand-me-downs. 'You give me some I'll give you some.'"

Graham relied on organizations like the Oliver Gospel Mission for support.

"One thing about Columbia, you can't go

hungry. If you go hungry, you're too lazy to go get it. Sometimes they bring it to you, they pull it right here: 'hey mister, you want something to eat?' Only thing you can do is tell them thank you. But I don't go around in front of them stores, panhandling," Graham said. "I tell them, 'you're in better shape than I am' — they're young guys. They don't wanna work."

Jeremy Laughead, director of internal processes at the Oliver Gospel Mission, has known Graham for years.

"I think we all have certain assumptions about what homelessness looks like, and who's homeless and why and my experiences at Oliver Gospel have really challenged those preconceived notions" Laughead said. "You look at what the media portrays homelessness but once you start interfacing with people who are homeless and learn their stories, you find out that in many ways they're just regular people."

Graham focused on the present.

"As long as I can breathe in the morning, the good Lord woke me up, I'm happy for that," Graham said. "Yeah, I'm holed up in here but I keep on moving on. You meet new people, new places. That's moving around; you see something you ain't never seen before. Cause once they put you in that wooden box and throw that dirt over your face, it's all over with."

From the State House to Memorial Park, Graham has favorite hang-out spots all over downtown Columbia. "Somebody told me about [Finlay Park] when I first came here. I was up the street and they came and said, 'if you wanna be to yourself, just go straight down the street there's a big 'ole park, it's called Finlay Park. And I've been here ever since,'" Graham said. "When I first came here I think it was raining. I didn't know that was a statue. They say that's Mr. Finlay. I said, 'that man just stays out there in the rain?' And they started laughing. They said, 'no, man. That's our bronze statue.' If you walk by there, you'll see it."