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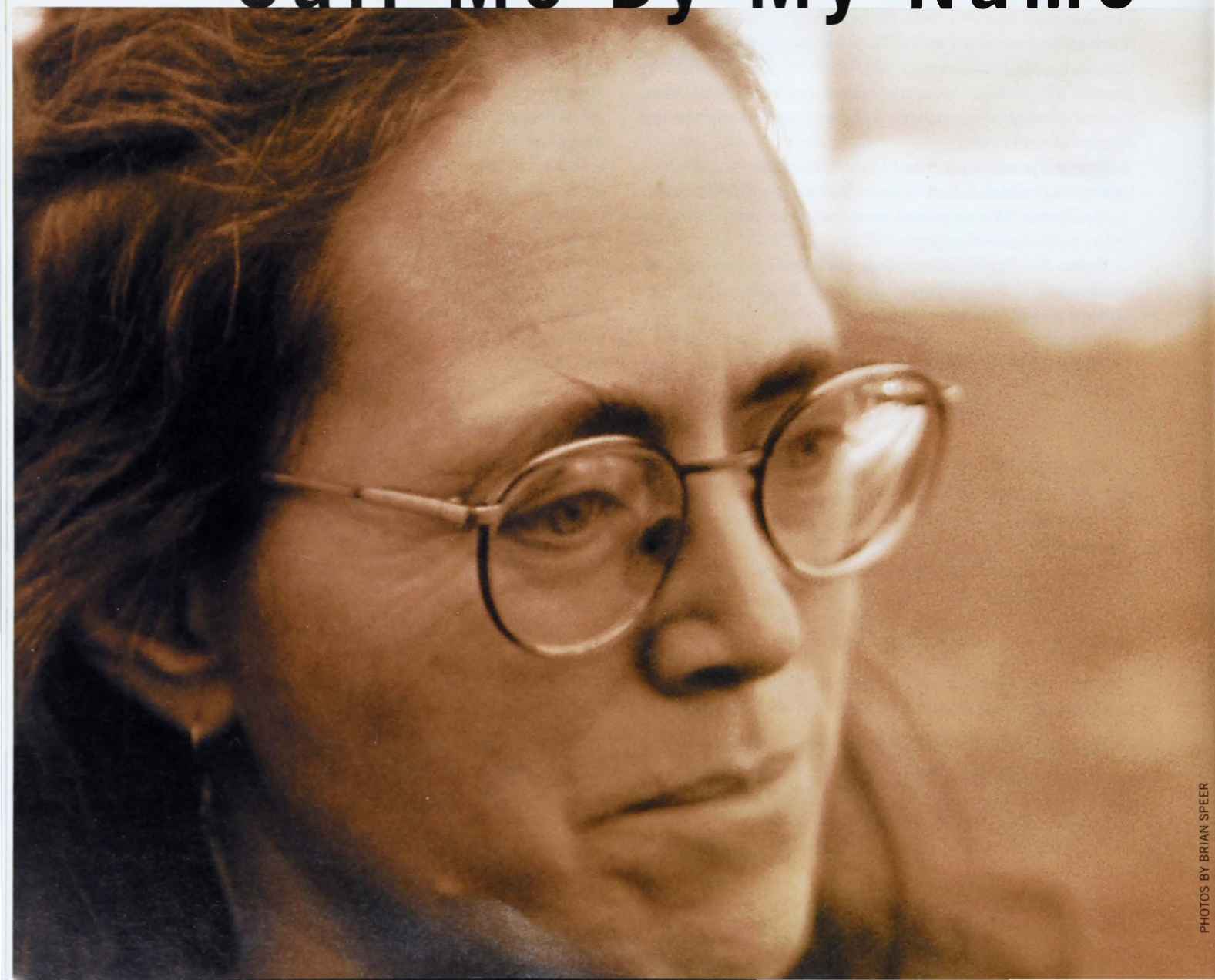
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Don't Call Me Homeless Call Me By My Name



Macy DeLong's own homelessness leads others to life after the streets

By Gerry Boyle '78

It was a balmy afternoon in late October, and Macy DeLong '71 had left her office in Old Cambridge Baptist Church and joined the throngs in Harvard Square: students, tourists, office workers.

And panhandlers and other homeless people, who cried out, "Macy! Hey, Macy!" as DeLong approached.

On this particular afternoon, at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Holyoke Street, DeLong was hailed by Nancy, a rosy-cheeked professional beggar who spends her days jingling coins in a cup and chanting, "Spare change, spare change."

With Nancy was Terry Craite, a woman with a Camp LeJeune-style buzz cut and staples binding a three-inch gash in the back of her head. Craite said she had hurt herself in a fall, but her account was sketchy.

"These are all the detoxes I been in," Craite said, pulling a wad of papers from her Arizona Jeans jacket and presenting it for DeLong's inspection. "I'm trying to do everything right. But they tell me about my pancreatitis and all this stuff . . ."

DeLong, a former Harvard researcher, listened with more than academic interest.

After graduating from Colby with a degree in biology, DeLong spent 17 years doing developmental biology work as a senior research associate at Harvard. Then, a decade ago, she left her career as a scientist and took to the streets. Literally.

DeLong, 51, is the founder of Solutions at Work, a self-help group for the homeless. But 10 years ago she could have been one of her own clients, someone who has stumbled, become homeless and needs help getting back on track.

For those who knew DeLong at Colby, it might seem an impossible scenario. Raised in Europe, where her father was an auto industry executive, sent to boarding school in New York, DeLong excelled at Colby. She was a Charles A. Dana Scholar and was awarded the class prize in biology. In addition

to science, she studied languages, especially Russian.

"She was very outgoing, very positive, very sure of herself, very intelligent," said Pat Montgomery '71, a long-time friend. "She seemed to have everything going for her."

And she did. DeLong was married to another Cambridge scientist, was a senior research associate supervising laboratories at Harvard, had been tapped by Harvard to speak at public forums on the university's research projects, including work on recombinant DNA. DeLong seemed like the last person to stumble. But mental illness is an indiscriminate disease.

For DeLong, it was depression exacerbated, she said, by stress related to her job and marriage and by hormonal treatments for infertility. She was plagued by depression followed by bouts of manic behavior triggered by medication.

"It was a major, major change from the Macy I knew, who was highly intelligent, incredibly energetic," said Barbara Waters '71, a friend and roommate at Colby who continued to talk to DeLong during her illness.

During one hospitalization, DeLong concluded she would get out only if she said she was okay. She lied and was released. As a result, she traded the hospital for the streets of Cambridge. On the streets, DeLong learned very quickly that for someone who is without a home, help can be a double-edged sword.

"I was talked into going into a shelter where they stole my shoes and my I.D.'s the first night," she said. "I was held up with a knife in the bathroom. They were convinced I was delusional when I told them I was a biologist at Harvard."

DeLong left the shelter and never went back.

Her days were spent wandering, she said. Food pantries, supermarkets and diners were stops on her rounds. An inveterate reader, she also was drawn to bookstores, where she would spend hours tucked in a chair. "As long as you didn't dog-ear the paperbacks, you could curl up and nobody cared," she said.



Macy DeLong '71 speaks with Terry Craite on Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge. Craite was homeless last fall and asked DeLong, an advocate for the homeless, for help retrieving belongings Craite had left at a local drop-in center.

But it was winter and darkness fell early. In the city at night, just as in the woods, there were predators.

"If you're a woman on the streets, there's always an element of risk," DeLong said. "The way you protect yourself is [to be certain] no one ever knows where you are. In the beginning, no one knew where I was. No one knew where I slept."

She kept moving until nine or ten o'clock at night and then made her way to her spot in the Old Burying Ground. Some homeless people slept under trees along a fence, but she thought that too visible. So DeLong continued on to a bank of shrubs along the wall of a restaurant that backs up to the cemetery.

Near a stone marking the grave of Wendell Maynard Davis (died 1827), behind a clump of arbor vitae, DeLong would spend the night. "I was well equipped," she said, as though it were an outing club trip. "I had a sleeping bag and a tarp."

Eventually February cold drove DeLong to join a group of people sleeping on subway grates. Several men in the group got drunk one night and one attacked her, DeLong said. Another homeless man "beat the daylight out of him," she said.

DeLong went back to her home in Lexington, not to live but to get her car, a station wagon dubbed Wanda the Honda. DeLong equipped it with a futon and sleeping bags and parked it in the rear of the parking lot of the Star Market on Mt. Auburn Street. The store employees didn't mind, but she soon attracted the attention of night-beat police.

"The cops hauled me out of the car in my underwear,"

DeLong said. "They said, 'Who the hell are you? Is that really your car?'" But soon they began checking up on this homeless woman in the supermarket lot. And then police began bringing homeless women to DeLong.

While still homeless, she began working on behalf of other people on the street. Eventually DeLong's illness was stabilized through medication. She was divorced and moved back into her three-bedroom home in Lexington, seven miles from Harvard Square. DeLong began using her house as a temporary shelter for people in need of a home, and to this day has housemates who were homeless. She founded Solutions at Work using her divorce settlement, her Harvard retirement funds and her credit cards.

Last fall, DeLong spent most of an afternoon showing what the group does from its warren of offices in the basement of Old Cambridge Baptist Church.

Solutions at Work runs the Cambridge Furniture Bank, which stockpiles donated furniture, appliances and household goods and gives them to people who are moving from homelessness into apartments or houses. The program, like others run by Solutions at Work, is staffed and run by people who are or have been homeless themselves. They organize the furniture, deliver it in Furniture Bank trucks and set it up in the client's home.

Another program offers low-cost or free moving services to disabled people, the elderly or people with AIDS. A third program, the Children's Clothing Exchange, offers good quality clothing and shoes to the public.

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"Just because you can't afford clothes doesn't mean you need icky clothes," said Sonya Darcy, 26, a single mother who manages the clothing exchange in the basement of Grace United Methodist Church. "For some people, this is it. This is their everything."

But the intent of the program is not to make recipients of its services feel beholden. Darcy, who has a 3-year-old daughter and lives with relatives in a small apartment, said she has been made to feel small when she asked for help in the past. She wants the clothing exchange to be "a place where you don't have to do that."

That is the philosophy that drives Solutions at Work, that nobody should be homeless, but that dehumanizing the homeless, forcing them to give up their identity and dignity in order to survive, really is no help at all.

Standing in the graveyard, DeLong asked about the homeless situation in Waterville. Told the local shelter was very busy, she bluntly said she did not consider that alone to be evidence of success. Programs for the homeless should aim to help people become autonomous, not dependent, she said. Much of her work has been aimed at instilling that pride in homeless people themselves. "Most of us, as people become activists, you end up challenging the providers," DeLong said.

That philosophy is growing among the homeless and their advocates in Boston, said Harrison Fowlkes, who has come to know DeLong in his work as supervisor/coordinator of the day center at St. Francis House on Boylston Street.

Fowlkes said he first met DeLong when she came to St. Francis House to assist with a registration drive for homeless voters. He said he has seen her speak to groups of homeless advocates and that she is adamant in her call for homeless people to be treated with respect. "She's a big believer in consumers having a voice about their own destiny, their own lives," Fowlkes said.

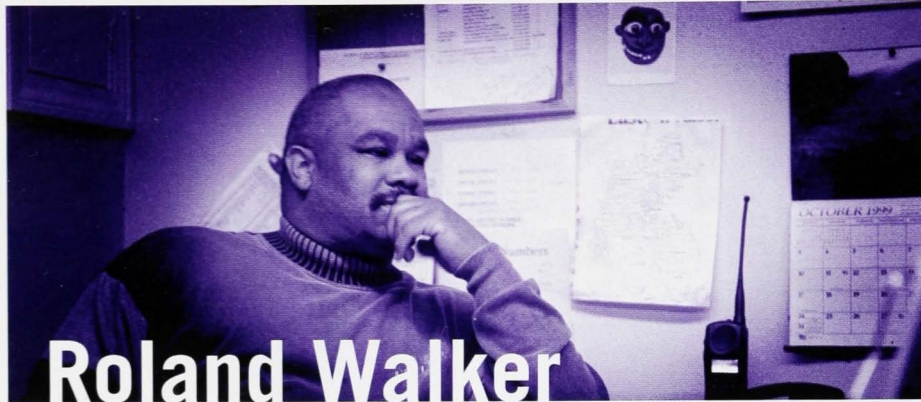
DeLong traces her activism back to her years at Colby. She was on campus when parietal hours gave way to co-ed dorms, when the college community and the country were divided by the Vietnam War. She joined Students for a Democratic Society and campaigned against the war and the draft. DeLong was steeped in "the idea that you had to question how things were done."

She said Colby engendered in her a skill for creative problem solving. In testimony to a liberal arts education, DeLong said that skill was honed not as much by courses in her science major as by her Russian-language professor, the late John Kempers. "It is a question of trying to redefine the problem in a way that it's possible to solve it," DeLong said.

Not that the solutions always come easily.

She acknowledges that she entered into an abusive relationship after her divorce. And she knows mental illness cannot be willed to disappear. DeLong was hospitalized again last year and still is being warned by her housemates that she should slow her frenetic pace.

But as her younger sister, former Massachusetts Institute of Technology geneticist Leslie DeLong, said, Macy DeLong has



Roland Walker

For Roland Walker, it was a good life.

Walker came to Boston from Philadelphia to attend Boston State College. After college, he married and, with his wife, Gwendolyn, had three children: Angelica, Tyesha and, as Walker still refers to him, "little Roland."

Walker had a good job, working in Boston hospital operating rooms as an anesthesia technician. His wife and children were happy and healthy.

And then the life that took decades to build crumbled in a single year.

In 1995, Gwendolyn Walker died of cancer. As the family struggled with their loss, the three children went to visit relatives in North Carolina. Fire broke out at the house and took the lives of Tyesha, who was 9, and little Roland. He was 7.

"The only thing I wanted to do following my loss was just to die," Walker said, in an interview last fall. "The loss was almost unbearable. . . . I really fell apart."

In the months and years that followed, Walker struggled with grief and psychological problems compounded by alcohol. He eventually surfaced in a transitional program—and into the sphere of Macy DeLong '71.

"Macy was there, helping me pretty much all the way," Walker said.

In the process, he came to realize that it's okay to be sorrowful, but then there is a time to move on with life, he said. He made a conscious decision to focus on his surviving child, whom he calls Angel. DeLong did, too.

"Macy said, 'She'll come stay with me,'" Walker said.

Acknowledging that his daughter was not easy to get along with, Walker said DeLong gained her confidence and respect. Four years after losing three family members to tragedies and the fourth to his despair, Angel "aspires to be like Macy," Walker said. "Be something. Go to school. I believe she makes an excellent role model."

Last fall, Angel Walker was working part time for the Cambridge Furniture Bank. Roland Walker, 44, was working as a paid project manager, coordinating delivery of furniture and moving jobs. His day was spent answering phones, talking to warehouse workers and truck drivers via cell phone and radio. His fellow workers included Jack, who is 60 and has spent the last 10 years in shelters, and Kimberly, who left her husband and made her way to Solutions at Work. A former housemate of DeLong's, Kimberly works with the agency as an office manager but hopes to go back to work as a medical assistant.

Between the ringing of the phones, Walker said DeLong dispenses "a little sympathy and a lot of empathy. I say, she's not Mother Teresa, but she comes a lot before Princess Diana. She falls somewhere between them."



"Just because you can't afford clothes doesn't mean you need icky clothes," said Sonya Darcy, 26, a single mother who manages the Child-Teen's Clothing Exchange.

"For some people, this is it. This is their everything." The aim of the exchange is to help without making recipients feel belittled or beholden in the process. Darcy said the Cambridge exchange is "a place where you don't have to do that."

always been "a leap-before-you-look kind of person. She had no fear of anything."

Said Montgomery, DeLong's Colby friend, "As far as jumping right in, she was always like that."

Leslie DeLong said her sister immersed herself in the world of the homeless, just as she once immersed herself in the world of Cambridge scientists. If the two worlds now are separate, they have merged on occasion. One night Macy DeLong hosted a dinner party for Harvard faculty and people who were homeless. The women in the group had trouble finding common ground, Leslie DeLong said. The men got on quite well, talking mostly about the Red Sox.

That Macy DeLong would gather together such seemingly disparate groups may be more telling about her view of people who are homeless than about her view of scientists. In DeLong's world view, the acquaintances and friends she has met on the streets of Cambridge are people first and homeless second.

As she walked back along Massachusetts Avenue, DeLong said she was facing the perennial challenge of raising most of her organization's \$450,000 annual budget through donations. But the jangling of coins in a cup distracted her from administration and finance. At Holyoke Street, Nancy and Terry still were on the sidewalk, Nancy shaking her cup and Terry just hanging out.

DeLong—the executive director of a nonprofit, a former Harvard biologist—paused to chat again with Nancy, the pan-

handler. Nancy declined to be interviewed. Asked later why Nancy was on the street, DeLong said, "Mental illness. We were in McLean together," referring to the renowned hospital in Belmont, Mass.

Terry, the alcoholic, had been talking about going home to her family in the Midwest, DeLong said. But that day, Terry was more concerned about whether she would be admitted to a local drop-in center where another homeless woman had checked Terry's duffel bag.

"You know Bobby Girl?" she said. "She's in jail. She's in Framingham but it's my stuff and I really need my stuff."

DeLong moved close to Terry and told her they'd let her in at the center, but not if she were drunk, not if she were angry. Terry, who earlier had acknowledged she can get "an attitude," promised she would try to show up sober.

And then it was back to the cramped offices in the basement of the church, where phones were ringing. The staff, all formerly homeless, was still on the job—dispatching movers, fielding donations, scheduling appointments.

DeLong went back to work.

"She helps out the best she can," said Darrel Lifred, 37, who works with DeLong and has associated with her since they met at an outdoor church service on Boston Common several years ago. "I'm proud of what she's doing 'cause she's trying to make a difference. We need more like her."