

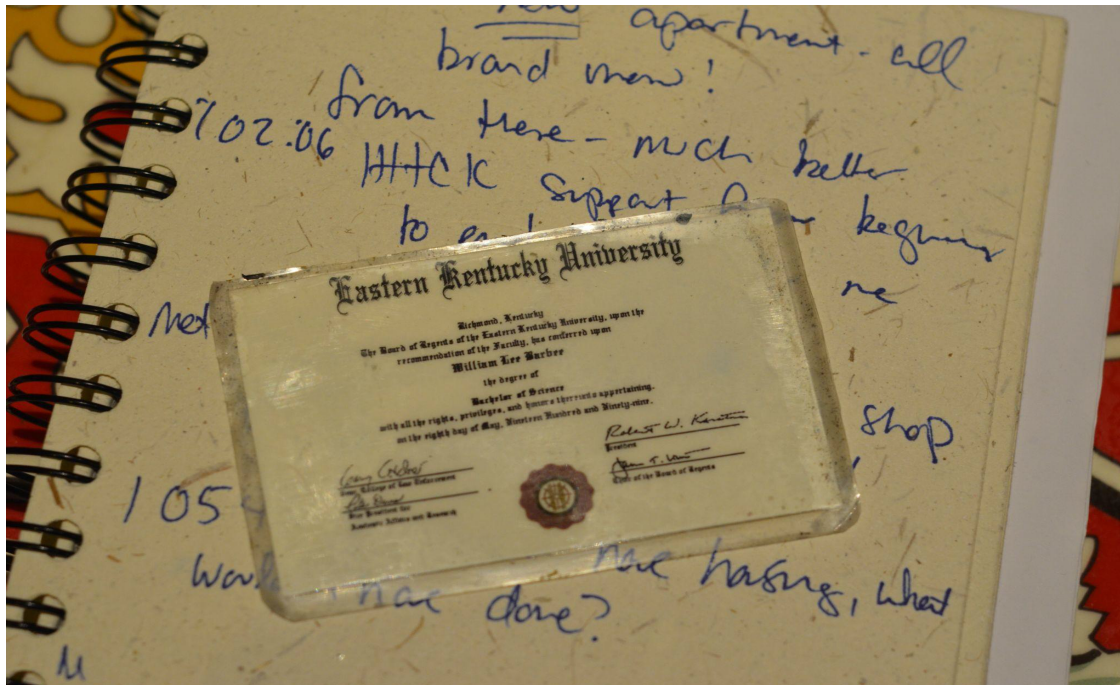


HOMELESS & HOUSING COALITION OF KENTUCKY

Frankfort, KY -- Lee Barbee has had the definition of a rollercoaster life. Ups and downs punctuated with every kind of setback imaginable, but a persevering patience and constant air of calm that eventually got him through. To say he's had close calls and swung at pitches some would call impossible is an understatement, battling the proverbial dragon around the corner repeatedly. With a little help from friends, a long-awaited clean bill of health, and secure housing, Lee made it through to the other side, landed on his feet, and is able to be the poster boy for 'keep going'.

"Everybody has a story", Lee begins. "Don't matter if it's a good one or a bad one, everybody's got one. Mine's a little unusual, but I'll tell you, I'm glad to be in a less tumultuous time", he laughed. "Boring and predictable is good sometimes."

Lee has two degrees from Eastern Kentucky University, and served as an officer with the Frankfort Police Department for 11 years. Following a difficult, expensive, emotionally charged divorce and some workplace administrative decisions he was uncomfortable with, Lee found himself without a steady place to stay, and making use of the local men's shelter as a temporary stop. "Well - it was supposed to be temporary", Lee said. "I was in a tough place with a lot going on in my head and my heart. I missed my kids, I was unemployed... Staying at the shelter was supposed to be a gap fill, but it ended up turning into about 4 years."



Lee carries his pocket diploma from EKU. Photo: Katherine Mueller



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His stay in the shelter was filled with difficulty. “I was there during this time of immense stress and really deep depression”, Lee explained. “There was a lot of self-loathing going on - I just gave up. I couldn’t seem to figure out what I had done or how I had gotten here... it was a really dark time. Sharing space with all kinds of guys in and out - I don’t know if that made it better or worse. Maybe better because there were always people around to talk to, maybe worse because it’s hard to get yourself together living in a shelter, living like that.” An HR discrepancy after being hired as a desk clerk at the shelter led to his resignation from that position. Soon after, an altercation in which Lee tried to intervene not as an aggressor, but to stop what was happening, led to his dismissal as a resident at the shelter. “I said are you kidding me? You watched the tape - I didn’t start it, I didn’t hurt anyone, but they told me I should have just walked away, and asked me to leave. I was allowed to use it as the soup kitchen, but I couldn’t sleep there anymore. I was homeless. I had a military style sleeping bag, a few pairs of clothes, but that was it. I was sleeping in the bag in the parking garage because it was the only place reasonably dry where I could stay out of the weather.”

During the time Lee was sleeping in the parking garage, he spent many of the days at the local public library. “It’s warm, clean. You can get your mind off the things happening in your day to day which, you know, if you’re homeless, probably aren’t that good.” One day he was approached abruptly by a woman who, immediately on recognizing him, gave him a giant hug. “It was just a plain old hug, but it stopped me from feeling as bad as I had been feeling for a minute for the first time in forever”, Lee explained. The woman, Jen, was a friend from high school. She began with the usual flow of a long-time-no-see kind of conversation, only to quickly learn Lee was homeless. “Well - we’re gonna do something about that today”, Jen told him. As it happened, Jen was an employee at a housing advocacy organization. Though her job was on the auditing side of things, Jen knew exactly where to send Lee for case management and hopefully expeditious housing assistance.

“I didn’t have anything else to do that day”, Lee laughed. “I got my things and walked a couple blocks - Jen told me exactly where to go - over to the Homeless and Housing Coalition of Kentucky (HHCK).” Lee was seen by an intake specialist, and then a case manager that day. He was a candidate for a Housing Voucher and for case management from staff at HHCK. HHCK found an apartment for Lee, got the lease signed, and he was able to move in. “I finally had something that was mine again”, Lee emotionally explained. “I only went in with a sleeping bag, but I thought that was a great start - I was glad for the whole thing. A lock on the door, out of the wind, the cold, out of the heat, nobody was gonna rob me or rough me up, nobody staring at me...things just got better, just by having that simple apartment that I could call home.”



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Through his case manager, Lee was also able to schedule appointments for his physical and mental health, ultimately receiving a diagnosis of PTSD stemming from “just everything before. Being an officer in the line of duty so long - I saw a lot go down there. The divorce, losing my retirement, losing my kids... just a lot of trauma.”



Lee shares his story. Photo: Katherine Mueller

Things took a turn for Lee - again - when he received a couch as a donation from a local missionary group. “I was glad to have it at first”, Lee said. “Off the floor, from a sleeping bag to the couch, seemed like a great step in progress. Much to his dismay, the couch was riddled with bedbugs which promptly infested his entire apartment. “I was sleeping in all my clothes, my long johns, gloves, and a hood up trying to keep them from biting me in my sleep”, Lee lamented. “It was awful - they were in the walls, in the carpet, biting me everywhere, if I raised my sleeve up even an inch they’d get at me.” Lee got rid of the couch, what other furniture he had, and his landlord attempted to get rid of the bedbugs. Bedbugs are, however, notoriously persistent, and never went away completely.



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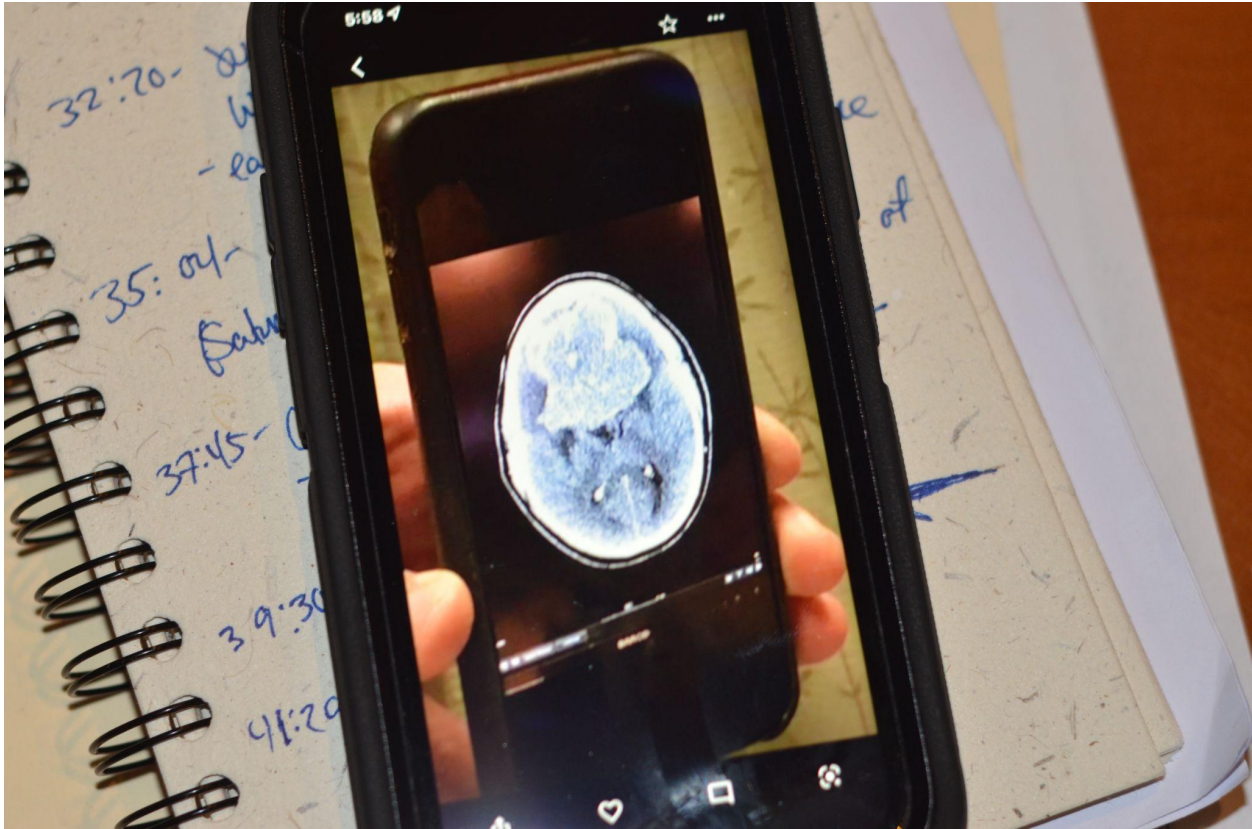
“It was awful. Just awful. Just when I thought I was gonna be able to get my head above water, the bedbugs happened. I was walking 45 minutes one way to get to the soup kitchen to eat, eating once a day, and really took a huge step back. Then it got worse.”

Riding the city bus one August morning, Lee was involved in an accident involving a speeding car. The bus was struck on the side. “I could see him coming, looked like he never even saw us, never even hit the brakes.” Lee was thrown from his seat in the middle to the front of the bus, where he landed on the back of his neck, with his legs across the lap of another passenger. Attending officers encouraged Lee to go to the hospital to get his neck and head examined after the impact. “I’m not doing nothin’ else”, Lee joked, “why not?”

Lee’s visit to the hospital and MRIs - which showed no damage from the bus accident, did show something else... that he had cancer in his lymph nodes. “I don’t know what to do about this”, Lee told hospital staff. “I don’t know how I got this, how long I’ve had it... what do I do?” His outpatient cancer removal surgery was scheduled for November. “They did a great job, but told me at my meeting afterwards that they thought the cancer was spreading, and they wanted me back in two weeks for more scans and to figure out what was actually going on in there. Two weeks? I didn’t go back in two weeks. Both my parents died from cancer. My brother died. My kids are away from me, and honestly, I felt like I had absolutely nothing to live for.”



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A photo of Lee's MRI

By June, Lee had incapacitating headaches. He had been complaining about them for a while, and finally, at the encouragement of a friend and the pastor at his church, he decided to go. On the Sunday before he was to go to the doctor, he collapsed in his kitchen, unable to get up. He messaged his friend, who begged him to go get checked out, and on Monday, set out to go. As luck would have it, Lee missed the bus. Head pounding, and the next bus not scheduled to come back for an hour, Lee felt great despair. "In my head, though - the devil was telling me to go on home, that that was my sign. But the other part said 'Lee? What else are you doing? It'll be back in an hour.'" Lee waited for an hour at the bus stop on the next bus, and made his way to the hospital. His friend joined him in the waiting room. "I knew something was wrong, I just didn't know what or how severe it was gonna be." His gut turned out to be right - Lee had a massive tumor growing on his brain. Stunned, Lee was unable to speak, and his friend burst into tears. The scan image was grim, and Lee immediately asked "how long do I have? I got some people I'd like to say goodbye to."



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Lee's surgery totaled 10 hours. He lost the ability to walk, and spent time at a rehab facility with specialists and physical therapists. "The post-surgery pain...it hurt. That's all I can say. It was so bad; I have to explain it simple - it was the worst pain you can imagine. It hurt." Lee's initial recovery time was about a month long; during that hospital stay, he was evicted from his apartment because of the bedbugs that were never fully treated, never went away, and worsened during his time as an inpatient. "They burned all my clothes, even", Lee recalled. "They couldn't save anything, I guess. Coats, shoes, nothing." Lee's friend knew this was all happening, but chose not to tell him as he focused his energies on his physical therapy and recovery at rehab. She worked in tandem with Lee's HHCK case manager, and was able to secure - using the same housing voucher - a new apartment in a recently remodeled building. "I had to start all over again", Lee said. "I stayed with her for a few days right out of the hospital until she had family that also needed to use the space I was in. Then my pastor heard I was going to have to go back to a shelter until the apartment was ready, said no, that wasn't happening, and I stayed with him a few days." A week or so later, after his release from the physical rehab facility, Lee was able to move into his new apartment. "I remember standing in the apartment one of my first nights in there. The previous tenant had left some nice furniture - all clean and in great shape. Even a TV. I was just amazed at the turn everything had taken and so quickly", Lee chuckled. "The rain that night was absolutely pouring, it was an all-night storm. I was on the phone with that same friend telling her how glad I was not to be out in this weather. The kind of rain you just can't get away from, you know?" As he surveilled the storm from his apartment, the front room window seal broke, and water began to flood the apartment. Just as Lee thought he had his head above water again, he was back under it... this time literally.

"I couldn't do anything but laugh", Lee said. "How could I?"

Lee met immediately with the property manager, who moved him into (yet another) newly refurbished apartment. This one didn't flood, and Lee, for the first time in years, was able to take a breath. No parking garages. No shelter scuffles. No evictions. No bedbugs. No floods. No car crashes. No cancer - lymph or brain. Just four solid walls, safety, a place to heal, and peace.

Lee is now a full-time state employee, and was successfully exited from the HHCK voucher program. He and his wife are currently renting an apartment using their own income. His relationship with his children has been rekindled, and he has a clean bill of health. "HHCK staff stuck with me through all this", Lee observed fondly. Getting me housed so quickly, trying to help get the bugs exterminated, keeping me housed somewhere during the second cancer surgery and recovery - they supported me beginning to end, stuck with me, checked in on me. Even though I had a rough time with housing the first place, it worked out, and without housing,



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through the wreck and the cancer...how would I have made it? It would have been so much worse - if that's possible. What would I have done without a roof over my head?"



Lee reflects in downtown Frankfort. Photo: Katherine Mueller