

From Homeless to Housed: Christmas Came Early for Santa



After 21 years living on the street and with a multitude of health issues, Larry Stuvland was referred to Aging and Disability Services for assistance by Sound Generations. Bellevue Fire Cares made the original referral on Larry's behalf.

Larry was struggling to survive. He needed essential services, resources, and housing. As the Aging and Disability Services case manager working with vulnerable older adults on the Eastside, I reached out to Larry.

Larry and I scheduled a chat at his local daily hangout—the Factoria Starbucks store. I asked how I could identify him. Larry said people tell him he looks like Santa. Sure enough, when I arrived at Starbucks, sitting quietly in the corner was a man with a long white beard who bore a striking resemblance to Santa—sans the red suit. When I asked Larry how I could help, he told me how his health issues made living on the street extremely difficult. Larry had neglected his medical needs. He desperately needed housing and medical care—including surgery that he hadn't pursued because he didn't have a place to recuperate afterward.

Larry's story

Larry grew up in Snohomish, Washington. Although he had had several long-term relationships, he never married and had no children. Larry was friendly but somewhat reserved. From our first meeting seven months ago, I have found him to be extraordinarily pleasant and quite engaging.

Larry loves sports—especially football and baseball—and enjoys science fiction and action movies and books. He is also a history buff and is not shy about expressing his political views and opinions.

I learned that Larry became homeless after being priced out of his apartment. At the time, he worked in foundries and did janitorial work but said he couldn't make ends meet because his wages were so low. Larry said the final rental increase he received was just too much—he could no longer pay the rent. This was the beginning of his homeless journey. Later, Larry lost hope when he could no longer work due to health issues. He said he accepted his fate and thought that he might be on the streets forever.

A community comes together to help

Larry began to spend time at the Factoria Starbucks store. Little did he know that his presence touched many people. Starbucks staff welcomed Larry daily. He had a safe, warm place to rest and relax. According to a Starbucks supervisor, patrons bought food for Larry and passed along gift cards in secret to make sure he had food to eat.

The staff at [Bellevue Fire CARES](#) continued to check on him to make sure he was okay. I connected Larry to medical care provided by Public Health—Seattle & King County's [Eastgate](#) clinic. They welcomed Larry, assisted him with much-needed medication, and connected him to other essential services.

Since he had difficulty getting around, I made sure Larry had access to transportation. The 24-hour QFC welcomed Larry as well. There were nights when he slept there if the weather was too frigid for him to remain outdoors.

Then, we had a small breakthrough—[Congregations for the Homeless](#) in Bellevue offered Larry a spot in their year-round shelter. Even though shelter living cannot be compared to a permanent home, it was a start. Larry raved about the staff and, for the first time since we started working together, I saw that Larry's mood was lifting. He became more hopeful. I think he began to believe in the kindness of others.

All the while, Larry was networking at Starbucks. Although he would disagree, I think he showed many traits of a businessperson.

A major breakthrough

I told Larry I would continue to work with him until he was housed. I truly thought it would take a very long time due to the difficult housing situation for low-income people in King County. Larry and I searched for housing for months, to no avail.

Then, another breakthrough occurred. I learned of an opening at an apartment in Kirkland. I asked Larry if I could help him pursue this opening and he gave me the go-ahead. Miraculously, one day later, I received a call from Larry. He laughed and said he found his own housing. He said a woman who frequented the Starbucks, whom he considered a friend, offered him a small studio apartment that he could afford at a complex she manages. It was near Starbucks. Larry moved in the next day.



Larry Stuvland stands at the doorway to his new home.

Congregations for the Homeless paid Larry's first two months of rent—helping him to get started on the right path—and Larry's friend stocked his refrigerator and cabinets with food and other essentials. I helped Larry develop a budget to make sure he had the tools he needed to succeed. Larry said he feels confident he can manage his financial affairs now and into the future.

Larry—aka Santa—reports that he is extraordinarily happy. He will pursue the additional medical care he needs very soon. Truly, Christmas came early this year—just for Santa.

Contributor Nancy Tillman is a case manager with Aging and Disability Services—the Area Agency on Aging for Seattle-King County. Nancy spends much of her time working with first responders—especially medics and fire fighters—who have identified older individuals who would benefit from services that support healthy aging and independence.