

Vision, Valley, Victory

Andre Starks' Journey to
Homeless Despair and Back



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Grief and loss.

How we respond when tragedy strikes often determines what we do with the rest of our lives.

When Andre Starks moved to Seattle from Arkansas with his beautiful fiancé, they had dreams of making it big and starting a new life together.

But just eight months later, Andre found himself mired in despair. Alone. Bitter. Completely apathetic about life. His fiancé had died from breast cancer. It happened fast. He had been quite confident she would recover, so her death shook his entire being.

He may or may not have known it before, but she was his everything. Sure, he had a marginal background in Christianity, and was now a practicing Muslim. But she was his prize, and the love of his heart. When she died, everything else in Andre's life died with her.

And he responded to this tragedy with self-destruction. Alcohol. Isolation. Avoiding relationships. It's a response that leads many others to the same place he found himself – on the street, alone, with no money, no food, no friends, and no hope. Lost in addiction to drugs and alcohol. Wandering the streets, he sometimes went 48 hours with no sleep.

Andre was existing, barely. He had no will to live life the way we're meant to live it. The fire was out. This was his valley, and his was about as low as a man can go.

But then, after a couple months on the street, something happened. Andre met someone. And that encounter would become the defining moment of his life.

Before Street Life – Normal Beginnings

Andre Starks grew up in Eudora, Arkansas, a barely-there rural town. His father died while he was still young, and he started smoking and

drinking in 5th grade. But in spite of that, he honored his mother's efforts to help him succeed, and did well in school and played sports. He just had a little rough edge on him, probably because of the loss of his father.

In 1993, he converted to Islam and became a member of the Nation of Islam. This dominated his early adult years, and he also had a couple children from unhealthy relationships.

But over time, Andre grew restless. And one day, he met the dream of his heart and fell in love. And love and restlessness put together usually adds up to one thing: "Baby, we ain't staying here."

You see, there's just nothing to do in Eudora. And that includes employment opportunities. He'd done some farm work, picking soybeans and driving tractors. But he knew he was destined for something better. So Andre and his love got infected with the West Coast bug, and started swooning for Seattle.

The funny thing is, Andre didn't only come here for the better job market. He and his fiancé both became convinced that soon after arriving in Seattle, they would win the lottery. She had some family in the Seattle area, and they felt that connection would help with their new start. So they packed everything and made the long drive across the land. This was in the mid-2000s, and when they arrived, they still hadn't tied the knot.

Sudden Loss

Just eight months after arriving in Seattle, Andre's fiancé died.

There was never a hint of cancer before they got here, so the speed with which this terrible disease took her life was astonishing. It's one reason Andre fell so hard afterward – he had almost no time to prepare for her death.

One day, they arrived in the big city. And the next, they learned the

terrible news. Like most people, they took it in stride, and started treatment. Andre was there for her. He spoke lovingly and confidently to her. "You're going to get better, and then I'm going to marry you."

They fought the disease together. Every fiber of his being told him she'd recover, and then they'd get to start their lives together anew. He had been to the hospital one day and then left to go rest. He got a call from the nurse. Andre fell to pieces at the words coming out of the phone. His heart deflated.

Unable to process his grief, Andre wanted to push it all out of his life. So he loaded up all her belongings, dropped them off at her family's house, and left, never speaking to them again.

He shut down, and turned off the world. He spoke to almost no one for months. He fell into a deep depression, a dark place of loneliness and despair. And he spent so much time there he couldn't find a way out.

Andre found himself on the streets of Seattle, and the world was dead to him.

Andre's Homeless Life

Some nights, he'd just walk. All night long. Not going anywhere. No purpose or goal. Just walking.

Other nights, he'd sit on a park bench. Andre says the noise outside him on the street, and the noise inside him in his head and broken heart, simply made sleep impossible at times. He would stay awake for 48 hours straight.

He'd wander in and out of various places like shelters and motels. He saw the darkest parts of Seattle, and fell into multiple addictions to alcohol and various drugs. He met some very bad people.

The thought of calling his fiancé's family was non-existent. But even calling his own family back in Arkansas was tough. He only did so



a couple times, and only then in moments of desperation. His sons went through this time barely knowing or hearing from him.

Sometimes you hear about kids growing up without a father, and you wonder where these fathers go. This is where Andre went. To the depths of despair on the streets of Seattle, 2000 miles away.

While homeless, Andre would often go days without eating. His stomach became a deadened void within him. Most of the time he had no money, and made little effort to get any. He wasn't homeless because of a lack of skill, talent, or education. It wasn't because of rental prices or any kind of systemic causes, though those things do play a role for other people.

Andre was homeless because he just didn't care anymore. Life didn't matter. Depression froze him in time. The idea of 'doing life' – even the thought of some kind of normal existence – was like a dream from another time and place.

They say you can tell when a person is about to die by when they refuse food. The loss of a will simply to eat means that life has departed, and it's only a matter of time before the body catches up to the fact.



Andre was heading in that direction. Reflecting back on this time, Andre says, “A lot of people don’t know the pain of being homeless.”

It’s not about hunger. It’s about pain. It’s about fighting just to find the will to keep living. Most of us simply can’t imagine that kind of existence. Yet it’s what most people who go homeless for an extended amount of time live every day.

How much longer would Andre have lived like this? It’s impossible to say. But he still had enough will to survive that sometimes he’d go to the various meal giveaways that charities and Christian ministries do around the city.

And that will to live, that tiny belief he still felt inside that his life was meant for more than this, propelled him forward – to the person who would change his life forever.

“These People Are Crazy”

One morning, Andre left a hotel room and came upon a ministry giving food away in Pioneer Square in downtown Seattle. These

people came from a group called 82nd St Ministries. Today, it's called Babysteps Ministry, which is run by some of the same people.

There are tons of groups that give food away. But there was something different about this one.



They actually talked to him. It seemed as if talking was more important to them than the food he'd just eaten. One guy in particular named Peter made a profound impression on him. He saw Peter and the others praying for homeless people. His first reaction? These guys are crazy. Who prays for homeless people? What's the point?

But after Peter, Steven, Brian (the pastor of the church associated with the ministry at the time), and the others started getting to know him, they asked him a question he simply couldn't believe.

"Would you like to come to church with us?"

Andre simply replied, "Why would you want me to come to your church?" In the past, he had a little interest and background in Christianity, but by this point he was a Muslim through and through. And he was homeless. And he was a big tall African American man, and these people were all Asians. I mean, what possible reason could there be for you to want me to come to your church, Andre wondered.

Peter's response: "Because you can learn something from us, and we can learn something from you."

So Andre went to their church. Brian preached. Something started to stir inside him. And he realized why – he was finally away from all the bad influences he had let into his life. Sure, he was still dealing with his despair and addictions. And he was still homeless, and would be for another six months.

But the people around him – this new circle of friends – this was radically different from anything he'd known, even all the way back to Arkansas.

The Power of Love

Andre began attending a small meeting to study the Bible with his new friends.

And don't let this be lost on you – because it was not lost on



him. They really were his *friends*. Andre had friends again. He was not “the homeless guy” to them. He was Andre Starks. People knew him, and knew some of his story.

Even though he was the oldest guy in the group, the only black man, and the only Muslim, they welcomed him. During the group meetings, Andre wouldn’t say much, still protecting his mind and heart from the pain he’d been living with for so long.

But one day, another homeless man showed up and started asking all kinds of questions. Andre just listened. But inside, his heart was beating fast. On a Wednesday night, Peter prayed with Andre, and he began his new faith as a Christian – giving his heart to God.

Now, if this bothers you, if you think a homeless ministry should just “meet needs” but leave “religion” out of it, take a moment and think about what “needs” of Andre’s have just been met. His real needs weren’t food and shelter. Yes, he needed those. But he was getting them already, one way or another. And he could have gone on for years getting those, but never living. Still just existing.

What he really needed was something no one else had given him – acceptance. Relationship. Friendship. Brotherhood. He needed someone who cared about more than filling his stomach or giving him a shelter that meant nothing to him. The reason Andre’s life changed on this Wednesday night is because a group of people made a commitment to befriend him. They cracked through the hard exterior he had put around his life since his fiancé’s death.

Food and shelter can’t accomplish that. Only love can.

And because of the love Andre received, his life changed. Fast.

Andre’s First Steps to Victory

Within just three days, he felt his heart and longing for other people growing exponentially. He looked around at the other homeless

people, still alone, depressed, addicted, and hopeless. Just like he had been on Monday and Tuesday this same week.

He could barely believe what he was feeling, but deep down, he cared. And he wanted to help them. On Thursday, one day after his transformative experience, he met another homeless man living in a box and prayed for him silently. This was his first act of selflessness in as long as he could remember. And it felt good.

He began meeting one on one with Peter, who started walking with him through his grief and other struggles. Babysteps calls this process ‘discipleship.’ It’s not always one on one, but the essential element – the reason it produces **lifelong freedom from the streets for homeless people** – is because it’s a commitment. It is not just a short hello and then we feed the next guy. It’s a real friendship that’s going somewhere.

Andre also kept attending the group meetings. It was here that he learned something that would define his outlook on human life – not just his, but everyone’s. They called it Vision, Valley, Victory.

Vision is what we want to be. What we can do with our lives. You might call this purpose, destiny, dream, hope, or something else. But whatever it is, you must grab hold of it and not lose sight of it when life gets hard. Andre realized he had lost whatever vision he may have once had.

Valley is the lowest point in your life. And Victory is just what it sounds like – the time of life when you become your vision.

Now, the order matters. Very often a person gets a vision for their life. A career goal. A family goal. Something they want to accomplish or excel in. But then, life turns against you. Your vision starts to seem unrealistic and foolish. You’ll never accomplish it. Misery comes, or just plain life takes over. Some people get lost in entertainment, or social media, or boredom, or addictions during these times. For Andre, this was his time on the streets. When he heard this, he knew – “I’m in my valley.”

And last comes victory. What Andre realized in this moment was, if

I'm in my valley, then my victory is right around the corner. And for him, his vision for his life was to help other people living on the streets.

The Homeless Man Becomes an Influencer and Life-Changer

Andre still had no money, and he had no phone. The ministry gave him a phone and paid the bill. They did this so they could stay in touch with him. Not just to give him a phone. They also wanted him to reach out to other homeless people, and the phone would help with that too. It was a free gift, but it came with a purpose.

Suddenly, Andre found himself with a phone, a purpose, and a big heart for other people.

Even though he had nothing, he started serving and helping other people on the streets. He would take people to lunch at Denny's and Subway and other low-cost restaurants. He got to know their stories, just as Peter and the others had done for him. Babysteps helped pay the bills for these lunches.

On Fridays and Saturdays, right outside in Pioneer Square, Andre would cut people's hair. With homelessness, these are things we just don't think about. We think about food, shelter, and maybe hygiene and finding a bathroom – a constant struggle. But people need haircuts too.

Andre cut hair for hundreds of people over the next few years.

Andre began working with other homeless ministries too. He'd go around the whole city looking for people to mentor and disciple. He'd help connect them with services if they were ready for it. He helped people write letters and make phone calls to relatives. He'd go with them to the hospital.

Andre estimates he made a significant impact on the lives of at least 300 homeless people. And many of them are no longer homeless.



He became known among the homeless community, and even got a nickname. They call him 'Arkansas.' You can still find some people today who know that name.

One of Andre's best friends came out of this time, another homeless man named Bill. Bill actually got up in front of a whole church and told his story. Andre was floored. Later, Bill told Andre he didn't want to be homeless anymore.

That's the decision every homeless person needs to make. It's what prevents most of them from escaping the streets. Deep down, if they get really honest, they don't want to do what they know it will take to change their lives. It's too hard. Just like Andre before he met Peter. Any thought of doing anything to change his life was instantly dismissed. It's not a lack of skill. It's a lack of will.

So Bill's stated desire to get off the streets caught Andre's attention. They became inseparable friends. They went everywhere together.

Bill's story is an example of why the ministry eventually changed its name to Babysteps. One day, Bill decided he needed to get his monthly disability benefits. But he needed someone to go with him. Why?

This simple act is a terrific example of why housing isn't the first step for many homeless people. Think of it this way:

Which is easier? To care for a whole apartment of your own, or to go to a building and start your monthly benefits?

It's obvious. Caring for an apartment requires a ton of work. Getting an application filled out. Having ID. Paying the deposit. Cleaning. Paying rent. Buying food. Cleaning again. Locking up. Keeping track of your key. Respecting your neighbors. Doing laundry. And cleaning again.

And that's a short list. Think about that, and then think about Bill.



Bill needed help going to a building and signing up to receive *free money* from the government. Too often we simply over-estimate the readiness of many homeless people to escape the streets, and have success doing so.

Eventually, Bill made it off the streets, as did Andre. For Andre, he lived homeless for another six months after first encountering the Babysteps team. Six months is quite a long time. But he was growing in all the other ways that would enable him to get off the streets permanently, as he still is to this day.

And Bill's first step – his 'baby' step – was to go start his benefits. Why? Because that's income. You need income to pay a deposit. And to get benefits means you need ID. Lots of homeless people don't have ID. Without ID you can't do anything. So for Bill to get his benefits meant he needed ID if he didn't already have it.

Just as important, Andre went with him, but he didn't do it for him. **Bill did the work.** But he had someone there to help. Entering a strange building with nicely dressed people can be quite intimidating if you've been living on the streets. Again – do we think about these kinds of details when we just blare out slogans like "housing first"?

Leading Dozens More People Off the Streets

This personal, step-by-step approach became Andre's calling card, and he used it with every homeless person who would let him. Later, he started his own small Bible group. His attendees? Seven *chronically* homeless people. Unlike him, these people had been on the streets for years.

But he didn't just do Bible study. He also did basic life skills worksheets and videos on things like budgeting, maintaining your living space, and accessing support services. In other words – baby steps. Andre knew that what homeless people need first isn't a home, as backwards as that sounds.

They first need to know someone cares, just like Peter and the others cared for him. That right there is why many people stay homeless. Because no one cares. And they know that no one cares. Think about living every day with that phrase beating into your mind: "No one cares about me." That's life for many people who are homeless.

But Andre cared.

Helping these seven guys was very different than even his own story. It took a lot more work and a lot more time to build the relationships. But they kept showing up. So Andre kept working with them.



After the usual Saturday Babysteps meal, he'd invite them and others to the grass for a second meal with sodas and snacks. The key was – to get the food, you had to sit on the blankets. So while the other homeless people sat there, Andre would teach them and pray for them.

Did you catch that? This guy who didn't speak to anyone for months was now teaching and praying and building deep friendships with seven homeless men.

And many months later, most of these seven chronically homeless men were either off the streets, or had taken some big steps in that direction. It's the chronically homeless who are the hardest to help, because they're the farthest behind and in the deepest discouragement. It's very hard for them to believe life can change.

So for Andre to have the success he had with seven of them is astonishing. To us, but not to him. Because he lived among them, and knew where they had come from.

What marked Andre's life now was big faith. He believed anyone – no matter how down and out – could take the steps necessary to escape the streets and restart their lives. Homelessness is like being in suspended animation – stuck in time with nowhere to go. But as Andre puts it, "You might fall, but God will pick you back up."

A Test of Character – A New Response to Pain

Andre now considered Peter and the others his brothers and sisters. They respected him, and he didn't want to let them down. They also had fun together. Andre had never felt so relaxed with other people.

On one such fun outing, something happened that crystallized for him how much he had changed in the last few months. Peter and the others took him to baseball's opening night, the Mariners against the A's.

There was a female security guard at the gate. She questioned Andre – "What are you doing with these guys?" Today, he thinks probably it seemed strange to her, this tall black man with all these young Asians. Something about it led her to make this comment. And it's hard to say if she was implying he shouldn't be allowed in the game, or what. We can't really know what was in her mind at the time.

But Andre felt anger inside. He was being singled out.

Had this happened any time before this in his life, he would have reacted in like manner. Chew her out and let her have it, then walk off and miss out on the game.

But today, Andre quieted his spirit, said a brief prayer of forgiveness to himself, and let it go.

Is that a small thing?

Sure it is. But the difference between a great life and a destroyed life is nothing more than a series of small decisions, made for good or ill.

Way back at the beginning, Andre made a small decision to withdraw from life because of the loss of his fiancé. It was one decision. He could have made many other choices in that moment. But the one he made sent him spiraling down to the bottom of the world.

But by this day at the ballpark, he had made so many good small choices, and the result of those decisions was made clear to him in this moment. The security guard dissed him, but he just let it go. Small moment. BIG revelation.

New Home, More Impact

During these six months of still being on the street but helping other homeless people through Babysteps, Andre still had hard times. Life wasn't all instantly better. He still mourned his fiancé. And he still battled alcohol and drugs for a time. He also missed his kids back in Arkansas.

But he was living again. He was serving people. He was growing.

And he even met a woman who would become his wife – she was a volunteer at Babysteps at the time. She lived in North Bend, so Andre moved there after marrying her.

He brought his brand of homeless ministry to their church after learning they had several young homeless people attending. They also had a women's shelter, and there he got his first paying job since coming to Seattle.

Some people would come to his meetings still drunk or high, but he wasn't put off by that since he knew what was behind it. He just worked with them. And many of these young homeless people – some in their teens, ended up leaving the streets and going back to their families after working with Andre.

Life After Homelessness – Up and Down

Andre's story is still being written. Things didn't continue like this forever. Eventually, he moved to Florida, which turned out to not be a good thing.

He had hoped to start another Babysteps-style outreach there. But the vibe just wasn't the same. Not sure what's up with Florida, but Andre just couldn't connect there like he had in Seattle. They didn't seem to respond to the opportunity to start a community of friends who help each other. Plus, during this time, he separated from his wife, which was a big disappointment.

Today, he lives in Arkansas again, and got to see his sons graduate high school.

He's also battled his own cancer diagnosis, but things are looking positive as he's recently completed his treatment.

His time at Babysteps and the life-changes he was able to bring about for so many people still beats in Andre's heart. One day, he hopes to get the chance to help more people escape the streets. And no matter how hard life gets, Andre has learned a few things that he holds close.

Andre's Life Message, for You

The secret to living a life of Vision and Victory is to get through your Valley without letting it entangle you with crippling emotions and bad decisions. And to get through your Valley, you need just two things.

First, you need communication skills. This is number one. Andre's experience with the security guard is an example of this. She misspoke and offended him. Good communication in that moment was to say nothing and let it go. In his many small groups, good communication means listening, overlooking offense, and not being afraid, among many other things.

Second, you need love and companionship. The brothers and sisters Andre met through Babysteps were his cheerleaders. They supported him, and it made all the difference. No one can do this alone. You simply can't. Homeless people just represent the extreme end-game of what isolation breeds. But no one will accomplish their Vision for life if they try to do it all alone.

With good communication skills and quality people around you who care about you, no valley is too harsh to keep you from fulfilling your vision for life. The way Andre sums this up is with this simple but profound truth he's learned through his experience. "I know how good God is."

He will never return to the dark days of his past, because he doesn't see life the way he saw it before. Internal change – mind and heart – produces external change. That's the right order, and that's how Babysteps still works with people who are homeless today.



What Does Andre's Story Mean to You?

We'd love to hear your reaction to Andre's story. [Visit this web page](#) and leave a comment, and we'll publish it!

Then, if you've been inspired and moved by what Andre's been through and the impact he's had on the lives of so many, maybe now's the time in your life to get involved in some way. Here are a few ways:

1) Come out and talk to homeless people!

Babysteps is local to Seattle at the moment. If you're in this area, we visit Pioneer Square on select Saturdays.

[Visit our Meal Events page](#) to learn more and try it out.

2) Become a Babysteps volunteer

Ready to commit to changing the life of a homeless person? Just one man, Andre, ended up touching the lives of 300 other people. Your impact on the homeless can multiply in big ways you can't imagine if you make a commitment to come out regularly.

As a volunteer, your first step is to attend our Volunteer Training, which we do every few months. There are other ways to volunteer as well if you don't feel talking to the homeless is the right place for you. We need help buying and preparing food, and several other off-site tasks. Come to a free training, and see what you can do!

[Sign up for the next volunteer training.](#)

3) Give to Babysteps

We don't need a ton of money to do what we do. But we do need some – to cover the monthly food costs and to support the volunteers who go out week after week so they will have success.

You can give monthly, and a great start is to join the Babysteps Plan, which increases incrementally every few months until it reaches \$12 per month.

[Go here to give monthly or sign up for the Babysteps plan!](#)

Finally, tell someone else about Andre!

Go to social media, and [share this link](#) to Andre's story with all your friends so they can get it for themselves. Thank you, and we at Babysteps hope Andre's story made a difference in your life.