

Good News Church GA
An Interview with Kevin Mandel
“Hiding, Homeless, and Hopeful”
by Drue Warner
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This is a transcript interview with Kevin Mandel, a volunteer we met at Good News At Noon, who went from having a 35 year career in banking rising to the level of executive vice-president for a large bank in downtown Chicago to homeless and without hope to rescued and hopeful. It’s an amazing story!

What would you say is your “3 Word Testimony?”

1. Hiding (through drugs and alcohol)
2. Homeless (6 months on the streets of Atlanta)
3. Hopeful (found in Christ through Good News Shelter, Jeff Bagwell, and Phoenix Community of Atlanta)

Drue shared about Kevin’s upbringing and family life.

Kevin grew up on the southside of Chicago (very tough neighborhood) in a very large, Polish, alcoholic family. Kevin had 3 older sisters. They all struggled with alcohol, and they all married alcoholics. Everyone in Kevin’s family has died of alcoholism or because of alcohol-related illnesses.

Kevin’s parents were divorced when he was one-year old, and he didn’t have a relationship with his dad. Kevin’s dad was an alcoholic and died at the age of 46. Kevin did not have any male role models. Because his mom was a single mom, his house was always the party house. Alcohol was central to their lives and that seemed normal because it’s the way that everyone in Kevin’s family was.

Kevin’s mom died in July of 2015 at the age of 92 years old. She was the glue that held their family and relationships together. After she died, everything came a part, and Kevin hasn’t talked with his sisters since his mom died. Kevin graduated high school and then started college. He was only able to go one year, because he needed to help his mom around the house.

The thing that attracted Kevin to his first wife was that she could drink and drug as much as he could. They partied and had a great time, but when they tried to

start a family and Kevin's wife was told that it was because she was infertile, it devastated her. She spiraled down into a new low of drug and alcohol abuse. On December 10, 1995, she got her third DUI. Kevin called her father and said, *"That's it. I'm not bailing her out of jail. I'm done."* Kevin filed for divorce. Several years later, he found out that she tragically over-dosed on drugs.

Kevin almost died 3 times from alcohol poisoning, so he also decided to go to AA. That's when his road to a relationship with Jesus Christ began. That was also the last day that Kevin had a drink, and he's been sober now for 28 years. Kevin says that his sobriety date is more important than his born-again date, because without the first date, the second date wouldn't be a possibility.

Kevin met his second wife in recovery. He didn't have any kids but she did. He said he went from having no kids to instantly having 5 kids. Kevin's mom had a career in banking (in the Accounting dept.), and she was able to help Kevin get his first job as a bank teller and worked his way up all the way up to an executive vice-president.

Things seemed to be going great, so how did things start to go south for you?

In 2008, the market crash and recession hit everyone, and especially banks, hard. After 4 years of layoffs, time ran out. I was a high level, highly compensated bank vice-president, and on February 8, 2012 (age 55), I lost my job of 35 years.

From there, life started to unravel. My wife and I were able to live off savings and my 401K for 5 years, but when the money ran out, she took the four children and left. Then, after not being able to pay the mortgage, the bank foreclosed and took the house and every bit of furniture, except for the recliner, because that was my bed.

Drue summarized Kevin's gradual descent into homelessness

This began a 10 year journey into homelessness and despair. One of the persons who was living in Kevin's house, had a mother who lived in Rabun Gap, so they moved from Chicago to Georgia, to: a) have housing b) to live with her boyfriend and two kids, and c) to take care of her mom.

After moving down and living in Rabun Gap for a brief period, Kevin was accused of stealing his friend's mother's prescription drugs, so the sister and her boyfriend

drove Kevin to downtown Atlanta and left him at the Gateway Center homeless shelter. That was short lived (only a few hours) because they had 9 beds for 200 people. They gave out raffle tickets and called numbers. His wasn't called, so he took off and looked for shelter elsewhere.

After being dropped off at the Gateway Center and finding no housing available, Kevin tried everything to find shelter and have some sense of normalcy. He went to Grady Hospital and took advantage of their free Avida counseling service. Mostly, it just gave him something to do during the day. Kevin found a shelter (or maybe it was a church) that served breakfast and lunch. They had lunch for people without an I.D. (that was Kevin). It wasn't very good at all, but it was something and he was grateful. They also had meals for people with an I.D. Their lunch was a lot better!

What was it like being homeless?

I used to sleep on the side of a Dunkin' Donuts. Me and the other homeless guys would get there at around 6:30pm. We all knew each other and helped protect one another. Multiple guys had been in prison. One served time for armed robbery, and another was a convicted pedophile. On the streets, it didn't much matter. We all just looked out for each other, and I was grateful to have anyone who would help me survive.

The looks that people gave me were unforgettable. In addition to making me feel completely worthless, people would turn and look the other way, completely ignore me, and make horrible comments about my situation.

I experienced a lot of difficult feelings including shame, embarrassment, rejection, no respect, condemnation. People viewed me as dirty and filthy. It was especially embarrassing when I'd get denied to use the bathroom at McDonald's (or any other similar place) and people would just look and stare.

Dumpster diving was a part of the homeless experiencing. So was going to the bathroom outside. In so many ways, toilet paper was a premium! It was also like striking gold if and when you'd find a refrigerator box. You could cut that up and it was the equivalent of 3 blankets.

Drue summarized how Kevin found Good News Shelter

After 6 months of homelessness in downtown Atlanta, Kevin was hospitalized with pneumonia. The friends, who had originally kicked him out of their house in Rabun Gap, heard about his situation and felt sorry for him. So, they came to the hospital and brought him back to their house for a second opportunity at housing, but that came crashing down when the landlord discovered he was living there and forced him out.

Now, Kevin was at a loss. He didn't know what to do. He started searching the internet online and found Good News Shelter. So, he went to the shelter, was assessed, and started living at (and was being transformed by the power of the Gospel) at Good News Shelter.

After 5 years of pulling a suitcase with everything he owned in it, Kevin's homeless journey was now over. Now, it was about recovery and transformation.

Do you remember how you met Jeff Bagwell (Pastor, Phoenix Church)?

I remember when Jeff Bagwell came in on a Sunday morning and offered to take anyone to church who wanted to go. That was the beginning of a new start. At first, it was me and 3 other guys. Then, it was me and 2 other guys. Then, it was just me going with Kevin to church.

What was different about Jeff and your experience with him?

Phoenix and Jeff spent a lot of money, put him up in a hotel for several weeks, invested relationally, felt loved, showed love, and kept coming back. I lost my wallet and I.D., and without I.D., I wouldn't be able to access any kind of government assistance. Jeff worked tirelessly to help me get replacement I.D.'s. That was an amazing experience! In reflecting back on this past year or two, it's easy to say that, *"Jeff, the Phoenix Community of Atlanta church family, and the Good News Shelter saved my life. I don't care what anybody says, Phoenix is the best damn church out there!"*

What made the difference between Jeff and others I had encountered along my path is one thing... KINDNESS. 3 examples include:

- Kindness - Jeff showed up every Sunday and took me to church
- Kindness - going to church and having complete strangers come up and talk
- Kindness - just sitting down (at Jeff's church), listening, and letting me talk

So Jeff, what was your experience in walking with Kevin through this?

Kevin needed hope that he could get off the streets and have a home again. He had to learn to trust not only God but us. He was worried about being abandoned through the process or that we wouldn't finish it with him. He also needed to seek forgiveness in a couple of broken relationships which he was able to do. Once his basic needs were covered then he began to get involved in our church confidently believing God had a purpose for him and can use him. It's been fun to watch him go through the discipleship process and now looking to disciple others.

Where are you living now? What's that like?

I've been through the Good News Shelter rehabilitation program, and I now have full-time, stable housing. The crazy thing is that I live with all these young 30-something missionary kids with "Adventures in Missions." They drive me crazy sometimes, but they're great kids and I love be there!

What was it like going back to Good News Shelter as a volunteer?

The first time I went back to Good News Shelter to serve, I was "nervous as hell!" I had spent so much time being served that I was not nervous about being the one serving. I didn't like it. I especially didn't like being on the floor serving the plates of food to the homeless. I said, *"I don't go out there to prepare the plates b/c there are still people out there that they serve who are still homeless. Plus, there can be a lot of animosity among those being served. So, I just prefer to serve and stay closed up in the kitchen dishing out the food. It's less traumatic."*

How did you come to know the hope of Christ?

Well, I'm a recovering Catholic. I could tell you some stories about the Nuns in school! I was naturally left-handed, but the Nuns would beat my left had all the time saying that my being left-handed was of the devil. Anyway, that's just an example of some of what I experienced in Catholic Boarding School. It was rough and did a lot of damage to my view of religion.

I came to faith in Christ because my cousin invited me to go to church. She had been inviting me for 3 years until finally I went with her, and it was great! A lot different than what I was used to.

What has had the greatest impact on growing in your faith?

Probably the greatest impact on my faith was that I started reading the Bible. I bought my first Bible and read through the whole thing. I felt like I was missing something. So, I bought five more Bibles and read through all of them. I still felt like something was missing, so I asked a friend and he said, *“Nothing is missing! The whole thing is about Jesus, from cover to cover!”* That’s when I got it!

Reading the Bible really changed everything for me. From that point (and really over these past couple of years, I have been in lots of Bible study groups. I’ve also met with a friend via Zoom and we’ve done over 200 Bible App Daily Devotional plans together online. I realized that I’ve done 1,824 consecutive days of reading my Bible. Wow! That’s hard to believe (especially compared to where I was less than one year ago).

In the course of this past year, I’ve gone from being without a home and without hope to being with a home and with hope.