

Homeless in College

Contributed by Jared Loggins--Black College Wire
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Spelman graduate reflects on her family's crisis

"I am homeless."

"The money is gone," Taylor Pettway, then a Spelman student, cried out in a plea of desperation almost a year ago as she and her family faced the very extant reality of living homeless on the streets of Atlanta. For Pettway, who had just walked across the stage as a graduate, the final straw in a string of seemingly unending and insurmountable challenges characterized the unusually tough spring a year ago when she, along with her family, had temporarily moved into the home of a family friend; and with nowhere else to go and nothing left to do, she wrote.

"Understand that this takes courage," she began. "My name is Taylor Pettway. I am a senior psychology major, creative writing minor, and I am homeless along with my mother, Lena Pettway, and my 16-year old sister, Bradley, and 14-year old brother, Chandler."

Throughout much of her life, Pettway recalled a "tattered" childhood characterized by an absent father and the indomitable will of a mother who, despite financial hardships, refused to give in. And indeed, they didn't give in.

For many students touched by the story, homelessness, for once, had been given an identifiable face. It had become surreal.

The House Burned down

Undoubtedly we've all bear witness to the "typical" images and stories of homelessness — the man or woman or child under the bridge, frayed and worn from struggle. But this was something different.

Here was a student enrolled at one of the country's most prestigious colleges, surrounded mostly by students of middle-income backgrounds, as disconnected from their realities as they were to hers, through no fault of their own, of course.

Blow after blow, she and her family was hit. And comeback after comeback, they kept going.

"The Sunday after Thanksgiving in 2011, the house that my family and my aunt's family lived in burned down," Pettway wrote.

Everything she had — every trinket, every tangible item that connected her to a sense of normalcy in past and present — had perished. And for months, she and her family lived from the trunk of a car.

"I knew that God was going to do something," Pettway passionately proclaimed in a recent interview.

Moving from temporary housing to extended stay hotels proved to be god-sent refuge amidst metaphorical storms that seemed to have been insurmountable.

More than a year later, her mom found gainful employment with the college. Though they still reside in an extended stay hotel, she says, things are looking up.

"…and that is a testament to where we have been and where we are," Pettway said. "We are living and not just alive."

There Are More

As quiet as it seems to be, there were more stories across the country like Pettway's. Joshua Williams recently graduated from Bethune-Cookman University and experienced similar hardships.

"Before the sun comes up, I would make sure I was somewhere to lay down," Williams recounted in the Daytona Beach News-Journal. "I knew I was homeless, but I said to myself I'd rather be in Daytona homeless trying to go to school than ever go back to Miami."

Just days ago, the world learned of soon-to-be Spelman student Chelsea Fearse, the valedictorian of her senior class at

a Clayton Co. high school, who had been homeless for much of her high school career. She lived in her mother's car, as she recalled in an interview with 11 Alive News in Atlanta.

Support Spread Like Wildfire

Pettway's letter and the struggles of each of these very similar cases are as much a call to action as they are a plea for help on an issue that is nothing new for college campuses, nationwide.

According to FAFSA data, nearly 30,000 college students identified themselves as homeless in the 2011–2012 academic year, while incomplete data for the current year is showing similar trends.

For Pettway, the Spelman community was adequate in providing her the networking to and resources to better provide for her family. Friends of Taylor came together and initiated a fund to help. Like wildfire, support came from all angles. Money, furniture, job offers, words of encouragement.

"Faculty and staff who I connected to reached out to me," she recalled. "The connections ran deep. I've never experienced this before. I was connected with a wealth of people to help me along."

Nationwide, the number of students speaking up to address homelessness among college students is on the rise. Likewise, institutional support and the role that colleges should play has become a topic of debate.

"In my own circumstance, the support was there," Pettway said. "Both Spelman and Morehouse's Alumni Associations called me and offered to clean up the house and fix it up. So like I said, God is still working."

Jared Loggins is managing editor of the Maroon Tiger, the Morehouse College student newspaper, which originally published this article.