

In My Opinion

Capturing society's forgotten faces

It's photo day at the St. Ben's meal. A volunteer project called Help-Portrait Milwaukee has set up in a small room and is offering to snap a picture of anyone who wants one.

No one knows how many takers to expect.



Jim Stingl

These are people who are practically invisible in society, but the camera sees them fine.

"Many of the guests are very shy and suspicious of cameras and video cameras. I was not sure how this would be received," said Brother Dave Schwab, director of the nightly community meal downtown at 9th and State streets.

He needn't have worried. People begin to file in. In turn they stand against a white wall with their toes up to a strip of tape on the floor. Most are photographed solo. A few buddy up with a friend, and some women have children or grandchildren with them.

The lighting is the same used for models.

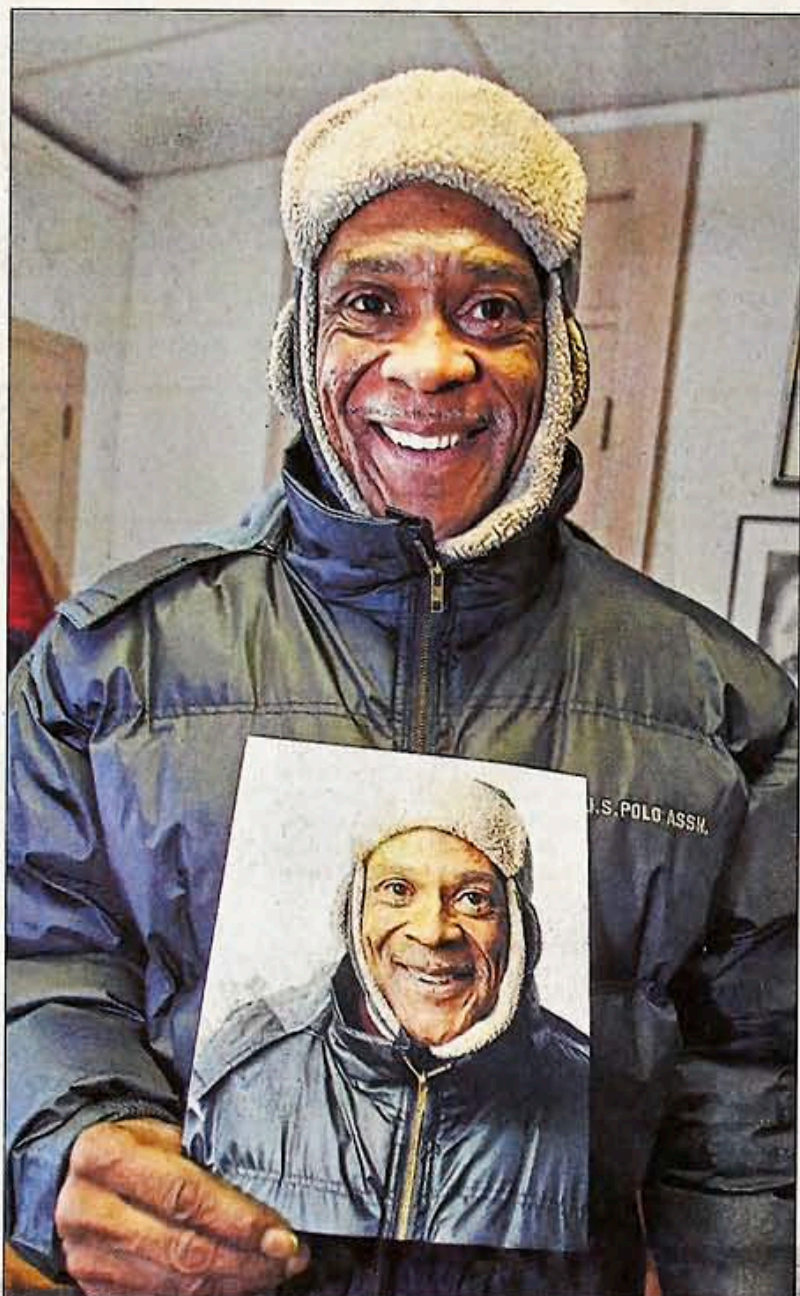
These are people who are practically invisible in society, but the camera sees them fine. Some are homeless. Some are down and out or mentally ill or way too alone. Yet their human spirit and dignity shine through on the glossy prints they're handed within a minute or two of posing.

Thomas Edward Carter laughs when he looks at his. It's a laugh of delight at seeing himself in a photograph, a common experience for most of us in a time of Facebook but entirely novel for him. He's just come in from the cold, and in the photo he's still wearing his hood tightly around his head and his jacket is zipped up to his neck. His eyes are bright and he's smiling.

When was the last time he posed for a picture? "That I couldn't tell you," says the 63-year-old, who tells me he's disabled and bipolar. He knows homelessness but at the moment has a place to stay.

He's hard-pressed to say why he wanted his photo taken, or as the Help-Portrait folks like to say, given. He receives an 8-by-10 head-and-shoulders shot and one that's 4-by-6, which will probably go to one of his

Please see **STINGL, 3B**



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Thomas Edward Carter laughs with delight when he sees his portrait that was taken at St. Benedict the Moor as part of Help-Portrait Milwaukee, a volunteer project to provide free portraits to the homeless.



Photographer Rob Gustafson shows William Taylor Jr. his picture after he hams it up for the camera.

On the web

Visit helpportraitmke.com to see the portraits and learn more about the project.

More Stingl online

Go to jsonline.com/video to see Jim Stingl's video columns.

STINGL ON THE RADIO

Jim Stingl talks about his column at 7:35 a.m. every Sunday on WTMJ-AM (620).

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Portraits of society's invisible

many sisters, he says.

Help-Portrait was started by Jeremy Cowart of Nashville, who has photographed many celebrities. Last year, more than 40,000 portraits were given to the photo-needy in 42 countries. What happened at St. Ben's, and also at a few other locations around Milwaukee last weekend, is part of this year's worldwide effort.

All the supplies are donated. No one is charged for the photos, and they are not used for any commercial purpose.

Four volunteers from the project are at St. Ben's when I visit. Leroy Skalstad, himself a regular at the community meal and a photographer for the St. Ben's calendar, checks people in. Rob Gustafson is wielding the camera with help from Matt Heltsley. And Reuben Neese runs the printer. All are either paid or hobby photographers.

"I'm Rob and I'm going to take your picture," the shooter says to each new photo subject. Some are nervous and need to be coaxed to smile. Others ham it up and pose boldly. The mood in the room is fun.

William Taylor Jr., 52, spreads his fingers into a peace sign. "Look at me," he laughs.

"I eat a meal here every day," he tells me. "I'm homeless and I have a drug problem." As he's trying to remember the last time anyone bothered to take his photo, someone nearby yells kiddingly, "Tell the truth. It was for breaking and entering."

More than 100 people are photographed at St. Ben's on this day, and each one walks away with a glossy print or two. The volunteers provide Christmas cards in case anyone wants to give the photo as a gift.

"I'll treasure it," Carla Highshaw, 48, says as we look at her photo. She's wearing a pretty blue and white blouse and hoop earrings. "I look pretty. I like it." She comes for a meal about every other day and stays with a friend, she says.

Calvin Young tells me he's homeless and appreciates everything St. Ben's does for him. The 50-year-old has family, but he can't live there, he says. He did not have any photos of himself until now.

His photo is tucked in a Christmas card that says, "May hope inspire you, may joy fill your heart." He takes the picture out and we look at it.

"I think this is very beautiful," he says, "and it's just me."

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