

MASONIC OUTREACH SERVICES

Next of Kin

On his 83rd birthday, William* woke up in a warm bed and a clean apartment. It was the first birthday in 10 years that either of these things was true. He had been living in his car for the past decade.

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The moment when a situation shifts from temporary to untenable is hard to pinpoint, and harder to predict. William had been hit hard financially years earlier, and found himself struggling to pay rent. He decided to stay in his car for awhile to save up money. Eventually, he had a routine worked out: survive on his Social Security check, shower and do laundry at the YMCA, sleep in the car. To pass the time, he listened to sports radio and went for long walks. He cleared out the area behind the driver's seat so he could recline back at night to sleep. He drove from place to place to place. He did this all through his 70s, and into his 80s. It was a lonely existence, but at some point, he just accepted it.

William has no children, and his few remaining relatives are on the East coast. His friends are scattered between California, Nevada, and New York. He has a lifetime membership in two Masonic lodges, and will stop by one or the other to visit every few years. He is a proud veteran, a gregarious guy, and an animated story-teller. Jokes come easy to him. But, like so many others of the Greatest Generation, asking for help does not. He never let on about his living situation. He never complained, and no one guessed what was going on.

Last summer, a good Samaritan found William unconscious in his car, parked in a deserted lot. The police brought him to

**The member's name has been changed to protect his privacy.*



the hospital, and the doctors began treating him for malnutrition. When the hospital called the number listed as his next of kin, John Kirchner picked up the phone at San Diego Lodge No. 35.

“He’d put the lodge as his next of kin, which was very wise of him,” says Kirchner. “He needed somebody to look out for him.” Kirchner has a New York accent and the direct, no-nonsense approach of a retired naval officer. After 23 years of living on submarines, he gravitated to Masonry’s spirit of brotherhood. Almost immediately upon joining San Diego Lodge, he volunteered to lead its outreach program. When he answered the call from the hospital, he had never met William. Soon, he’d get to work negotiating his health bills, retrieving his car from the impoundment lot, and cleaning out the years of papers and grime that had amassed inside it. But first, he knew he needed back-up.

Masonic Outreach Services (MOS) is one of several types of fraternal support services delivered by Masonic Assistance, all funded by the donations of California Masons. MOS staff are trained to advocate, provide case management, and in many cases deliver financial aid to Masons and their families. They have the contacts and the know-how to connect vulnerable fraternal family with the support they need. But they also rely on lodges to connect them with those fraternal family members that are in need first. In recent years, Southern California’s Division IX has emerged as a new model for the lodge-MOS partnership. Its brothers are trained in outreach by MOS, and have developed a communication network between staff and every lodge in the division.

With one call, Kirchner activated that network. MOS immediately assigned a case manager, James Jackson, and provided

interim financial support while they sorted out which state benefits might be available. While Jackson tackled the Medi-Cal and state aid applications, Kirchner found William a walker and gathered furniture. The two men went together to pick up William from the hospital, and drove him around to select his new home. William ultimately chose a senior facility in Escondido, about 35 miles north of San Diego. Jackson contacted Consuelo Lodge No. 325 in Escondido to help keep an eye on William. Mike Sherman and Mike Singer—Kirchner refers to them as “Mike and Mike”—jumped right in.

The first time they met William, it was in his new efficiency apartment, sitting around a table piled high with medical paperwork and bills. It took several visits, but William grew to trust them. They drove him to Walmart to buy clean tee shirts and shampoo. They dropped by to see how

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he was settling in. Eventually, he started opening up, telling them stories of growing up and serving in the National Guard. With guidance from MOS, they worked through the table of paperwork, sorting out his bills and various aid applications.

As Singer puts it, “The most important thing we did was befriend him. We made him feel comfortable. You think about your parents or aunt or uncle, anyone that you love, and how you hope there’s somebody out there who’s trustworthy; who can take care of them if you’re not able to.”

Today William is eating three square meals a day, and putting on weight. (“Look at my stomach!” he recently boasted to Singer.) He is receiving the medical care he needs. Often, when Singer stops by to check on him, he’ll find William sharing a table with neighbors in the dining room, trading jokes and telling stories. When that happens, Singer leaves quietly; William doesn’t need him that day.

Over the past few years, in particular since the District IX outreach initiative began, both San Diego Lodge and

Consuelo Lodge have helped a growing number of fraternal family members in need.

“Sometimes, in the beginning, it’s heartbreaking,” says Mike Sherman. “You hold back tears until you leave their side.” But with the help of MOS, there is a path out of heartbreak. Sherman calls MOS “one of the greatest resources that we have to assist a fallen brother or a widow,” one that brings home what Freemasonry is all about.

“Nobody can really fathom how William was able to survive living out of his car for 10 years,” Sherman says. “He went from a four-door Honda Civic to an efficiency apartment. He now has a stove and a refrigerator. He has a table, a recliner, a bathroom, a bed.”

“It kind of grabs your heart—that you’re able to reach out and help a member like this,” he says. “You’re a mentor, you’re a counselor, you end up being a best friend. But above all, you’re a brother.”