

The gravity of abuse

Part II: Neighborhood watch

This is the second in a series chronicling the complex personal toll of domestic abuse

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Pursued

Plimp. Brandy Sweeney heard something hit the side of her tent. She sat up in the dark, listening. Plimp ... ploomp ... ploomp. She thought, maybe ... But it couldn't be. Then she heard her name. Brandy. Brandy. She knew the voice. Richard. Ploomp. He was throwing rocks at her tent. How did he get past the 24-hour security staff?

For the past few weeks, Brandy had been living in Tent City 3, a free, legal encampment of close to 100 tents staked into the south lawn of Calvin Presbyterian Church in Shoreline, north of Seattle. She had moved into a tent with her partner, Richard Duncan, after a long bus trip from Boise, Idaho. Both agreed they wanted better lives, betting it could happen in Seattle.

But the drinking and drug use pulled them in a different direction. They fought and yelled and kicked and punched — particularly Richard, who, hours after learning Brandy was pregnant, hammered a fist into her stomach in a drunken rage. Days after that punch, another tempest broke, leading Tent City 3 staff to evict Richard in early February 2009. Brandy thought she'd be safe in the yellow tent then, but Richard didn't let go that easily. He stalked her.

Come talk to me, Richard whispered. Brandy stayed put. Even though she didn't know if she could trust him, she still cared for him. And she was six weeks pregnant with his child. She had experienced his violent temper, but she wondered if he deserved a second chance. Didn't everyone?

She remained in her sleeping bag, nervous. He threw more rocks at the tent; he called her name. She lay still, waiting, hoping. And 10 minutes or so later — silence. He'd left.

Richard came back the next day. In Idaho, Brandy had told Richard about a Washington state program called GA-U, Government Assistance-Unemployable, which provided \$339 every month. Because some recipients had mental health diagnoses, people nicknamed it "crazy money." Brandy received it, and she thought Richard could probably get it, too. A couple days after being evicted from Tent City 3, his GA-U came through. Now he had crazy money to burn.

Richard bought a cell phone with pre-paid minutes and called the Tent City 3 phone and asked, Can I speak to Brandy? Brandy picked up the line.

I'm sorry, Richard said. We need to be together, forgive me.

Fearful, Brandy wouldn't commit. Those people at Tent City are poisoning your mind, he said. Brandy hung up. Richard called again. And again and again. He phoned her so much, Brandy lost count.

He stood outside Tent City 3 and, like a modern-day Stanley Kowalski, yelled her name. *Brandy! Brandy! Brandy!* The 24-hour security staff shuffled Richard away. When he saw people entering the encampment, he'd

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ask, How's Brandy? Can you tell her I really want to talk to her? They kept giving him noncommittal replies: She doesn't live here anymore, or, Sure, I'll let her know.

Richard knew Tent City 3 security could turn him in for trespassing, and he shied away from any interaction with police. He had a lengthy prison record from Nevada, marked by violent felony assaults. In November 2008, before meeting Brandy, he'd been released from prison for assault with a deadly weapon. So Richard hid in nearby bushes, watching for her. At night, he slept on the gravelly shores of Richmond Beach, three miles away. Every day, he returned to pursue her.

It started to wear Brandy down. The rocks, the phone calls, his yelling her name, looking at her from the bushes, tailing her whenever she left: Richard was obsessed. What would it take for him to stop?

Tent City 3 provided residents with bus tickets, and one day in early February, Brandy walked to a bus stop. Richard popped out from a nearby apartment building, surprising her.

I'm really sorry I hit you, he said. I'll get help. Tears spilled from his eyes.

Brandy realized Richard had never apologized before, not like this. But could she believe him? Were his apologies sincere or a form of manipulation?

Richard's tears magnified into sobs. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, he said. Don't leave me. He looked so pathetic, Brandy's resolve collapsed.

All right, she said. Richard dried his eyes.

Brandy told him they'd get back together. After all, her options seemed few: She was pregnant, living in a tent in the winter and broke. Richard promised he'd find somewhere better, that he'd protect her. "I just kinda got sucked in," she says.

It took her some time to fully commit, but she abandoned Tent City 3 less than a week later. Most of what she had, she left in the tent as she struck off to be with Richard and their baby. To make a family.

TLC

On Jan. 30, 2009, a few days before Brandy left Tent City 3, volunteers with SKCCH, the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness, performed an annual One Night Count of homeless people. They found 2,827 people on the streets or without shelter. The King County Department of Community and Human Services surveyed 65 emergency shelters he'd



Richard Duncan

PHOTOS BY KATE BALDWIN



Brandy Sweeney

same evening, finding 2,552 people. Too many people, not enough beds.

But cold weather provided something of a boon. When the weather dipped below freezing, city hall opened as a winter response shelter. Brandy and Richard spent the night there on mats, women and men sleeping in different spaces. The city hall shelter closed at 5 a.m., which forced everyone back outside.

Out in the cold, Brandy and Richard migrated to a green space a couple blocks away called City Hall Park. They sat on a bench, shivering. As they huddled together, a man who cut through the park walked up to them. He carried a backpack, hard hat and

tool belt.

Hungry? the man asked.

Brandy and Richard nodded. He handed them trail mix and power bars.

He asked what they were up to. Planning to leave Seattle, Richard said.

Well, if you want work, come with me.

Brandy and Richard knew GA-U and food stamps couldn't lift them out of shelters or get them off the streets. After he told Brandy to stay warm at a day shelter, Richard followed Mr. Hard Hat. Barely a half block away stood the office of TLC, Trades Labor Corporation. They walked inside.

A temp agency, TLC connected employers with blue-collar workers including construction laborers, drywall technicians and carpenters' helpers. Anyone possessing these or other skills might find work: All you had to do was show up after 5:30 a.m. when the office opened.

Once Richard completed his application, TLC hired him out to a construction site near The University of Washington and gave him bus fare. He rode through the predawn dark, proud he could support Brandy and the baby-to-be. Not that general labor offered excitement or good money. "I get paid minimum wage to push a broom," Richard says. Eight hours of work, \$8.55 an hour. Family meant a lot to Richard. In the Nevada prison system, he had become involved with Odinism, a spiritual practice that followed the teachings of the Norse god Odin. His fellow Odinist inmates also embraced white supremacy. Tattoos on Richard's body spoke to that belief: a swastika on one pec, a profile of Hitler on the other, and across his fingers, "SKINHEAD." His practice taught him a man provided for his kin. At the end of the workday, TLC would cut him a check to support his family. Richard picked up a

Monday through Friday, Brandy hung around the motel. With a phone in the room, she could call out, and incoming calls were transferred from the front desk. Not that anyone knew she was there. Sometimes Brandy spoke to the manager's girlfriend, who lived in a corner room. Other than that: "I didn't really associate with a lot of people," she says. Except for Richard, she lived in isolation.

At the job site, Richard was a model employee, efficient and polite. The moment he arrived back at the motel, though, he started drinking. A quick trip to the Aurora Grocery, two blocks away, supplied him with beer — lots of it. "And I don't sip things," Richard says, "I drink them." A regular 12-ounce beer would be gone in two, three good chugs. A 12-pack, no problem. He drank till he passed out.

Brandy wouldn't join in. She had partaken before she knew she was pregnant, and even a little after. "That's not the highlight of my life," she says. But by the time she arrived at the Georgian, she went cold turkey: no alcohol, no cigarettes, no meth. She didn't want anything to affect the baby.

Richard, in his own way, knew the child needed a good start, which fueled a desire to change. As he drank beer, oftentimes he watched TV. He liked history shows, and one evening he watched a program that detailed white supremacy movements. That's my past, he told Brandy, and I'm going to leave it behind. Leaving drinking behind proved more difficult.

When Richard finished a beer, sometimes he gave Brandy the signal: He'd shake the empty can. That meant it was time to fetch another one. She'd pull one from the minifridge, feeling like a nag if she complained. By the time he downed a six-pack, his mood, like a storm cloud, darkened. A fight might break out. Yelling would charge the atmosphere. Sometimes, he hit her.

Brandy washed clothes, cleaned up, fixed dinner. Inside of her, a child formed, kicked. Outside, the world felt tight, constricted.

June ticked by, July soldiered on. A heat wave cooked the city. Temperatures spiked to 103. Brandy, in her seventh month, tried not to wilt. They had learned the baby was a boy, a son. He drummed his foot against the inside of her swollen belly.

Brandy shopped for meals in the Aurora Grocery, buying items to microwave or heat up on the hot plate in the overheated room. The food was so expensive. Cans of tuna fish cost more than two dollars. And loaves of bread? She had to economize. Luckily she saw the flier about the food bank.

Inside the Bethany Community Church, the food bank lay seven blocks south of the Georgian. Brandy and Richard walked as the early August sun dipped to the west. Inside the cool of the church, off to the side, was a pantry filled with canned ravioli, corn flakes, peanut butter, bags of sugar. Grocery bags stuffed with food awaited anyone who asked.

A woman, with wavy, ginger-colored hair and sea-foam green eyes, handed out the food. She pointed to Brandy's purse. I like your bag, the woman said.

Brandy smiled, then asked, Do you have diapers? Or baby food?

No, but I can try to have diapers the next time, she said, and handed Brandy a bag. Richard carried their groceries to the motel.

They returned the next week and the next. Brandy always asking for diapers and baby food. Finally, the food bank had received some, and the woman with the ginger hair passed them on. Brandy supplemented their diet with what she brought back and played the homemaker, which pointed to a truth she hated to admit: Even though she dreamed of leaving the smelly, chaotic, unstable Georgian, after five months, the motel had become her home.

A neighborly day in the neighborhood

The first time Karen Ciruli saw the grit and grime of Aurora Avenue North, it reminded her of home.

She grew up in a quiet, little town in southern New Jersey, but not far away shone the bright lights and high-roller glitz of Atlantic City. You could travel there on the

broom and swept.

As the workweek progressed, the pair found a rhythm. In the morning, Richard would head to TLC, and Brandy would find a warm drop-in center; in the early evening, they would reconnect for dinner and a beer; at night, they would enter male and female winter response shelters at city hall; in the morning, they would repeat the cycle.

By the weekend, Richard had saved up enough money for a motel room on Aurora Avenue North. The room was small and dingy, but it had a shower and heat. "It was like a suite at the Hilton," Richard remembers. But even a low-rent Hilton has a checkout time, so they returned to the shelter routine.

Richard wasn't too keen on Brandy walking around Seattle all day, alone. He also didn't want her to work. Ever. He had the job, so he would take care of their needs. He put finding a place where they could live on the top of the list.

One evening in mid-February 2009, Richard stepped up to the front desk of a motel located at 8801 Aurora Ave. N. Rooms went for \$245 a week. That amount trumped what Richard had on him, so he spoke to the manager, showing him pay stubs. He told the manager Brandy was pregnant. Look, Richard said, can I owe you for one day, then I'll pay tomorrow?

Sure, not a problem, the manager said. He got Richard's signature, then handed him a key.

Brandy and Richard walked across the parking lot and up to the second floor. Richard unlocked the door to Room 16. They stepped over the threshold and looked around. Wood paneling, hard mattress, leaky showerhead, running toilet, TV bolted to a rack on the wall, noises from the room downstairs.

Welcome to the Georgian Motel.

The mother road

Brandy didn't like living at the Georgian. First, the rooms were smelly. A combination of dirty socks and cigarette smoke, kind of like a bar. Second, the motel was chaotic. The police always seemed to show up, or someone was getting beat up. Random people knocked at her door, looking in her window. And third, she found the place unstable. One night, you were in one room, the next day, you had to move. Since she spent most of every day there while Richard worked, all of it sank in.

For Richard, leaving the shelter and staying at the Georgian proved he could protect and provide for his family. But covering the cost, that took thought. He formulated a payment plan.

Rate at the Georgian: \$245 a week
Richard's take-home pay: \$52 a day
Amount he'd pay the Georgian:
on Mon. \$50
on Tues. \$50
on Wed. \$50
on Thurs. \$50
on Fri. \$45
Total: \$245
Left over: \$15

Tight? Yes, but the pair understood their situation. Monthly rents for one-bedroom downtown apartments averaged roughly \$1,000, almost equal to a month at the Georgian, but landlords placed legal hurdles before tenants that Richard knew he could never clear. At the Georgian, you didn't need first and last month's rent, plus security deposit; you didn't need to submit to a credit check; you didn't need to worry about having a felony record. All you needed was cash — plus you got cable, electricity, water and

heat, all included at no extra cost.

Brandy had enrolled in TANF, the federal program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, once she learned of her pregnancy. With that and their GA-U, the couple eked by. And while it might not have been an optimal place to live, on one level, Richard had chosen the perfect spot: Aurora Avenue North embraced people in need.

Since its beginning, Aurora hosted services that the region required. Electricians, car dealers, appliance stores, mattress retailers and mom-and-pop shops dotted the avenue and brought an ever-changing stream of customers. Streets branched out from the central Aurora artery, giving birth to the Greenwood neighborhood. Aurora became the area's mother road.

Roads needed cars, cars needed drivers and drivers needed rest. Again, Aurora was there to serve. In the 30s, motor inns sprang up. In the late 40s, motels. And during the 60s, more motels to house visitors to the World's Fair. Ambassador, Orion, Crown Inn, Kluse-In Motel, Marco Polo, Aloha, Nites Inn, Thunderbird: These names and others, some neon-lit with vacancy signs, called all who craved slumber.

But during the 70s, as Seattle fell into an economic slump and commuters buzzed along I-5, motels lost their usual patrons. Salesmen, part-time workers and other transients checked in instead. Working girls, many unbelievably young, sought johns. As the area declined over the decades, some of Aurora's motels transformed. They served as a form of low-income housing and offered shelter to workers, couples and families who couldn't afford to live downtown. Like Brandy and Richard.

While Richard bused downtown to work