


'I'm afraid to leave. I'm afraid to fail': Homeless for 6 years, Darlene wants to get off the streets ... or does she?

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Jessica Boehm, Arizona Republic

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Sunlight faded on Madison Street as hundreds of people emerged from tents and other makeshift living quarters assembled on the side of the road.



The state Capitol and downtown Phoenix are visible from this stretch of Madison Street, but the prosperity of the central city does not reach here.

More than 300 tents line both sides of the street between Ninth and 15th avenues. Half-eaten sandwiches and other spoiled food litters the sidewalks, as does human waste.

Dozens of dogs rifle around, seeking the best of the discarded food. People on bikes roam the street, making it almost impossible for cars to pass.

Some call it "the zone." Others call it "tent city." About 400 people call it home every night.

It's an area ripe with despair and hopelessness. But this night, there's a hint of excitement in the air.

"It's spaghetti night. That's everyone's favorite," said Enrique, one of the area's homeless residents.

The residents make their nightly pilgrimage to Andre House, where they are served dinner six nights a week. The doors to the building weren't yet open, but already more than 100 people filled the parking lot to wait.

Among them is a middle-aged woman, her blonde hair pulled into a bun. She's wearing a gray hoodie, a lavender undershirt that matches her glasses peeking out from underneath.

Her name is Darlene, or Mama D or just Mama.

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Darlene Carchedi, known as Mama D, bikes to the Andre House in Phoenix for dinner on Feb. 26, 2020.

Eli Imadali/The Republic

Mama D, living with her fists up

Darlene Carchedi lives in a tent and, most of the time, she's happy there.

Her living quarters don't match her personality or her appearance, which makes her a source of intrigue to her homeless peers and service providers.

Darlene likes designer clothes and fancy skin care products. She keeps herself and her belongings tidy. She's well-spoken and well-read.

When she arrived at the Human Services Campus with her husband six years ago, she panicked. She'd never seen a homeless shelter, except for the ones she used to volunteer at in Chicago, she said.

When they were evicted from their Mesa home, Darlene's husband begged her to go camping — just live in the woods until they figured out what to do. But Darlene refused.

"I said, 'There's got to be some place that can get us into some kind of housing,'" Darlene said.

If there was, Darlene and her husband never found it.

Darlene has since morphed into Mama D — a tougher, feistier version of Darlene — and six years later, she feels more comfortable here, on the street, than she does in the "real world."

She's become the resident peacekeeper and protector of the sometimes unruly bunch who live in the encampment just south of downtown Phoenix.

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Darlene Carchedi makes a lint roller out of duct tape outside her tent in downtown Phoenix on Jan. 3, 2020. She says that when officials...

Eli Imadali/The Republic

She won't throw the first punch but will finish any fight on the streets. She'll stand up to police officers if she feels they're being unfair, even if it means a night in jail. She always carries a knife and offers her protection to homeless newcomers.

She had to adapt — to become Mama D — to survive on the streets. But the longer she's here, the harder it is to go back to just Darlene, and leave behind the new purpose and family she's found on the streets.

"Just like you transition to become homeless, you have to transition back. And I mean, they're both traumatic, major life changes — that's major trauma," Darlene said.

2020 was the worst year for many Americans, but for Darlene, it was just another year she spent living with her fists up on the streets.

A year that may not be the last she spends here.



"You feel that total loss, trauma, every single time," says Darlene Carchedi (seen on Jan. 3, 2020) of the homeless encampment cleanups where officials throw people's things out. Eli Imadali/The Republic

Jan. 14, 2020: Spaghetti night

Hundreds of people in mismatched coats and sweaters funneled into the Andre House parking lot, waiting for the dining hall to open.

Darlene was one of the few people who didn't seem excited about spaghetti night. Instead she sat at the entryway to the lot, her lips pursed and eyebrows furrowed, as if she was trying to stop herself from crying.

She had both her arms wrapped around the neck of a young man.

"Aidan is leaving," Darlene blurted out.

Aidan was one of the staff members at Andre House. The staff is mainly made up of recent college graduates who spend one year at Andre House as a Catholic service mission. Aidan's year was up and Darlene's eyes welled with tears as she hugged him again and again.

"Another one of my kids is flying the coop," Darlene said. "Right now I just want to bawl my eyes out."

She has a biological family — sisters, a brother, a son and two grandchildren — but they don't live in Arizona. Here, while she's living on the streets, she considers the Andre House staff her family.

It's clear they have a similar affection for her. Darlene volunteers with the staff to sort through the donations people bring down to the organization. Then they let her have first pick of the donated items.

It's how she got the Under Armour shoes she's wearing.

When the dining hall opens, she gives Aidan one last hug and promises to see him one more time before he leaves.

As she makes her way into the building, she greets others experiencing homelessness, staff members and the volunteers plating meals, almost as if she works at Andre House and isn't one of the recipients of the organization's hospitality.

Darlene takes her tray, filled with spaghetti, salad, bread and butter, orange slices and yellow pudding, to the middle of one of the long tables that fill the Andre House dining room.

"My biggest fear in life was becoming homeless," she said, between bites of spaghetti.

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An Andre House employee jokes with Darlene Carchedi after dinner at the ministry on Jan. 14, 2020, in Phoenix.

Eli Imadali/The Republic

Darlene says she grew up on the south side of Chicago and joined a gang by the time she was 10. She witnessed and perpetrated horrific violence, she said.

Much of Darlene's past could not be confirmed by The Arizona Republic, but she says she has a college degree and worked in finance for multiple construction companies in Chicago. She moved to Arizona in 2004.

Darlene said she had \$281,000 in the bank before a scuffle with the Mesa Police Department left her injured in 2012.

According to a police report, Darlene went back to an ex-boyfriend's house after he had gotten an order of protection against her. When Mesa police arrived, Darlene was screaming profanities and refused to get on the ground when asked. An officer deployed a stun gun four times. When the officer forced her into his vehicle, Darlene kicked him.

She was charged with aggravated assault of a police officer, resisting arrest and failure to comply with a court order.

Darlene said she was still living with her ex-boyfriend at the time and that he punched holes in her bedroom wall, which escalated the disagreement. She was surprised when the police arrived and they quickly began shooting her with a stun gun, she says. She says she had 27 burn marks on her body from the stun gun and had a stroke.

Her injuries left her unable to work or do much of anything for months, Darlene said.

While she was recovering, she fell in love and quickly remarried. Her new husband took care of her finances, Darlene said.

She said he surprised her with expensive gifts and lavish vacations, not realizing that he was spending her money. Eventually, her savings ran out and they were evicted from their Mesa apartment.

She was upset but couldn't be angry, and she couldn't stop loving him, she said.

"It was the best four years of my life. I would not have gone on all those vacations if I knew it was my money. I'm a penny pincher," Darlene said.

They spent the last few dollars they had on bus fare to make it to the Human Services Campus, Darlene said.

They sometimes stayed inside the shelter, but they preferred sleeping outside because they had to go to separate women's and men's facilities at the Human Services Campus.

They spent about six months living on the streets before her husband disappeared, Darlene said. She believes he was kidnapped and robbed because people knew he had a check for a workers' compensation claim coming soon.

Darlene's husband could not be reached to confirm her story.

"Can I borrow the Parmesan?" a woman interrupts.

Darlene is popular at the dinner table because she has a large bottle of grated Parmesan cheese.

"Gotta do something with food stamps," Darlene said.

In her bag, she has an assortment of other condiments she bought with her SNAP benefits to liven up the monotonous meals. She's happy to share with the woman and several others who come up to her during dinner.



Darlene Carchedi gets emotional as she talks to a woman who promised Darlene a housing opportunity on Jan. 3, 2020.

Eli Imadali/The Republic

A week earlier, a woman who used to be homeless told Darlene she had a spare room in her house that she'd let Darlene stay in if she wanted.

After five years of living in a tent, she could have her own room in a house with a roof and a heater.

But today, a week after the offer, Darlene glosses over questions about the house.

Darlene said the woman was supposed to come to dinner last week to work out details of her moving in, but she didn't. She didn't seem bothered by it.

After dinner, Darlene washes her hair and face in the large sink outside Andre House, using an old Circle K Polar Pop cup to pour water over her greasy hair.

She pulls bottles of shampoo, conditioner, face wash and perfume out of her zebra-print roller bag and asks an Andre House staffer to get her a toothbrush.

"When I get a place, I'm just going to soak and get all of the dirt out of my skin," she said as she lathered her cheeks with face wash.

She ends with an anti-aging cream the she got from a donation bin. She looked it up and it was worth \$40.

"Without your skin and your health, you've got nothing," Darlene said.

One of the Andre House staffers, Taylor Hoffler, sighed as she watched Darlene's nightly bathing ritual.

"I hate when she does that. It makes me so sad," she said.

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Darlene Carchedi washes up outside the Andre House in Phoenix on Jan. 14, 2020. The agency's sink is her go-to place to clean up after showers are closed.
Eli Imadali/The Republic

Jan. 21, 2020: 'It hurts, everywhere'

Seven days after spaghetti night.

It's a cold, dreary Tuesday after Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The tents on Madison are sopping wet from the rainstorm the night before. An elderly man stands on the corner of Madison Street and 13th Avenue, coughing.

Darlene's tent is drenched but still standing. She doesn't respond to her name at first. Then there's a moan.

"I'm sick, I have a fever," Darlene mumbles from inside her tent.

Eventually she unzips and sticks her head out. Her face is uncharacteristically free of makeup, and her eyes are swollen and tired.

"Everyone's walking around with pneumonia. I hope that's not what I have," she said.

She stayed dry during the rainstorm but her arthritis was acting up because of the weather.

"It hurts, everywhere," she said.

Feb. 4, 2020: Standing her ground

Twenty-one days after spaghetti night.

Darlene sat on a pile of blankets inside the living room section of her tent with her friend Letha Burns.

Around her tent, everyone was hustling to organize their belongings. Phoenix police officers had come through earlier in the day saying all tents and belongings had to be disassembled and moved out of the area by early Wednesday morning for a deep cleaning.

There are always cleanings on Wednesday morning, but usually they just have to disassemble their tents for a few hours. Now the police officers were telling everyone they had to move everything from the area — a quarter-mile trek — which is difficult for many people with disabilities and people like Darlene, who have accumulated enough things to fill a studio apartment.

Darlene wasn't hustling because she didn't plan on moving.

"I'm going to stand my ground. You're going to have to bulldoze me," Darlene said.

That likely would mean at least a ticket, maybe a night in jail, but Darlene is used to that.

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She doesn't have a problem with cleaning — in fact, she wished the police would crack down harder on some people living on the street who don't take care of their areas. She said she feels for the nearby businesses, and she detests garbage and people acting like animals.

But Darlene doesn't think the cleanup is really about cleaning up. She believes it's an intimidation tactic to get them into Central Arizona Shelter Services, which wouldn't work even if there were beds available there, she said.

She started staying in a tent outside of the Human Services Campus about three years ago, after 18 months of sleeping in the dry Salt River Bottom.

She wanted to protest CASS' conditions and thought if she could get enough people staying on the street, the city or county might open some kind of overflow parking lot for them where they could live independently without police bugging them. They used to have one, but the county condemned the old overflow building and parking lot three years ago.

The cleanup was just another one of the countless attempts to scare her into submission, she said.

"The 9th District court ruling says it's inhumane to cite, fine or jail people for being homeless," Darlene said, referencing a district court decision out of Boise, Idaho, from the year before, which says that homeless people can't be punished for sleeping in public spaces if there are not shelter beds for them.

She brings up the case frequently, like a badge of honor that proves her existence is legal.

A man's voice calls out from outside the tent. A few staff members from the Human Services Campus have come to warn everyone about the cleanups. Darlene emerged from her tent, ready to pounce.

"I'm not moving. I'm not moving my stuff. I'm going to stay right here and they're going to have to bulldoze me because all of my stuff is clean. I'm not violating any encroachment on the easement," she said.



Human Services Campus employee Brad Bowley talks to Darlene Carchedi on Feb. 4, 2020, about the upcoming encampment cleanup in Phoenix.

Eli Imadali/The Republic

Brad Bowley tells Darlene he understands, and that he's angry about the cleanups, too.

The city didn't give the Human Services Campus a heads up and the organization was scrambling to try to find a way to help everyone move. Bowley told Darlene that the campus was going to open up its parking lot, directly across the street from Darlene's tent, so they could move their belongings into there to avoid any issues with the police.

He said they'd have people available to help her move her things in the morning and monitor to make sure there was no police harassment. Darlene's eyes started to well.



Darlene Carchedi gets emotional on Feb. 4, 2020, after CASS employees help her with the upcoming encampment cleanup in Phoenix.

Eli Imadali/The Republic

"I love you guys. Can I hug you guys? You're going to make me cry," Darlene said.

She said her relationship with CASS and the Human Services Campus has always been tumultuous. She's never felt supported by the staff on the campus — until now.

"The 9th District court and now (the campus) to take our side, that's huge," Darlene said.
"We're changing the world, kids."

Feb. 27, 2020: Pep talk with Romeo

Forty-four days after spaghetti night.

Darlene lounges on a mat inside the Andre House entryway. Her phone and a speaker are plugged into a mess of extension cords that hang above her makeshift couch.

She's talking to Romeo Lopez. He's young, has an Afro and is threading the shoestrings through his neon green Nikes.

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Darlene Carchedi speaks with friend Romeo Lopez as they charge their phones inside the Andre House on Feb. 27, 2020, in Phoenix.

Eli Imadali/The Republic

"The cleanup is pretty shitty," Darlene said.

Phoenix continued requiring all of the people staying on the street to move every Wednesday, but the campus stopped opening up its parking lots for people to store their belongings during the cleaning.

So Darlene stopped complying.

She said she was the only person who refused to move today. She told the officer he couldn't make her under the 9th District court ruling. He eventually said, "Look, I'm just doing what they tell me to do" and ultimately left her alone.

Romeo asked why people were giving up, but before she could answer, one of the staffers from Andre House calls out: "You have to be out of here in 15 minutes."

"Yes sir," Romeo replies obediently. "It's like jail," he says in a soft voice, his head down.

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After sharing their past traumas and future goals, Darlene Carchedi tells friend Romeo Lopez she's proud of him as they charge their phones at the Andre House in Phoenix on Feb. 27, 2020.

Eli Imadali/The Republic

Romeo and Darlene spend the next 15 minutes and then some sharing their past traumas and future goals.

"I don't live life with regret. You accept the deck you're given — you don't always get five aces, sometime you get five twos," Darlene said.

"I'm throwing that deck away," Romeo replied.

Romeo tells Darlene he grew up in foster care, where he was abused. She tells him he can learn to love again.

"You will have unconditional love — I think everyone deserves it," Darlene says, embodying the role of a therapist, or even a mother.

Romeo smiles coyly and looks at the floor.

"All right, you can be my adopted son," Darlene blurts out. "I'm proud of you, Romeo."

At 4:26 the staffer was back telling Darlene and Romeo to go.

"I told you 15 minutes ago," he says.

Darlene Carchedi, who has been experiencing homelessness in Phoenix for 6 years

I don't live life with regret. You accept the deck you're given — you don't always get five aces, sometime you get five twos.

“

Outside of the Andre House, Darlene uses bungee cords and straps to secure a heaping bag of her most important possessions to her turquoise beach cruiser bicycle, a gift from one of the Andre House employees whose daughter had used it before her death, Darlene said.

"I am a world-class expert on fitting 20 pounds of stuff into a 2-pound bag," she said.

It's at this point she brings up her friend, and the promise of housing from early January.

Darlene said the friend had told her that her boyfriend couldn't come over if she lived with her.

"I don't do control well," Darlene said. "If I have to live under your rules at 53, it isn't going to happen."

There's something else, too. She doesn't think she can leave because she won't be able to help her friends and neighbors who are homeless if she's housed.

She'll lose her title as a self-appointed advocate, and her purpose.

"I can't help and stand for the people here unless I'm going through it," Darlene said.

This was the first time — this year — that Darlene let a housing offer pass by.

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Darlene Carchedi (seen with Romeo Lopez at the Andre House on Feb. 27, 2020) says she doesn't think she can leave the streets because she...

Eli Imadali/The Republic

She quickly changes the subject to a girls-only sleepover party she's planning for some of her friends on the streets.

Everyone comes to her tent in their pajamas and they share beauty products they've collected from donations, gossip and tell jokes like teenagers.

She used to host them once a month but hadn't thrown one in a while. She said the cleanups were stressing everyone out, and she thought a sleepover might help ease the tension.

May 27, 2020: Extreme heat begins

One hundred and thirty-four days after spaghetti night.

Two months after COVID-19 started spreading throughout Arizona at an alarming pace — shutting down schools and libraries and limiting the number of people allowed inside homeless shelters — Madison Street looked different.

Maricopa County opened up two empty parking lots and marked 12-foot-by-12-foot squares on them. The county encouraged people living on Madison Street to move into the lots and stay in their square to promote social distancing. The county offered security in the lots and opened up portable toilets and wash stations for those who chose to stay there.

About 200 people had moved into the lots by the end of May, leaving only about 200 left sleeping in tents on Madison Street.

For those remaining in tents, the weekly Wednesday cleanups continued. And it was a Wednesday.

A massive pile of familiar, but deconstructed, tarps lay in a pile on the opposite side of Madison Street from where Darlene usually sleeps.

"Mama? That's all her stuff," a man said when he heard someone was looking for Darlene.

Darlene was across the street organizing the rest of her belongings to move to the other side of the street so she wouldn't get in trouble for not complying with the cleanups.

"I'm prison famous," she shouted across the street. "They call me the homeless pin-up girl."

A photo of Darlene had been published in *The Republic* a few months earlier, and one of her friends who had just gotten out of prison had told her that some of the men had clipped out her photo and hung it on their walls.

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According to a friend who had just gotten out of prison, this photo of Darlene Carchedi (with friend Letha Burns) taken on Feb. 4, 2020,...

Eli Imadali/*The Republic*

They were mostly excited to see the inside of her tent. She doesn't usually let men inside her tent, she said.

Darlene wasn't in a great mood. She'd had a fight with her boyfriend. During last week's cleanup his tent got thrown away, so he was staying with her. Then he accused her of cheating.

"I'm not going to lower my standards to (sleep) around with the homeless community," Darlene said.

Darlene met her boyfriend before they both became homeless. He had worked for her husband and they reunited after Darlene's husband disappeared and he became homeless, too.

Today, Darlene says she's done. Done with living on the street. Done with the quickly approaching triple-degree temperatures. Done with moving everything she owns every Wednesday.

With the new county lots open, she feels she can leave knowing there's a place for people to live independently, outside of shelter, without police harassment.

"That's what I've been fighting for," Darlene said.

The lots are a temporary measure to accommodate COVID-19 social distancing requirements. But Darlene believes her advocacy for the past three years played a role.

She hasn't moved in herself, though. She wanted to make sure those left sleeping on the streets had an advocate and she's worried that the lot is fenced in and patrolled by security guards.

She doesn't "do control well," she said, and the security guards are on a power trip — "Their balls have swelled," as she puts it.

She also hates change.

It's only May, but the sweltering summer weather already was beating down on Madison Street. Darlene said she has to do all of her cleaning and other chores at night because it's the only time it's tolerable.

She was only asleep for two hours when the police and cleanup crews woke her this morning.

"Darlene, get up, we have cleanup," they said over the loudspeaker in a taunting sing-songy voice, Darlene said.

"I'm ready to go," she said.

It was the first time in 2020 that Darlene sounded serious about getting off the streets.

June 30, 2020: A plan to move to Oregon

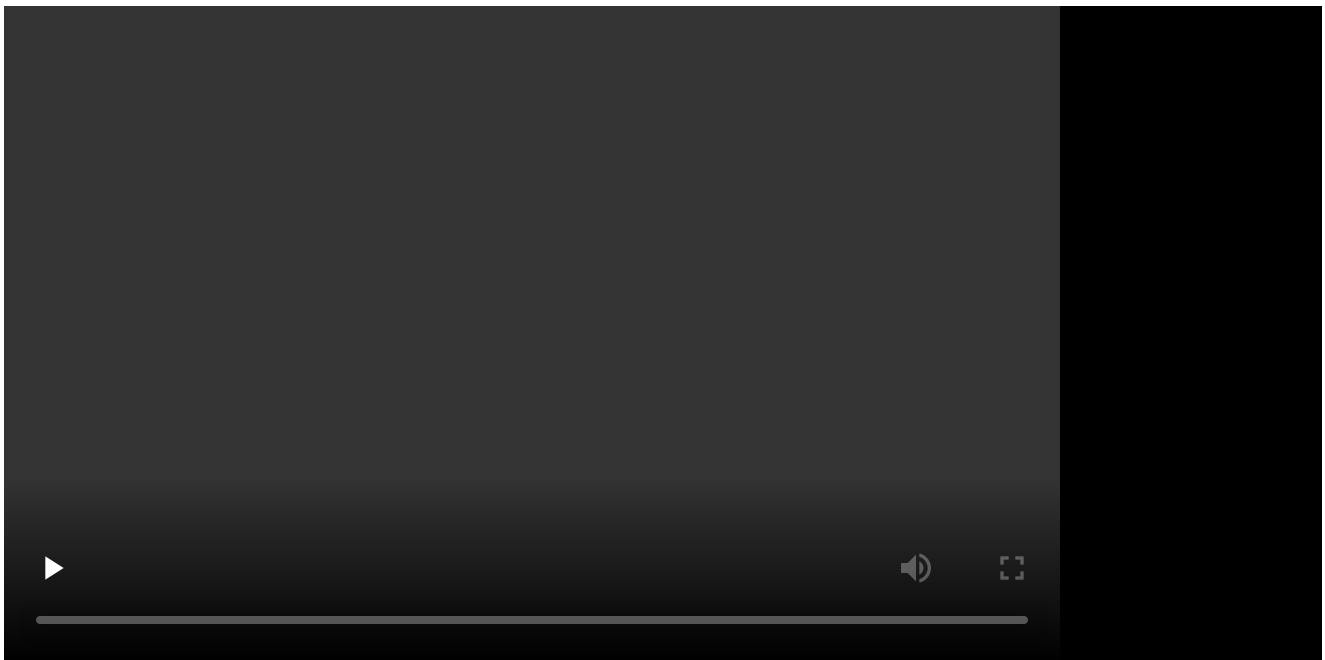
One hundred and sixty-eight days after spaghetti night.

Darlene tied a white bandanna around her neck but never pulled it up over her mouth and nose, despite the handmade signs around the Andre House campus reminding visitors that masks were required at the facility.

“I’m not afraid much of anything,” she said with a smile. “For 54 years God’s taken care of me.”

The conditions she lives in every day, sleeping under tarps in the harsh Phoenix heat, are worse than most people will experience in their lifetime.

So, COVID-19? No, she’s not scared.



Cheryl Evans/The Republic

An Andre House staffer let her in early this morning to wash up. She sat on one of the benches in the parking lot and peeled off her green flowered gloves and placed them on the bench beside her in the parking lot of Andre House.

She’d gotten them this morning when she sorted through a donation bin.

“It was the only girly thing they had,” Darlene said.

Her hair was pulled up into a messy bun that sat squarely atop her head. A pair of sunglasses were perched right beneath her bun, and she wore black glasses with three rhinestones bordering the corners of both eyes.

Turquoise earrings hung from her earlobes, matching the remnants of eyeliner left on her bottom lid.

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Darlene Carchedi (seen June 30, 2020, at the Andre House in Phoenix) says she is not worried about catching COVID-19 on the streets. "I'm not..."

Cheryl Evans/The Republic

She unpacked a handful of toiletries from one of her travel bags and headed to the outdoor sinks. She washed her face and used a washcloth to clean her arms and legs.

"I'd like to get back to normal. I miss my family here," Darlene said.

The worst part about the pandemic is that Andre House has closed off most of its indoor space to try to prevent the spread of COVID-19, she said.

Meals are served in the parking lot instead of around tables of talkative guests in the dining hall. Staff members still interact with the people they serve, but with masks over their faces and 6 feet of distance in between. Hugs, once commonplace, have been replaced with elbow taps.

Being homeless is already isolating. The measures put in place to try to prevent coronavirus spread have diminished the already limited acts of humanity that Darlene and her homeless neighbors rely on for strength and perseverance.

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The worst part about the pandemic, says Darlene Carchedi (seen on June 30, 2020), are the measures put in place by service providers like the Andre...

Cheryl Evans/The Republic

That's what scares her, she said.

But she has hope today. She can't stop talking about her 6-year-old granddaughter — who calls Darlene "Glamma" because she loves makeup and fancy purses — and her 1½-year-old grandson, whom she's never met in person. She uses the Wi-Fi from Andre House to video call them every day, Darlene said.

They live with her son in Oregon, and she's going to go live with them, she said.

"That's my plan. That's where (my son) wants me," Darlene said. "I'm definitely ready to be a grandma."

Darlene says she needs to take care of some of her outstanding warrants before she can move, which is why she hasn't left to live with them already.

Sept. 16, 2020: Moving to the parking lot

Two hundred and forty-six days after spaghetti night.

A couple sat inside a makeshift shelter on Wednesday just before 10 a.m., looking at something on a tablet.

It was the spot where Darlene used to live. But neither knew of anyone by that name.

A few tents down, a middle-aged man sat on a plastic chair surrounded by his belongings.

"Miss Darlene? She just passed," he said.

The man said Darlene had recently moved into one of the county parking lots. But she still patrols the area on her turquoise beach cruiser.

Darlene's camp was in the lot farthest west on Jefferson, he said.

"You'll see it. She's set up all of her stuff against the gate," he said.

All the plastic tarps and burlap sheets that once shielded her tent on Madison Street are now flanked against the fence that outlined the parking lots. She has an old Rodney Glassman campaign sign holding up one side of her shelter. It's hard to miss.

Darlene is standing on the sidewalk outside of the parking lot shelters. She wears flower patterned pants and a tank top. A pair of readers and a pair of sunglasses sit atop her head.

She's talking to one of the men who run the lots. It's an impassioned conversation. She's thanking him.

"You're really doing an excellent job," Darlene said.

What was once a contentious relationship between the security guards and the homeless residents of the parking lots has subsided, for the most part, Darlene said.

"I know I said you'd have to drag me kicking and screaming to get me to move here," Darlene said with a smirk.

She said she moved into the lot more than a month ago after deciding she should enjoy the space she'd lobbied for and make sure the conditions in the lots were up to snuff.

"I can't really speak on what's going on down there or whether they meet their standards," she said. "I asked for this. Now I'm going to receive that gift. So I decided to move down there."

Some of the "old timers" who have lived on the streets for years and refuse to go to treatment programs have followed her in, she said.

"We got them off the streets. They can wash, they can go to the bathroom. They even said, 'That's such a huge change in life.' Really," she said.

She is worried, though, that the newfound privacy in the lots has led to worsened depression — which has led to more drug use.

People are happy not to have police officers bothering them for cleanups every Wednesday, but for some people, that was the only attention they got from the "real world" — and "negative attention is still attention," Darlene said.

"Then comes despair. Because nobody cares," she said.

They're missing "home," Darlene said. And "home" is Andre House.

"As stupid as this sounds to you, that little corner over there and that dining hall, it's mine. It's where I go every day. It's where I go after my shower, it's my space," she said.

Darlene talks about her son and grandchildren and how thankful she is that she can talk to them every day. A lot of people don't have an outside support system, or any connections outside of Andre House.

She cries but quickly changes her tune, talking about how "spoiled" they've been in the lots. One of the security guard's church group brought down \$800 in tents and other supplies for them.

"In less than a year it's come this far. Look it, I've got God bumps," Darlene said, pointing to the tiny bumps all over her arms.

"You know I'll whine and complain when I need to, but I'm in happy land," she said.

When Darlene is happy, she's less inclined to leave the streets. She doesn't mention moving to Oregon today.

Sept. 22, 2020: A bad day

Two hundred and fifty-two days after spaghetti night.

"I'm getting dressed," Darlene called out from inside her tent. Her voice was muffled, and it sounded like she'd been crying.

Fifteen minutes later she said she was still getting dressed. Eventually, she said she wasn't going to come out of her tent.

"I'm fine," she said.

Richard Crews, director of programs for the Human Services Campus, overheard.

"You have to remember that your worst day is probably still better than their best days," he said.

Oct. 15, 2020: Treated like a prisoner

Two hundred and seventy-five days after spaghetti night.

Darlene sat slumped on a bench outside Andre House near an outlet where she charged her phone.

She wore a lime-green T-shirt that read, "For god has not given us a spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind." Matching green earrings dangled from her ears.

"It's not good at the lots right now," she said.



Darlene Carchedi (seen on Oct. 15, 2020) says the new security guards at the homeless encampment in Phoenix were treating them "like prisoners" again. The...

Nick Oza/The Republic

The new security guards were treating them "like prisoners" again. The old guards, who she'd formed a great connection with, were reassigned. She didn't know why.

Yesterday, they told her she had to clear all of her tarps off of the fence. They said she had until noon to do it, but 15 minutes before noon they came over and cut them all off the fence so her shelter had caved in, Darlene said.

"There's like eight other people in there that have stuff on the fence that they didn't threaten to kick them out. They didn't threaten them in any manner, just me," she said.

She said she refused to come out of her tent a few weeks ago because she was fighting with her boyfriend. He headbutted her, and she punched him.

"I don't like violence, it was over something stupid," she said, and quickly changed the subject.

She begrudgingly agreed to go back to the parking lot to show off the damage done to her shelter.

Darlene had to crawl into her living-room area and stay crouched because of the caving walls.

Her "closet" — a portable clothing rack she found in a dumpster — held up the west end of the shelter. A few shirts and jackets hung from the rack, but most of her clothes were flung on the ground because her "street daughters" had just gone shopping in her closet.

"I don't ever make them refold them because they don't ever do it right anyway," Darlene said of the young women she takes care of on the streets.

She sat down on her neatly made bed, which consisted of layers of mats and blankets she had fashioned into a mattress. Next to her bed is a framed picture of Bonnie and Clyde.

"I like the fact that she's the one that's got the gun," Darlene said with a laugh.

Today, Darlene is thinking a lot about her dad. He was the reason she moved to Arizona about 15 years ago.

She was working for a construction company in Chicago when she came to visit her dad, and he told her she should stay, she said.

A few weeks later, she found out her dad had cancer. She took care of him until he died a few years later, she said.

"It was just the anniversary of his death," Darlene said.

She cried as she recalled how her grandson was born on her father's birthday. Her son named him after her dad, and they rejoiced that the baby would be their king, who would carry on the family name, she said. But Darlene had still never met him.

■

Darlene Carchedi cries on Oct. 15, 2020, as she talks about the anniversary of her father's death and recalls how her grandson was born on her father's birthday.

Nick Oza/The Republic

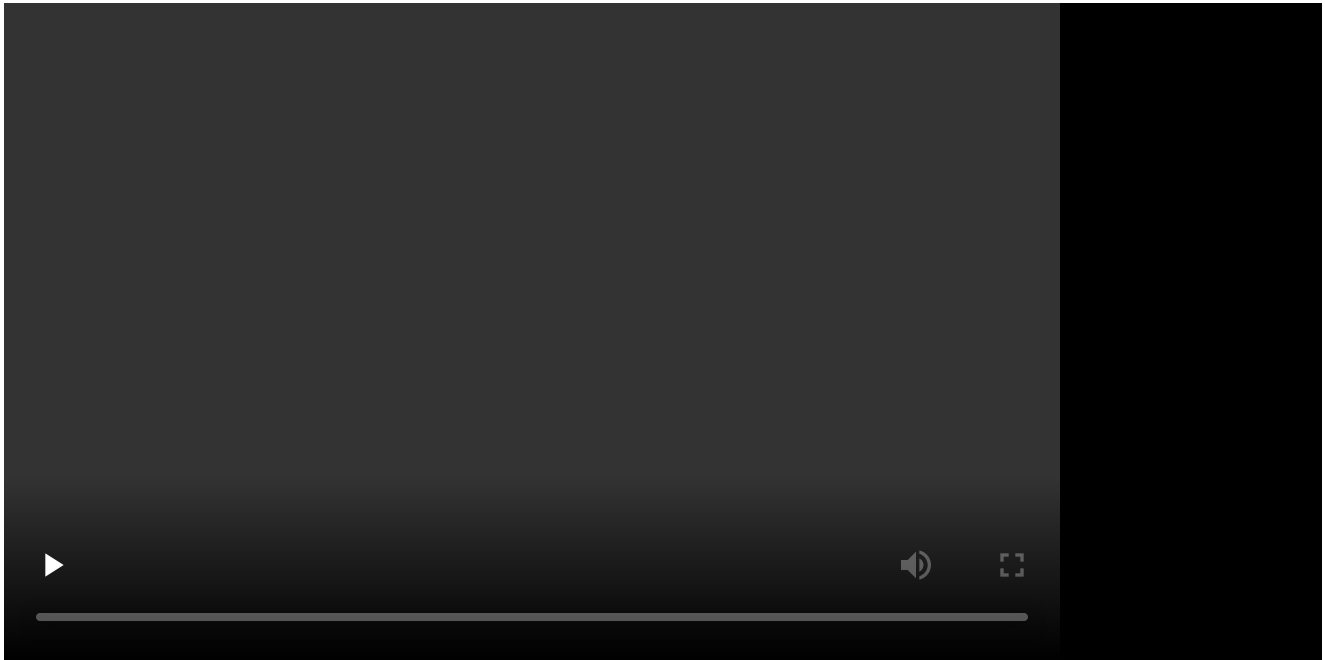
And now she wasn't sure when she would. Her plan to move to Oregon to live with her son has been called off.

Darlene said her daughter-in-law was pregnant again and told her son she didn't want Darlene to live with them.

"My son's like, 'How dare (she), and I'm like look ... that's your wife. That's your life now and you're a family unit and that's what's important,'" Darlene said, although it was obvious she was hurt.

She said her daughter-in-law doesn't like her because her son turns into a 5-year-old when she's around. They're too lenient with her granddaughter and let her draw on their faces with lipstick and jump on the bed.

Now her housing journey is back to square one.



Nick Oza/The Republic

"I grew up hard. I grew up as a gang member. This place has taken me back to that, which I've worked so hard all of my life to get away from. I went to college. I raised my son by myself. But do you know how long it's been since my ass has sat on a real chair or a real piece of furniture or a bed? It's been five and a half years. That's a long time," Darlene said.

Now that staying with her family is no longer an option, she doesn't know what the future holds. She's afraid of getting into housing on her own — because she'll be alone.

"They all act like, like, 'Oh you got housing, you won the lottery.' Well, no. For a lot of people it's very hard. They die. They don't die by suicide, but trust me, they had a hand in why they died. They gave up," Darlene said.

Darlene Carchedi

I was a strong independent woman in life before I became homeless, but my biggest fear in life has always been to be homeless. And my biggest fear now is that I won't be able to deal with real life anymore.

“

Darlene is advocating for what she calls "after care" — some sort of a transitional housing program that would allow people like her to regain their confidence before they live on their own.

It scares her to think about going from sleeping surrounded by hundreds of people every night to living alone in an empty apartment in a neighborhood where she knows no one. She doesn't know how to live by herself anymore.

"I was a strong independent woman in life before I became homeless, but my biggest fear in life has always been to be homeless. And my biggest fear now is that I won't be able to deal with real life anymore," Darlene said.

Every day she stays on the streets, she feels like she loses more of her old self.

That's why she still makes her bed and pairs her socks. That's why her clothes have to match and why she puts on makeup every day, she said.

She's clinging to the reminder of who she used to be, and hoping she hasn't lost it completely.

"Those are things I have to do that remind me of who I am," Darlene said.

Dec. 3, 2020: 'I hate change'

Three hundred and twenty-four days after spaghetti night.

"Oh, my God. I've never had something so strange happen to me in all my life," Darlene said.

She was sitting on a mat between the bathrooms and the kitchen at Andre House. It's still closed to guests because of the pandemic, but the staff made an exception for Darlene, so long as she keeps her mask on — a requirement she's flouting now.

Darlene weaves a story about taking a bike ride down under the freeway overpass last week at 3 a.m. because she couldn't sleep. Under the overpass, there was a golf bag sitting perfectly in the middle of the road under the street light. There was no one around, but two gashes in the street on each side of the bag.

"I'm like, what the hell. Then I'm like, 'Well, maybe it fell off the truck.' I'm thinking of all this stuff that, you know, maybe could have happened. But it couldn't; it was sitting so pristinely," she said.

She found a man working at a construction site down the road and asked him if he knew whose golf clubs they were. He came out and looked and said they weren't there two hours earlier when he had arrived at work.

"I'm like maybe a spaceship dropped it, but I'm like, 'No, it couldn't have, it's sitting so pretty.' I'm like, 'Oh what the hell,' so I attach it to my bike," Darlene said.

It was almost a complete Dynacraft set, with only one club missing. There was also a set of tangerine MacGregor golf balls and a chipper of a different brand. Then she remembered that she found a golf club and ball 1½ years ago. She went into her tent to find it, and lo and

behold, it was the missing club and matching ball.

"I've had those two things for a year and a half. I found them over by the cemetery. And I had to hang onto it. ... I mean I had it that long. Three moves I moved that golf club with me and it happened to be the one missing club. What are the odds? And that someone sets them right in the middle of the road," Darlene said, starting to choke up.

She thought about selling it, but decided to give it to the "kids" — the young staffers at the Andre House. Many of them like to golf, and she thought they could pass it down to future staff members.

The staff started crying before using the clubs as light sabers, she said.

"Father Dan said, 'You know, I think when you leave here, you're going to leave a legacy,'" Darlene said with pride, referring to the Rev. Dan Ponisciak, executive director of Andre House.

An Andre House staffer came around the corner and saw Darlene maskless.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Darlene yelled and pulled a bandanna up over her nose and mouth. The bandanna had a hole-punch-sized hole near her lips so she could still sip her Circle K Polar Pop through a straw.

■

People experiencing homelessness hang out outside the Andre House on Feb. 16, 2021.
Nick Oza/The Republic

Darlene says she has a new plan to get off the streets. She seems confident, but it sounds a little too-good-to-be-true.

Before becoming homeless, she said she worked in civil engineering drafting. An old friend she used to work with is starting a new gig in Dubai and needs someone here in Arizona to handle the on-the-ground issues.

It would mostly be a work-from-home situation, and her friend will let her stay at her apartment in Mesa. She just needs to take a class in the spring to learn civil engineering terms in Arabic and then she can get going, she said.

The Arizona Republic could not confirm her pending employment.

Even though Darlene insists the job offer is legitimate, she seems hesitant about moving.

Darlene is worried about the loneliness that would come with a private apartment in Mesa — miles away from the only people she's known for the past six years.

Living in a tent as the temperatures dip below freezing isn't the best situation. But at least she has people to talk to and a sense of pride and belonging when others ask her for help navigating homelessness.

"I'm a person who needs to be needed, and I'm needed here," she said through tears.

"And I hate change. I always have," she said with a small laugh.

She talks about her son and how her goal was to get to her grandkids. Now her daughter-in-law says no.

She talks about her boyfriend and how he's probably going to leave her to go back to his children's mother.

She talks about her ex-husband, who was homeless with her and was kidnapped.

"It's like even if I get out of here, I have nobody — no place and nobody," she said.

Her tears turn to anger as she recalls that a social worker told her after a year living on the streets that she had qualified for housing two months after she became homeless, but the agency never notified her or her husband.

"When I went to ask them about it she was like, 'Oh, well, you must have fallen through the crack.' And I said, 'I want that crack's name, because you've taken my entire life from me,'" Darlene said.

Dec. 17, 2020: Rebuilding after a fire

Three hundred and thirty-eight days after spaghetti night.

Darlene was sifting through a pile of rubble, her fingers stained black with ash, where her shelter once stood.

All that was left was burned pieces of plastic and paper and the occasional scrap of metal, which she was collecting to try to sell to the scrap yard.

A few days earlier her tent caught fire in the middle of the night. Her tent backs up to the gate on Jefferson Street, giving anyone easy access to vandalize it — or catch it on fire, which is what she believes happened.

She had gone in for the night and was laying in her bed when she remembered she left some blankets hanging to dry on the fence — security gets mad if things are left on the fence overnight — so she got up to get them. That's when the fire started.

"By the grace of God I got out to get those blankets, and that's what saved me. I was in there. I went to bed," Darlene said.

With a few days of perspective, Darlene is already finding some humor in the tragedy.

"I bounced off the fence face-first. My face kind of stuck to the fence because of the heat of the fire and I hit the sidewalk right on the fat on my ass and bounced off my ass to standing position and took off running to come around the fence. If somebody would have taken a video of that it would have been hilarious. I felt like a cartoon character," she said. There were scabs from the burns on her face.

Almost everything was lost in the blaze. Darlene's only clothes were the pajamas she was wearing when the tent caught fire. Some of her makeup brushes, wet wipes and cottage cheese she had in her cooler also survived.

The bar cart, clothes racks and decorative items she'd carefully accumulated from local dumpsters in hopes of someday using to fill an apartment were gone in an instant — as was her treasured turquoise beach cruiser.

She was once particular about styles of clothing and matching outfits. Now she is in survival mode, taking anything that people drop off as donations.

"I'm just getting what I get off the street. I said, 'Once again, lucky Darlene, I have a fire at Christmastime when everybody's giving stuff away. I got some blankets, I'm trying to make a bed out of ... Styrofoam sheets that they had in the dumpster so I could put it on the floor,'" she said.

The volunteers at Andre House took up a collection to buy her a tent, so at least she has shelter.

"I had \$60 in my purse, too, I was so mad. Do you know how hard it is to come by \$60 down here?" Darlene said. "I wanted to get my granddaughter and my grandson some Christmas presents."

That's when she lost it.

She said she recently found out her kidney cancer came back. She doesn't want to tell her son until after the first of the year so she doesn't ruin his holidays.

She can't have surgery until she quits smoking for 30 days. That hasn't been easy with the stress of the fire.

Plus, her bronchitis is acting up and she has an inner ear infection. And there's a piece of glass in her foot that the skin has grown around.

"I'm like, God bless America. Someone shoot me," Darlene said wearily.

"I say that around here and they say, 'Why don't you just shoot yourself?' I say, 'Because I'm Catholic,'" Darlene said with a hearty laugh.

Jan. 15, 2021: Not ready to say goodbye

Three hundred and sixty-seven days after spaghetti night.

Darlene's new tent looked like just that — a tent. It was a stark comparison to the mansion of tarps she'd constructed before the fire.

Outside was a beach cruiser with peeling white paint. Her boyfriend, who works on bikes, built it for her using parts he'd accumulated. He still needed to paint it, but for now, it worked.

You could almost stand up inside some of Darlene's previous shelters. This one felt small, though it was still characteristically tidy.

■

Darlene Carchedi works on a tent in an encampment in downtown Phoenix on Feb. 16, 2021. Darlene lost her previous tent and many of her belongings in a fire in December 2020.
Nick Oza/The Republic

Using a bunch of blankets she'd gotten from donations, she had made a mattress that was surprisingly sturdy. She'd recently gotten a few chevron throw pillows someone was throwing away that matched the sheets she'd found in another donation pile.

She had attached blankets to the top and bottom of the tent to prevent the cold from flowing in during the night.

Darlene opened up a grocery store bag of donated clothes she'd grabbed while getting food at St. Vincent de Paul. She was sorting the tennis shoes and assorted clothes based off of who she knew that needed them— or deserved them — the most.

This is what she does most of her days. Finds donated items and sorts and delivers them to people. People depend on her for this, which gives her a sense of purpose, although sometimes she worries she's enabling people to be lazy.

She's stressed about who will take her place as the resident clothes sorter when she starts working for the drafting company. She says she's still planning on taking the job, but some issues have arisen with the class she's supposed to take. She was supposed to find out later that day if it would be online or in-person.

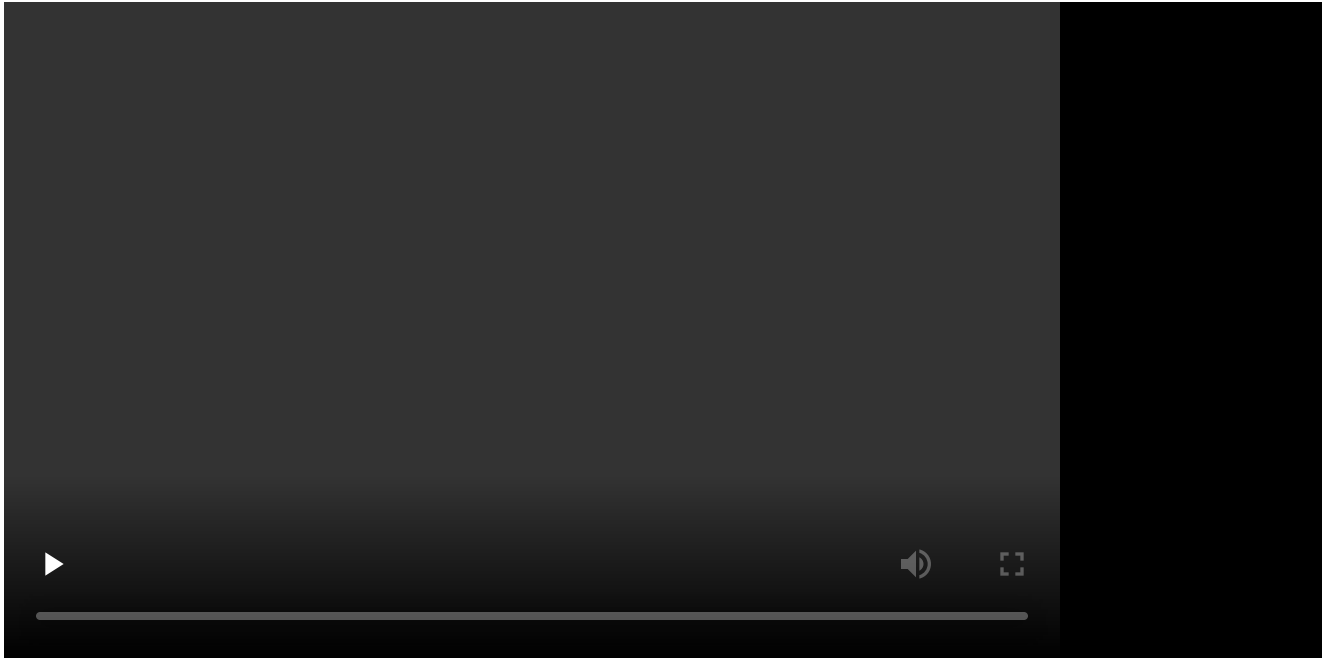
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Darlene Carchedi sorts through donated clothes on Feb. 16, 2021, for herself and other homeless women at Andre House in Phoenix. She says she worries...
Nick Oza/The Republic

Even when the job starts, she's not sure if she wants to move to the apartment in Mesa she was promised. She's not sure she's ready to stop being homeless.

"You're basically mourning yourself, the old you. You have to do your own funeral and you morph into something else that's acceptable to your social group or your society," Darlene said of transitioning back to society.

She's not ready to let Mama D die.



Nick Oza/The Republic

Will Darlene move off the streets?

"I don't want to be a lifer," Darlene says often, referring to people who never get off the street.

The comment feels paradoxical, because so often it seems she does not want to leave.

But experts say it's common for people experiencing homelessness, especially those who have spent years on the streets, to struggle to make the leap back to housing.

The median length of time that people experiencing homelessness have spent without a permanent home is 347 days, according to a Homeless Management Information System analysis of 3,311 single adults experiencing homelessness in Maricopa County in December 2020.

Darlene Carchedi, when asked whether she wants to move to permanent housing

| It's not that I don't want to leave. It's that I'm afraid to leave. I'm afraid to fail.

“

One in five people who left an emergency homeless shelter for permanent housing in Maricopa County fell back into homelessness within a year, according to 2019 HMIS.

Alexandra Lesnik, a staffer at Andre House, said people who become homeless are resilient and relational. In their moments of despair, they create bonds with one another.

Those bonds are critical to their survival on the street, but they also make it difficult to leave, she said.

"Homelessness obviously, in part, is loss of a home, but it's also the loss of family and the loss of community. They lose that, and then rebuild it again in the zone, and then lose it again (when they leave)," she said.

Ponisciak, executive director of Andre House, said he knows Darlene is attached, not only to her homeless neighbors but to his staff and organization.

"She's a part of Andre House as much as everybody else. And I have to think that is probably a barrier to her getting off the streets, because of the bond. That's got to be hard for some people to let go," Ponisciak said.

Even if she can let go, Ponisciak said he too often sees people get into an apartment, only to return to the zone a few months later.

"They're like, 'I missed my friends,'" he said.

■

Darlene Carchedi (seen on Feb. 16, 2021) says she doesn't want to be "a lifer," referring to people who never get off the street.

Nick Oza/The Republic

Ponisciak said he's realized that ending homelessness won't happen just by getting people into "a big empty room." His team is working on how to continue making people feel a part of their community, even after they have a home. Already, some of his staffers drive people who used to be homeless to doctor appointments and visit them in their apartments.

A year ago, the Andre House staff told Darlene they weren't going to push her, but they were ready to help her with housing whenever she was ready, Ponisciak said.

About two months ago she asked for help, and staff is working with her to get a state ID — the first step to securing housing, Ponisciak said.

"It's not like we haven't been trying. Everybody knows Darlene," Ponisciak said. "We've all been working with her, and it's taking years. Sometimes it does take years. I would love her to go and make the steps she needs to make today. That may not happen, it probably won't, and I need to be OK with that."

Ultimately, it will be Darlene's decision, and if she does decide to leave, it will be in her own time.

"It's not that I don't want to leave. It's that I'm afraid to leave. I'm afraid to fail," Darlene said.

■

Experts say it's common for people experiencing homelessness, especially those who have spent years on the streets, to struggle to make the leap back to housing.

Nick Oza/The Republic

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