

Collision Tech assists The Path



DAVE SIGLER/Chronicle

Duwayne Sipper, executive director of the Path of Citrus County, presented a certificate of Appreciation to Collision Tech owners Bob and Bonnie Alexander and their employees for the work they did to refurbish their truck. The vehicle got a new paint job, custom graphics, bed liner, tune-up and a bug shield.

Victims of circumstance



Desiree Speer and her fiancé Nathan, a young homeless couple, have found shelter at The Path of Citrus County, a homeless shelter in Beverly Hills. The two hope to soon have jobs so they can afford to move to their own home. They keep their four cats in a tent behind the women's shelter.

Couple struggles to stay together

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Chronicle

Nathan and Desiree are young and in love. They're also homeless.

But they don't want pity. They just need a little help.

Nathan, 20, declined to give his last name because his family lives here. His 19-year-old fiancée, Desiree Speer, is from Puyallup, Wash. She is about four months pregnant.

They came to Citrus County from Kansas about a month ago with high hopes. Both expected to quickly find jobs. They planned

to live with Nathan's mother and stepfather.

Dreams started unraveling when, despite his mother's invitation, Nathan's stepfather refused to allow Speer to live in their Beverly Hills home.

"He didn't want my 'baggage' with me," Nathan said.

Speer said her mother disapproves of Nathan, so they wouldn't be allowed to live with her in Washington, either.

Unwilling to part, they stayed for a week with a family friend, then spent the last of their money on motel rooms. Soon, they had to rely on outside help. The Salvation Army paid for three nights at the Hayes Motel in Crystal River, then they were allowed to

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Speer stays at the women's shelter and Nathan at the men's shelter, but they spend most of their time looking for work and applying for government aid.

COUPLE

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stay there one week free of charge.

When they left the Hayes Motel, they had no money and nowhere else to go.

Nathan said a female Crystal River police officer allowed them to load up all their belongings — including four cats — into a patrol vehicle. She gave them a ride to the gazebo by City Hall.

Speer said the officer told them they could remain in the gazebo overnight, but then they would have to leave.

They don't ask for money, but Speer said that a city employee gave \$5 to Nathan.

At first, Speer said she didn't mind staying in their tent under the gazebo, but as the night wore on and the streets became quiet, she started to worry that "somebody would steal something that I've worked so hard for."

Mouths to feed

In that night without four walls to protect them, Speer said, "I couldn't help think of everybody else at home with their TVs on, wasting electricity."

But having their cats, Tom, Midnight, Danielle and Dawn, with them made the night outdoors easier for Speer.

"Those are our babies," Speer said. "Looking at them is like looking into the eyes of a baby."

If a choice had to be made between feeding the cats or feeding themselves, Speer said they always choose to go hungry and buy food for the cats.

The next morning, Nathan said he walked to a nearby church and asked where they could get help. They used the last of their cell phone time making calls to local charitable organizations.

Speer said they didn't qualify for rental assistance because they didn't have jobs, and no one was willing to house both of them — except DuWayne Sipper of The Path of Citrus County, a homeless shelter in Beverly Hills.

There was one catch.

Because they aren't legally married in Florida, the young couple isn't allowed to share a room or spend time alone together at the faith-based shelter.

Speer said they are considered married under common

law in Kansas, and they have also participated in an outdoor wedding ceremony, called a "handfast." Both Speer and Nathan practice Wicca.

While Speer stays at the women's shelter and Nathan at the men's shelter, they spend much of their time looking for work, applying for government aid such as food stamps and WIC.

The shelter residents use Sipper's vehicle to travel to their appointments, but they must pay for gasoline.

Speer has encountered unexpected obstacles in her attempts to get back on her feet. She said she can't work without a Florida identification card, but she can't use her military identification to obtain it. She needs to get a copy of her birth certificate.

That piece of paper — and the cost of the marriage license — is also preventing Speer and Nathan from making their marriage legal.

"I feel like people keep stepping on the little bit of hope I have, bringing us farther and farther down," Speer said.

Army of two

Nathan and Speer never planned on getting help from the government. They were trained to defend it.

After Nathan graduated from Crystal River High School's Health Academy in 1999, he joined the Army. He was trained as a field medic and a forward observer, the soldier at the front lines who uses a radio to tell the big guns where to shoot.

"I was excellent at my job," Nathan said. "I knew it inside and out."

Speer joined the Army in June 2000. She said she learned secretarial skills, as well as how to dispatch and fly aircraft. She also learned how to shoot an M-16 rifle and a 9-mm handgun.

"It's got to be the most amazing thing I've ever done," Speer said.

Both were discharged for medical reasons. During a military exercise, Nathan said he slipped on ice and slid down a mountain into a tree, leaving him with a disabling back injury. He said his doctor only wants him to lift up to 5 pounds, but he would go against his doctor's advice if he could find a

job. Since he arrived in Citrus County, Nathan said he has already submitted about 40 job applications. He said he hasn't disclosed his disability on any job application because he feels his back injury is his problem and he is willing to risk further injury in order to work.

So far he has had no response.

"I have not had one call-back yet," Nathan said, his frustration obvious.

While Speer was in the Army, she was diagnosed with severe arthritis in her hips, wrists, lower back and ankles. She also suffers from bipolar disorder. Speer isn't taking medication for her mental disorder because it may harm her unborn child. She said it is also expensive, and she doesn't like to take it because it makes her lethargic.

Nathan and Speer met when they were both stationed in Korea, which makes their military service bittersweet. They both consider joining the Army the biggest mistake of their lives. But that's what brought them together.

Nathan said, "I wish I never would have joined the military." If he hadn't joined the Army, he wouldn't have injured his back. He said he would probably be studying to be a doctor at a university.

"I think my biggest mistake I ever made would have to be leaving home before I was fully ready," Speer said, brushing tears away. "It feels like I wasted a year of my life to end up homeless."

One of seven children, Speer

said she left home at 17. While her mother wanted her to become a litigator, Speer said she wanted to become a medical doctor or a veterinarian.

Her mother didn't support her decision to join the Army.

"When I first joined the military, she told me I'd never amount to anything," Speer said. "She told me it was the biggest mistake of my whole entire life."

'Housing impaired'

Despite hardships, Speer said they try to keep high spirits and make jokes about their situation.

"I don't like to call it homeless. I like to call it housing impaired."

And it's not unemployed, either. It's "job impaired."

She said at the shelter, all the residents try to keep each other laughing.

Though Nathan and Speer aren't looking forward to spending Christmas at the shelter, they are content to be together.

"Nathan is my family, as far as I'm concerned," Speer said.

Nathan said at times he feels bored, stressed and angry about their situation.

But they have a plan. They want to remain at The Path until they save up enough money for three month's rent. When they leave, she said she hopes they can take two people from the shelter with them and make a home.

Speer recalled what the Crystal River police officer told her when she dropped them off at the gazebo: "Did you die on Sept. 11? Then this, too, shall pass."

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