

Tweets from the streets

Media guru Mark Horvath lost his home and lived on the streets. Now he encourages homeless people to use social media to share their stories

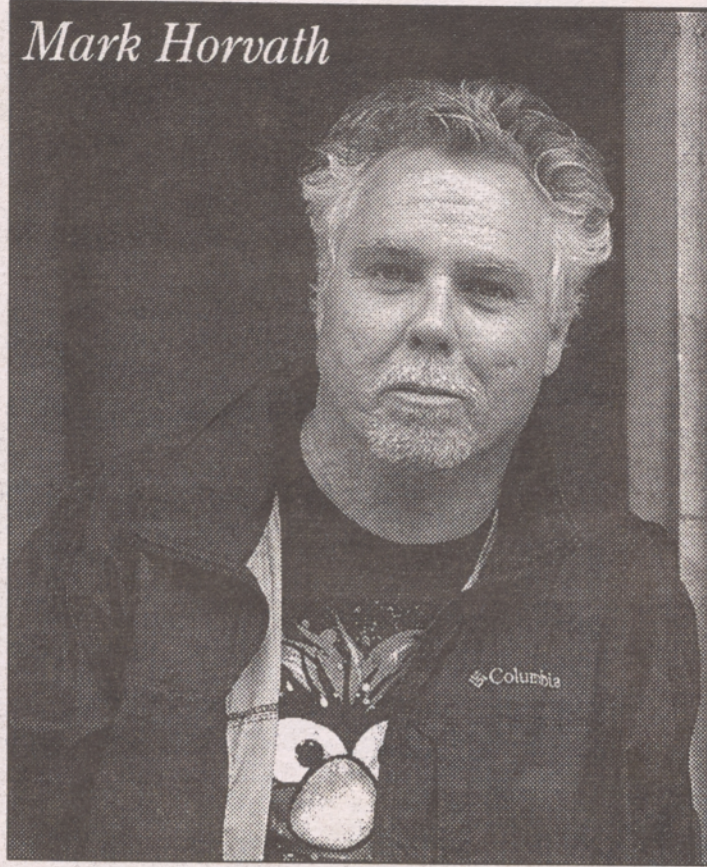
BY ALEX BECKER
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Mark Horvath's energy is contagious. The fast-talking social media expert and founder of InvisiblePeople.tv recently captivated a venue full of mostly marketing professionals in Seattle at an event sponsored by Social Media Club. Popularly known by his Twitter handle @hardlynorm, Horvath travels the world creating videos of homeless people as they tell their stories, and he shares the videos online to raise awareness about homelessness. You can even watch a video of Street Roots vendor John Michael on the site.

His work has achieved widespread acclaim and has been featured by the Los Angeles Times, CNN, CBS, Mashable and NPR. The Huffington Post named him one of "11 Twitter Activists You Should Be Following," and YouTube gave him its home page for a day. He has even received sponsorships from Ford Motor Company, Hanes and Hertz Rent-a-Car to continue his work.

There's no doubt that Horvath knows a thing or two about media marketing. He also knows something about homelessness. He lost a six-figure salary at a television syndication distribution company 18 years ago, while struggling with a drug addiction. He ended up homeless on Hollywood Boulevard. Eventually he was able to get help. He got off the street, kicked heroin, found religion and began working for a televangelist. Then in 2008, he lost his job and his house went into foreclosure. Unemployment ran out. This time his downturn wasn't drug related but simply economic, collateral damage from the financial crisis. Homelessness, again, was on the horizon.

Not sure what to do, but armed with a



Mark Horvath

professional background in marketing and film production, Horvath decided to take his skills on the road. His goal was to help educate society about the realities of homelessness by "making the invisible visible." So, with \$45, his video camera and laptop, he began recording homeless peoples' stories and posting them on Twitter. Then he made a website. As more bloggers shared the videos and as he gained more Twitter followers, his work spread and the stories began reaching a broader audience. Communities mobilized to help their homeless neighbors. Horvath says he started with the simple goal of educating the public. As he said in an interview, he wants to end homelessness and has become a leading voice on the issue.

Alex Becker: What is "Invisible People?"

Mark Horvath: "Invisible People" is a storytelling organization that empowers homeless people to tell their own story.

Alex Becker: How did it start?

Mark Horvath: Years ago I had a great job in the television industry. Then I ended up homeless on Hollywood Boulevard. [Before becoming homeless] I had a new house, a new car and a job. Then the economy tanked. I lost the job, lost another job, lost another job and lost the house to foreclosure. [Then I experienced] 19 months of unemployment. So I grabbed a video camera, went out and started empowering homeless people to tell their own stories. We don't need to hear from another executive director or another politician or some research doctorate at some university talk about homelessness. We need to hear from the people experiencing it themselves. That's where the power of Invisible People lies.

A.B.: You've talked about the bureaucracy that homeless people navigate just to receive services. You said, "The system is broken." Please explain.

M.H.: Twenty years ago they came up with this idea called the continuum of care. It makes great sense to have an individualized agency to handle a person's problems, (for

example), a homeless veteran or a single mom. Or somebody that's HIV positive. But we have become so segmented, and we are horrible at communicating. There are people that fall through the gaps. If there are gaps in the safety net, fix them! One of the biggest issues is communication: Agencies don't communicate with each other. And we're all fighting for the same funding, the same scraps. The single mom living in her van is at the library looking for services online, but the majority of homeless services websites are donor-centric. They're not servicing the people online. I can rent a hotel room anywhere in the world in real time (online), but a homeless person has to physically go to an agency. You sit in an office for four, five, six hours, and then you see a case manager. Then you fill out all this paperwork, and you're really lucky if you get put on a waiting list. If you're really, really lucky, you get some bus tokens to go back. Then you do it again and again and again, and pretty soon you give up.

A.B.: How do you use social media to share people's stories?

M.H.: (Social media) is an amazing advocacy tool. The more of us that are explaining (our experiences) and sharing our challenges about living on the streets, the more we'll see change. Social media gives power to the consumer. I know a mom living in her van in Kent. I gave her a camera, and one of the first things she did was start videoing system failures. People would say to her, "You just want to be homeless!" So she videoed herself trying to call to get into a shelter (that was full). The more that we use our collective voice as homeless people, whether we blog, whether we tweet, or whether we use Facebook, the more we're going to see change. Also, when you're out on the streets, it's extremely lonely, and (using social media) helps alleviate isolation. So it's not how I use social media, it's how (homeless people) need to use social media.

A.B.: What have been some of your major social media accomplishments?

M.H.: YouTube gave me their home page for a day. I'm the first "cause" to speak at Twitter headquarters. The LA Times, Ricki Lake and MTV have all written about or featured "Invisible People" in some way. I could go on. But to me, the most important (accomplishments) were the 50 kids in Baton Rouge that didn't have shoes and within an hour had brand new shoes (after Twitter followers heard their story and donated). The individuals who have been housed. Or when the Canadian government [commissioned] us to go to 24 cities in Canada to help create an organization that's going to save thousands of lives and lots of money. We have been able to reach a new stakeholder that's not the typical nonprofit community, people that didn't know about the realities of homelessness. That's the power of social media.

A.B.: How has homelessness become

normalized in our society?

M.H.: I have two big fears. One is that society has become anesthetized to homelessness. I see that in some communities like Seattle and Portland. It's almost like it's meant to be, and that's scary because it shouldn't be meant to be. The other (fear) is criminalization of homelessness. That is really scary. It's growing because it's a quick fix. We want to get them out of the park. Well, let's pass laws and boom! They're out of the park. But whenever we pass those laws, well, you might as well just open your wallet because the most expensive solution to ending homelessness is incarceration.

There are other solutions, like the "housing first" model for the chronic homeless, but we need shelters, too. Shelters provide a valuable service, especially for people that are just hitting homelessness temporarily. And that's about 60 percent of homelessness, especially now because of the economic crisis. You have a family, they lost their job, they lose their place to stay: The housing first model doesn't work for them, but a shelter model does. We need to start really focusing on the people on the streets.

A.B.: What motivates you to do this work?

M.H.: When I first started, it was pretty easy math. If I traveled and helped empower homeless people to tell their own stories, somehow I survived. Somebody would help me with rent or somebody would buy me a meal, and it was pretty easy. Then I ended up working in homeless services in Los Angeles for four years, because people don't fund (educational projects to build) awareness. Now, because of my social media and notoriety, I could walk back into a six-figure marketing job. But I don't see myself sitting behind a desk making other people money. Once you get the taste of helping people, once it gets into your blood and into your spirit, it's there. You can't remove it.

A.B.: You say there are three things we need to end homelessness: housing, jobs and health services. What can ordinary people do?

M.H.: First, find out which organizations in your community are providing housing, jobs and health services. Second, contact them and ask, "How can I help?" Some places aren't good at managing volunteers, but don't give up. Find some place to be. Maybe you're an accountant. Maybe you work in media. Maybe you work in marketing. Maybe you're unemployed. Take your skills to someplace that's going to use them. And here's the magic: Whatever's going on in your life — maybe you lost your job or you got a flat tire, or your girlfriend left you — you get outta yourself, and go help somebody else.

All of a sudden your day gets better, then your week and then your month. It gives you perspective.

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spoke with numerous tenants who are "co-morbid," a term used to describe people suffering from more than one physical or mental health problem. Depression, anxiety, asthma and a history of smoking were some of the most common conditions tenants reported to her.

Discovering the relationship between those various health problems and how to best treat them will be the key to Health Share's success with low-income and co-morbid patients. But exactly what type of services Health Share will be willing to create and fund is not yet clear.

All CCOs are required by legislation to use community health workers — essentially, outreach workers who develop close relationships with their patients, conduct home visits, and help people learn how to become healthier—and there is interest in having workers come to buildings operated by Central City Concern and other agencies to visit with tenants at their homes.

Another suggestion is having staff from hospitals and other health providers come to


places such as the Bud Clark Commons to give classes and workshops on various topics, such as healthy eating, or having a specialist come and do free skin care to prevent abscesses.

"That care could help prevent infections that lead people to the emergency room," Clark says. "There are a lot of things that we can do that don't cost money."

Blackburn and others mention funding various support services connected with housing, such as addictions treatment, mental health counseling and case management as a likely recommendation the workgroup will make to the Health Share board.


Manning even goes so far to say that temporarily paying for a homeless individual's rent until they're stably housed would reap benefits as far as a person's health.

"Short term rent assistance could be really effective for the same reason the Recuperative Care Program is effective," Manning says. "There's a good (segment) of the homelessness population where a short term intervention can be effective."



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