



PHOTO: MARK E. HOGANCAMP, COURTESY OF THE CINEMA GUILD.
A medic rescues a wounded major after an ambush by the SS in this miniature creation by Mark E. Hogancamp. He created a 1/6 scale model of a World War II Belgian town as a way to deal with his mental illness. His pursuit is the subject of a new documentary, "Marwencol."

One man's war

BY JOE NOLAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Documentary puts new focus on mental illness, homelessness and the intersection with art

A new documentary tells the story — or rather the true-life fantasy — of photographer Mark Hogancamp. It's also a story about the human impact of lack of health insurance, mental illness and addiction on America's at-risk populations. "Marwencol" is a tribute to the regenerative powers of art.

On April 8, 2000, Mark Hogancamp went to a bar in his town of Kingston, New York. After being harassed inside, Hogancamp left, but was followed and attacked by five men who kicked and beat him without mercy. His face and brain were so severely damaged that Hogancamp remained in a coma for nine days.

Upon regaining consciousness, Hogancamp had to start from scratch—learning how to eat, talk and walk as if for the first time. Although he made fast progress in the first 40 days after his coma, his real challenge was only just beginning. After just over a month of therapy, Hogancamp was informed that because he was uninsured he was no longer eligible to receive further treatment.

Lack of insurance or under-insurance is a constant reality for people on the streets or at-risk of becoming homeless. For folks who are already homeless, the dangers of life on the street are compounded by a lack of access to proper care should they become sick or injured. According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council (NHCHC), 70 percent of homeless individuals are uninsured. Even beyond more extreme forms of poverty, lack of affordable health insurance remains one of the primary culprits in jeopardizing formerly-middle-class lives. As the NHCHC's 2010 policy statement reveals, 62 percent of all bankruptcies last year were attributed to an unexpected medical emergency.

While Hogancamp doesn't wind up on the

street, his meager surroundings and the overdraft notices in his mailbox reveal that he is among that growing group of Americans for whom an unexpected illness or injury can be financially devastating.

In addition to illustrating the perils of the uninsured, "Marwencol" also speaks to the addiction issues that often plague at-risk communities. After being told he can no longer receive therapy at the hospital, Hogancamp moves home, where he explores his surroundings and interviews his friends to fill in the blanks regarding the person he used to be. While his old journals reveal that Hogancamp had been a talented comic-book-style illustrator, they also remind him that he had been a tormented alcoholic.

Alcoholism and mental disorders often go hand-in-hand. About half of all people diagnosed with some form of mental illness will also be dual-diagnosed as having a substance abuse problem. Likewise, half of all alcoholics are dual-diagnosed as suffering from a mental illness. Hogancamp's personality difficulties most likely stem from his post-traumatic stress, his brain damage as well as his sometimes visible frustration and real rage at the circumstances of his life as the victim of such a senseless crime. However, it's likely that anger has always been a problem for Hogancamp. His friends' descriptions of his drinking days imply as much, and Mark's hazy memories — coupled with the graphic, violent imagery in his old journals — point to the realization that his alcoholic tendencies may have always been accompanied by some form of mental illness.

Among those who are homeless, alcoholism often plays a role as both cause and effect. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, an alcoholic becomes at risk for homelessness when a significant proportion of already-scant household income is spent on alcohol or other substances. Of course,

it's also difficult for a person who is barely getting by to properly focus on treatment and recovery. Once someone is homeless, alcohol and other substances become common coping strategies to manage the stress, danger and anxiety that are all a part of life on the streets. Ultimately, it's a vicious cycle in which causes and effects interchange to the detriment of the user and their living situation.

"A large percentage of those we serve have addiction issues," explains Rachel Hester, executive director of Nashville's Room In The Inn. "I am not sure what comes first, the struggles they face or the addiction. Every one of us has an escape. For example: shopping or relationships. When we are in crisis, these escapes can also lead to crisis. What I have also seen is that many use alcohol and drugs to self-medicate their mental health issues and may not even be aware of it. What we (at Room In The Inn) try to work toward every day is offering alternative escapes like art therapy, library, chess, positive relationships, recovery meetings, education."

The mixed-blessing of Hogancamp's recovery is that his alcoholism is also one of the things he lost to the attack. Just as he can't remember much about his old personality, it's as if he can't remember being an alcoholic.

When Hogancamp realizes his only hope for a full recovery is a total commitment to exercising his body and mind, he decides to take matters into his own hands. With hands that shake too much for an immediate return to drawing, Hogancamp creates an ingenious and rigorous program of art therapy for himself, right in his own backyard. His creation helps him to develop his dexterity while simultaneously

See ONE MAN'S WAR, page 9