

“The next thing I remember is there being two women holding me, then there was a cop and then I heard LifeFlight landing not too far away,” Sunny said.

The women were ER nurses, the officer had seen him flying through the air as he performed other duties, the LifeFlight helicopter had been in the area after a prior call had been canceled. The accident destroyed his back and wiped away most of his memories.

As he underwent emergency surgery, Sunny remembers looking down and seeing himself on the surgical stretcher and looking up to find angels on either side. When he looked back down, he was surrounded by a massive crowd of unknown faces. What happened next, for

him, was so clear and powerful that he scrunched up his face, held his hand slightly over his head as he rode a spirit and pulled words from the ether like an incantation: “It wasn’t the spoken word, it was thought and feeling. But what it said was nobody will think of you less if you choose not to do what you are about to be asked. We’re going to need some of

you to go back because we’re losing down there. You will be put through all the same temptations as everyone else, only it’ll be tougher on you because they will know who you are. After a time of suffering, this day will come to you in bits and pieces. When it comes full, remember this day as yours. But you’ve got to move fast, get as many as you can because time is short.”

After receiving the message, Sunny recalls being pulled back into his body against his will, and again, serendipity intervened. One of the top back surgeons in the country happened to be visiting the hospital where he ended up, Sunny said. He helped the regular staff reconstruct his spine.

“After all that, everyone at the hospital called me the ‘miracle baby.’”

The accident and the memory problems it triggered put him on the path to being shelterless. Trusting others became a particularly fraught gambit.

He still has trouble piecing together what came before and relies mostly on what others tell him of who he was before the crash. He said he was a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War who enlisted only after going on the lam for a year and getting caught. He tells tales of daring escapes and rescues in country, reenacts a moment where he hung from the skid of a helicopter as it took off.

“I decided early on that if I was told something 12 times I could believe it was true,” Sunny said.

Other stories include falling into drug use, possible time as a dealer, a job as a traffic control supervisor where he excelled. Sunny said he hasn’t lived indoors except for brief periods ever since.

“I’ve had some friends offer me a couch for a few days at a time, but then it

takes a month before I can get comfortable being back outside,” he said. “My ministry is in the streets though.”

In Keizer, he’s found his own space in the community, one where the community, in most respects, allows him some dignity and a police force he himself stands behind in every way.

“I would take a bullet for any one of the officers in this town,” Sunny said.

In his mid-60s, according to court records for three minor offenses more than a decade old, Sunny is worried he’s suffering from dementia, but doesn’t have an official diagnosis. Paranoia crept in throughout the interview but, rather than let it control him, he tries to combat the thoughts by setting a good example for others.

While petty crimes like shoplifting helped him survive for a time, he got tired of “hearing mothers tell children to put items back in line at the grocery store because they couldn’t afford it.”

“I felt like I had become one of the takers and that wasn’t a good feeling,” Sunny said.

Despite his joviality, living

outside takes a greater and greater toll. “It’s cold having to put up a tent at night and tear it down in the morning,” Sunny said. “There are days when it seems like my whole day is spent just getting ready to go to sleep and trying to go to sleep and then waking up and finding a new place to sleep.”

When asked whether he would take advantage of the services offered by local agencies and given a permanent place to stay, he hesitated.

“If I could find someone who would give me a permanent spot for my tent or a spot where I could park a little RV, I would rather do that,” Sunny said.

He’s heard of others who managed to set up online donation campaigns for shelterless people who set up residence in the hearts of their community, but reports of such efforts seem to end up in fraud or criminal charges as frequently as they are successful.

Even if he did find a permanent shelter, he would like to remain part of the community. Giving out high-fives to children during the holiday lights parade is a highlight of his year.

He’s grateful to live in Keizer, a city in which some residents find him as vibrant and necessary as any other piece of the community.

“This is a beautiful city, it should be seen as beautiful, and I try to do a little bit to help keep it going,” he said.



SUNNY

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

We are unable to verify some claims of the subject of this story, but time and tide wear down the best of us. Being shelterless for any length of time accelerates the process and Sunny has lived in the streets for roughly two decades.