

FINDING HOME, from page 10

be housed. It would be an easier life, easier than walking daytime and nighttime, not achieving anything, not going anywhere.

'God, hello? I'm just another human down here.'

A 90-day Salvation Army residential treatment program gave him some insight, and a foothold to think differently about his life.

At 63, Randall was eligible for Social Security benefits. Emily Nelson at JOIN helped him file and connected him with Central City Concern, where Crystal McIntyre and Race Hebrard

connected him to housing.

"They went to bat for me," he said. "They do a whole background thing: how long clean and sober, prison, homeless years, etc."

In October, Randall moved into his apartment, for which he pays 30 percent of his income. He checks in with Central City Concern staff every month and picks up his bus pass.

When Randall learned that he had an apartment, he was scared.

"I was accustomed to another life," he said. "How do I accustom myself to be a human being again? Will people think 'Oh, you're one of them, one of those homeless people'? I was happy, but I thought, 'I'm indoors; this is heavy.'"

But when he walked into his apartment for the first time, he fell in love with his stove and refrigerator. "Look at that - I have a freezer. Milk will last longer than three days. Wow, I've got ice cubes! Wow, look at this running water! It's right there at the turn of a knob. A stove with an oven! I don't have to keep my silverware on the ground. Or clean them with sand. I spent 25 to 30 minutes inside the kitchen at first, just looking at everything."

And the challenges of being housed?

"Funny question! I can answer you in only one way." He handed me a yellow sheet from a legal pad on which he'd written a list of things he needs: air freshener, paper towels, carpet cleaner. "Indoors, you have needs that you did not have before. It's the trial and error of living inside."

We talked about how to clean coffee stains out of carpet and when not to use bleach. He has skills most of us don't and knows how to live outdoors in the middle of a big city. The everyday work of keeping

house inside is a new, but not unwelcome, challenge.

Old friends sometimes want to stay at his place or otherwise impose on his new life, but he is careful.

"I'm not homeless anymore. I think of others who are still out there. They've chosen their lives, and I've chosen mine. I put my foot down. I don't mind you coming over. I'll feed you, let you hop in the shower. But this is my space. I jumped through the hoops to get what I have. It's an ordeal. If you abuse your situation, you can't keep it."

Randall walked the path out of homelessness one step at a time, jumping through those necessary hoops. He was successful because he took it seriously and kept a clear mind.

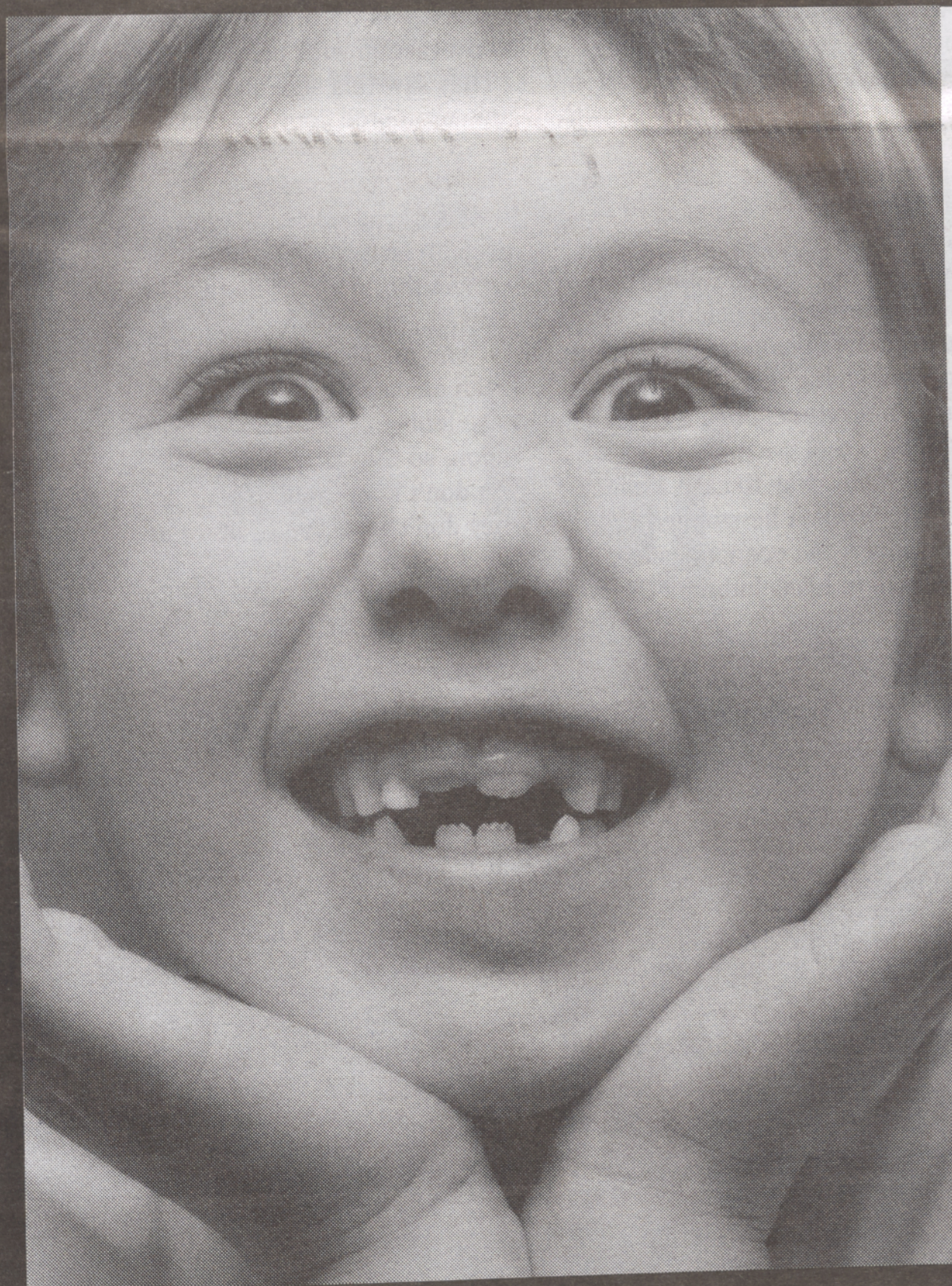
"You're not going to skate through these doors if you've been drinking or doing dope."

He likes his apartment and his neighbors: it's a quiet, family-oriented complex, with children playing outside. "It is a big turn from being homeless to housing like this. I like the security - the utmost is security. I can lock my door. In a tent, of course, you can't."

When we finished our conversation, Randall walked me out to the parking lot, then turned to go back inside and closed his apartment door with a gentle click.

"It was always in the back of my mind to be housed. It would be an easier life, easier than walking daytime and nighttime, not achieving anything, not going anywhere. 'God, hello? I'm just another human down here.'"

RANDALL MCKEE



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