

# 15 MINUTES

## A friend to the homeless

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John Wages recognized the hungry faces around the The Soup Kitchen on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard Monday morning. He stood in the cafeteria handing out hygiene supplies to a group coming in off the street while other volunteers got ready to serve the women and children lunch. They eat first, before all the men flood in at noon.

"Every single person that's homeless in Lee County," Mr. Wages claims, "I know."

The statement seems far-fetched until you consider that he spends his days seeking them out.

"Just from walking around the downtown (Fort Myers) area and from volunteering," he says, "you meet a lot of them. I go and talk to homeless people and hear their stories. If a homeless person is in the hospital, I go visit them."

Standing on the corner chatting with some of the homeless men, Mr. Wages, 28, could be one of them. His face is humbled looking and deeply tanned, his eyes distant and blue. But he works for AmeriCorps Vista, a national organization designed to fight poverty, as a speaker on homeless issues and a roving volunteer in Lee County. His travels on foot or by bus to places like The Soup Kitchen, Salvation Army, Harry Chapin Food Bank and one church or another, helping out where he can.

He has also has assembled a group of 12 local homeless people — his "speakers bureau." They talk at churches, schools or other organizations such as veterans' groups, telling the stories of how they became homeless and what it's like. (He can be reached at 878-0270 for more information).

Mr. Wages says he rents a condo on McGregor Boulevard and earns the minimum amount needed to pay the rent, eat and dress through AmeriCorps. He describes the organization as "a domestic Peace Corps."

Until last year, he was a janitor and cafeteria worker at Bishop Verot, where his mother is known as "the lunch lady."

"All the kids love her," he said.

His father is a former homicide detective from Indiana, who is retired in Orlando.

Mr. Wages moved to Fort Myers 13 years ago from Indiana, graduated from Fort Myers High School and earned a degree in tile setting from a technical school.

Ever since Mr. Wages joined a church called Rainbow Ministries five years ago, homeless people have become an increasingly large part of his life. He gave up his day job to work for AmeriCorps after being recruited while feeding the homeless in Centennial Park in downtown one Sunday.

"I wanted a new experience," he said. "I want to help, to change lives. I think it's because of the Lord. He wants me to help."

He sometimes takes a homeless person back to his condo and offers him or her a shower, a meal and some clothes. His girlfriend doesn't mind this, he says because he won't bring them around if they're obviously intoxicated. Homeless people make up his closest friends and even populate his dreams.

"When I'm sleeping, I'm working too," Mr. Wages said. "I'm always dreaming about what I can do for homeless people, how I can help them and how I can get the problem solved — to end homelessness, and to educate against hate crimes against the homeless to all the teenagers."

One person he helped to find a job now lives with Mr. Wages and his girlfriend.

"He's not really homeless anymore because he lives with me," Mr. Wages said. "He's on my speaker's bureau. He works all day at a fish market and he goes out and gets crabs. He's a very considerate and caring guy. He wants to help homeless people who want to help themselves."

"We hang out together. We go fish-



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John Wages, right, and his friend, Mr. Victim of Circumstance.

ing. We go to all the different churches and get speaking engagements. He's well mannered, clean."

A homeless man standing outside the Soup Kitchen who asked to be called "Mr. Victim of Circumstance" said he wants to be one of Mr. Wages' speakers.

"I'm brand new at this game — being homeless," said the man, who had lost his job last year. "At one time, I was respectable society. Mr. Wages has been helpful, very helpful. His mission in life is to help people." ■

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