

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Family provides cross-country lifeline

By Bobby Kerlik
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Tyrone Taylor, 62, (left) Pittsburgh and three daughters two decades ago and took a path into alcohol, cocaine and homelessness in Los Angeles. Since family members reached out to him, he is back in Pittsburgh living with his daughter, Shawnta, 31, and her children in Penn Hills, including Keith, 2. Justin Merriman | Tribune-Review

Tyrone Taylor picked up his grandson at his daughter's Penn Hills home Monday and gave thanks to God, a day after returning to Pittsburgh from California, where he had spent 20 years homeless and addicted to drugs and alcohol.

"All the rewards I've gotten since I stopped using -- I wouldn't trade it for nothing," Taylor said, smiling at his 2-year-old grandson, Keith. "Everybody doesn't get a chance on skid row."

Taylor, 62, who said he has been free of drugs and alcohol for 6 1/2 years, returned to his hometown on Sunday, just in time to watch his beloved Steelers while surrounded by family -- something nearly unthinkable before 2005 when he was sleeping on the streets of Los Angeles.

Taylor now speaks about his time on the streets and tries to motivate others not to end up like him. His story and picture is featured on publications for the Skid Row Housing Trust, a

nonprofit in Los Angeles that builds and runs housing facilities for the homeless and treats people with drug and alcohol addictions.

"For me, it was a fork in the road and making the decision, 'Do I want to live or die?' " Taylor said. "I seen a lot of people die, and I didn't want to die that way."

Molly Rysman, director of external affairs for Skid Row Housing Trust, said Taylor has spoken to a variety of audiences, including investors like Fannie Mae and Skid Row's 20th anniversary celebration. The organization is funded through public and private funds, she said.

"I saw Tyrone a couple of weeks ago before he left. We certainly hope to stay in touch," Rysman said. "The goal of (Skid Row Housing Trust) is to end (each person's) period of homelessness. For some, that may mean a few years; for others, the rest of their lives. It's fantastic Tyrone has family he's able to reunite with."

Taylor grew up in Homewood and attended Westinghouse High School but didn't finish. His mother died when he was 4, and he was raised by his grandfather, O.T. Tillman, who was a pastor at a Lawrenceville church.

He went to work in the mills before he was laid off in 1983 or 1984 -- he wasn't sure which. He couldn't find work in Pittsburgh, so he moved to Las Vegas, leaving behind his three daughters. He became a casino dealer.

He found drinking in Las Vegas, then moved to Los Angeles when someone told him he could live for free on public assistance. Soon, he was caught up in addiction and living on the streets.

"I just gave up. I was caught up in, 'Poor me, poor me, nobody cares,' " Taylor said.

In late 2004, his brother, Allen Taylor, found him on the street in tattered clothes and pushing a shopping cart.

"He saw he wasn't having an impression on me so he contacted my daughter," Taylor said. "She found me on Valentine's Day 2005."

Shawnta Taylor found her dad on skid row, and he said his life changed forever.

"I hadn't seen him for years. I knew he was out there. I wanted to make an attempt to reach out to him," said Shawnta Taylor, 31, who has three children. "He's my dad. I wanted to let him know I still loved him and that he had family and grandkids. I hadn't seen him since I was 8 years old."

Taylor spent two more months on the street before checking himself into a Salvation Army treatment facility in April 2005. He called his daughter after he was in a halfway house and sober. He saved some money and was able to send her some as a payback, he said.

Taylor is now eligible for Social Security and receives a railroad pension. He said he's retired but plans to work odd jobs, attend local addiction support groups and continue to share his story.

"I tell people -- AA, CA, NA, they keep you from seeing the DA," he said, laughing. "Hopefully, people don't go through what I went through."

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