

Season 6 - Episode 5

Seen and Saved Through a Camera Lens

Antoinette Foley:

I was originally born in Cork but my family moved from Cork when I was five years of age to Castle Cormoran, County Kilkenny.

Torah Kachur:

That's Antoinette Foley. Listening to her voice you might think she's quite elderly. But she's actually only 33. You see, it's been a very hard 33 years.

Antoinette:

A lot of things that I've been through in my life. Losing my children, burying my child.

Torah:

She was still a teenager when her first child died.

Antoinette:

You don't just wake up one morning and say I want to be an addict.

Torah:

But that's what she is, an addict dealing with depression and abuse and homelessness.

Antoinette:

I was in a tent, nowhere to wash. My skin was all destroyed.

Torah:

She begs for money on the street but spends it on drugs instead of food.

Antoinette:

I could go a week, sometimes more without eating. I was as thin as a stick.

Torah:

At the age of 29, she's just another dirty, nameless, faceless person sitting on the sidewalk holding a paper cup. Seen, but ignored by the people walking by.

I'm Torah Kachur. This is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. And we're now in our sixth season of sharing

these stories with you.

As always, we start with the idea that every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help, or if you'll be a person that helps someone else.

This show is here to remind us that any of us could be either one of those people every day.

It's hard to pin down the event that started Antoniette Foley's downward spiral. At the age of 16, she runs away from home.

Antoniette:

I ended up going out with a boy. And thought I was in love with him and was homeless with him, at the river.

Torah:

One day she develops a toothache, and her boyfriend suggests taking heroin to deal with the pain. She tries it once but doesn't stop. She gets pregnant. But continues to live on the street.

Antoniette:

I had three children with him. My first was stillborn.

Torah:

The other two babies survive, but when her relationship with their father ends, the kids are taken to live with their paternal grandparents in another county.

Antoniette:

When my children was gone. My life went downhill. I went down and everything, basically.

Get up in the morning. I'd have to beg the price of drugs, food.

Torah:

Antoniette's usual spot is outside a grocery store.

Antoniette:

No matter what weather it was, snow, rain, thunder. I sat there.

Torah:

The staff doesn't hassle her. Like most people, they just pretend she doesn't exist. And when you are homeless, apathy during the day is better than being attacked at night.

Antoniette:

I was asleep one night in a tent on my own and I don't know what woke me up and when I woke up my tent was in fire. I, the zip, I just zipped it up and quick and ran out.

Torah:

Her nylon tent and dirty sleeping bag are destroyed in minutes. What few comforts she has are gone. The fire may have been set by another homeless person, or by some people in town who didn't want her sleeping in the park.

Either way, it isn't safe, so Antoinette goes to a shelter.

Antoinette:

I moved there. That was a wet hostel. People still taking.

Torah:

A "wet hostel" means residents are still allowed to use drugs and alcohol. It's a devil's bargain. For an addict like Antoinette, going cold turkey is impossible, so a wet hostel is her only option. But it's a dangerous place to be.

Antoinette:

I was robbed. In my room I was attacked. A knife was held to my throat to rob my money.

Torah:

She leaves, gets a new tent, and sets it up near the river.

On one particular late afternoon in August, she's walking from the grocery store back towards her tent. A local shop keeper, an older man with wavy grey hair and kind eyes, is just locking up his store.

Antoinette:

And I said, sir, if you any spare change. And he put his hand in the pocket and I think he gave me a fiver.

Torah:

I said there was no definitive event that started Antoinette's fall. But that afternoon, that five Euro note and the kindness that came with it, is clearly the moment that started her climb out.

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you're in trouble. No matter if the danger you are facing is a flood, a wildfire, or life on the streets.

It's 5 p.m. and James Mahon is closing up his store for the day.

James Mahon:

A small shop looking after the small businesses in the locality and the people walking in off the street with computer problems.

Torah:

It's on the main street of a town called Athy.

James:

I've been born and lived here all my life. So I take pride in the town.

Torah:

Athy is a small market town, 10,000 people or so, nestled on the banks of the River Barrow where it meets the Grand Canal, about an hour outside Dublin.

James:

It's a small town. And you sort of notice people who are new to the area. And here was somebody who I saw a couple of times on the street. I was wondering where is she from?

Torah:

That 'someone' is a young woman, sometimes sitting on a square of cardboard, in front of the grocery store, holding a paper cup, other times walking up and down the road, slowly, aimlessly.

James:

She looked unkempt. She definitely looked as though she was homeless. She had every appearance of it.

Torah:

She isn't the only homeless person in the town of Athy, but James takes a special interest in her.

James:

The tent where she was living was located probably only around 200 meters from my shop. So I would have seen her nearly on a daily basis. She was very, very thin. Her appearance wasn't great, her clothes weren't great, but she just had that appearance nearly of a teenager.

There was a very vacant look on her face. You know, it really, it was a look of somebody who had nearly given up.

Torah:

All of this James notices at a distance. He's been aware of her for six months or so, but they've never spoken.

James:

I was locking up the shop one evening, pulling down the grills and the locks and she was walking by and she just stopped and said, have you any change? I put my hand in my pocket, think I had a I think I had five euro in it and I handed it to her and that was it. She was very thankful and she went she went on.

Torah:

The exchange is brief — less than a minute — but that evening James gets to thinking. What will she do with that money?

James:

You were hoping it was going to be used to buy food, but you knew in your heart and soul it was going to be put to other uses.

Torah:

And that gets him wondering, is there something else he can do?

James:

I decided, right, look, I'm going to have to go and talk to her and see what we can do.

Torah:

What James is feeling is something we all face on some level. You see someone in trouble, and you want to help but how?

There are some common things that people do: call the police, or contact a local organization that runs a shelter, or reach out to some level of local government that provides social services.

But James, well, James does something different.

James:

She was walking by most days. So I actually just stopped her and said, would you be interested if I take a few photographs? She seemed amazed that anyone would be interested.

Antoinette:

And I said, why would you want to take my pictures? He said, there's something about you.

Torah:

Antoinette agrees and a couple days later they meet up. They spend about an hour taking photos.

James:

I was actually just taking nearly portrait photographs without any lighting, just using natural light. Showing the effects of having been living rough.

Torah:

They're down near the river where Antoinette has her tent. Just a short distance from his shop, but it's a different world.

James:

There was no running water there, was no toilet facilities.

Torah:

James sticks to taking portraits of Antoinette, avoiding the tent, and the garbage

strewn about.

James:

You know, it's enough to actually go and get the photographs without nearly crossing a line and taking advantage of nearly going with sensationalism.

Torah:

He doesn't want to sensationalize; he wants to humanize.

The next day, Antoinette is walking past James' shop. He shows her the photos.

It's the first time she's seen herself in a very long time. The photos are honest, not flattering, just honest.

She asks if he can take some more, so two days later, James walks down to her tent.

James:

She'd actually gone and she'd found some make up and she had tried to brush her hair. Now, look, she was doing it all in a tent. She was doing her best to go and do it. But there was that thing. She was taking a little bit of pride in her, in her appearance.

Torah:

A little bit of pride, a glimmer of self-respect or self-worth. It's a start.

James enters six of the photos from their initial shoot in a local exhibit. The reaction is powerful.

James:

People said, you're on to something here that there is something there in those photographs.

Torah:

Antoinette's eyes — that had seemed so vacant when he saw her on the street, came alive in the photos. They compelled people to acknowledge that she was a person, a real person who shouldn't be ignored.

James:

Her predicament, her situation was absolutely plain for all to see. The tent was pitched virtually in the middle of the town. You had the local church 50 meters away. It was right beside a car park where parents dropped their children and collected them from school. So this was very, very much in the open. They may not have known her background. They may not have known her name, where she came from, anything about her. But they knew. She was known as the girl in the tent.

You know, if you chose to ignore it, you ignored it, but you knew about it.

Torah:

Over the next few months James' help becomes more substantive: He takes the change she gets from begging and gives her bills. He lets her use the toilet in his store. Small gestures that form the foundation of a friendship.

Antoinette:

I was shocked how kind a person could be and it took me a while to trust because I was used and abused on the streets.

Torah:

Their weekly photo shoots become a time to share stories.

James:

And you're finding out a little bit more each time about her background of possibly what has led her to be where she is. That's where the photography came in because you'd say right come on we'll go and take a few photographs here we'll go and tell this story.

Torah:

James learns a lot about Antoinette. She tells him about her pregnancies, the loss of her first child, and the two children that were taken away.

James:

So there was an awful lot going on there. You had to start to stop and think right. I shouldn't be judging here. I shouldn't actually be asking too much. You know, because I might say it's easy, just do this, this and this. But to do those things, they were easy for me. They were easy for me to say it. But when you realize where she was coming from and the problems, the discrimination, the various things she was facing, you realize, look at, this is not, this is not easy. This is not straightforward.

Torah:

A big step was when James arranged for her to start getting social security payments — that's largely impossible if you don't have an address. But James had an address, so he got it sorted.

Despite the interventions, Antoinette's life still followed a predictable and self-destructive pattern.

James:

She was at the supermarket day in day out and she would sit there with a small sort of like a disposable coffee cup and people would throw the money in.

As soon as she got enough money to buy heroin, to buy crack cocaine, she would go and get it. And then she'd be happy until around lunchtime when she'd need it again.

Torah:

During those low moments Antoinette would hide in a small room in the back of

Jame's store.

James:

She was able to make herself tea. So we gave her a few biscuits, things like that. So she was happy with that.

Torah:

Sitting in that back room, James makes Antoinette a promise. He tells her that if she quits drugs and stays clean for a year, he'll make sure she gets a house of her own.

James:

Now, I was maybe making a promise that I was hoping I could deliver on. She's probably not going to give it up. So it'll be a promise I might never have to keep.

Torah:

Months go by — more than a year actually — before James sees any progress.

James:

We started in August 21, we were probably around to October of 22 before you noticed the words were beginning to change. She sort of spoke about, "if I could do this," "if I could do that," you know, that's suddenly that she could see a pathway to get where she wanted to get. And she actually started to talk about the future.

Antoinette:

When I was homeless I was thinking, me and James talk one day said, if I ever got clean, I said I'd love to help others.

James:

The actions and the words were not matching. They were far from it. You know like looking at it outwardly, her actions were still the same.

Torah:

That November — whether it's the prospect of spending another winter in a freezing cold tent, or maybe the accumulative effect of James' calm presence in her life — Antoinette starts a drug rehabilitation program.

The program combats the chemical addiction with a substitute called methadone, but it also imposes a new routine.

James:

She had to actually show up on a daily basis at a clinic and actually go and she would have to drink her methadone there in front of the staff. But now they were getting a chance to assess her medically as well.

Torah:

The daily treatments help, they reduce her cravings. But her recovery isn't a straight line. She has good days, and she has setbacks.

Antoinette:

When I was in addiction at that time, of course I was doing it, slipping, doing it, slipping. But he was like, 'you can do this, you can do this.' So I kept trying.

Torah:

Then one day she walks into James' shop and pulls out a small bag.

James:

And she had some heroin and she put it, I can remember she put it on the floor of the shop and she went over and she got a hammer and she just beat it on the floor. And she said, that's it. She said, I've had enough of this and I'm off it. That was the turning point.

Torah:

Ireland has something called the "Housing First" program. It's what James had in the back of his mind when he promised Antoinette her own house.

There is a long list of criteria that a candidate has to meet. The last of those being "free of addiction." And Antoinette has finally checked that box.

With James as her sponsor she applies for housing, goes to meetings, has periodic check-ins with a social worker, and after one year clean and sober, she is allocated a home.

The day she moves in, she has nothing but her sleeping bag.

James:

And that's it. She didn't mind. This was going to be hers and this was going to be it.

Antoinette:

When I moved into me house the first night, the peace I felt. I have never felt it in my life. I'm safe. I can lock my door. I can go to bed knowing nothing bad will happen.

Torah:

From the day James handed her a five euro note to the day she moved into her own house was three years, two months and twenty-one days. Through it all James and Antoinette made time almost every week to take photographs.

For Antoinette, those photos are a reminder — an undeniable record of where she was and how far she's come.

Antoinette:

Every time I see them it brings back everything.

Torah:

Together, they've published a photo book titled The Hawk against the Dove, which

they use to make presentations for high school students. Giving them an unfiltered look at homelessness.

Antoinette:

My hope for this book that it saves people, getting them off of drugs, stops them going on it. It's not just the drugs. It's what can happen.

Torah:

Antoinette has no doubt about what would have happened to her if James hadn't entered her life.

Antoinette:

I say I would have died or someone would have hurt me. (sob)

Torah:

Antoinette's story is enormously complicated. There's a lot of details I left out — the death of her mother, her relationship with her father, a group of citizens in Athy evicting her from her tent site.

Antoinette said, "you don't just wake up one day and decide to be an addict." Well, it's equally true that it's never just one thing that leads to a person being homeless. It's always complicated.

Donald Whitehead Jr. grew up in and around Cincinnati, Ohio and has his own story about being homeless.

Donald Whitehead Jr.:

I have had two experiences of homelessness. I was homeless almost my entire childhood. We lived doubled up with relatives.

We lived in a house that was designed for one family, but there were three families that lived there. And then I had the experience of homelessness for about five years as an adult, primarily due to battles with the disease of addiction.

And so I basically hid out in a shelter while I was in the grips, as they call it, of my addiction. And I finally was able to find a program at a homeless shelter. Haven't looked back since.

Torah:

That was 30 years ago, and Donald is now the Executive Director of the National Coalition for the Homeless based in Washington, D.C.

What are some of the common misconceptions about being homeless?

Donald:

I think one of the biggest and probably the most damaging is that people want to be homeless. That this is some kind of a camp retreat that people are just hanging out

because they don't want responsibility.

It's actually a multitude of other issues like structural racism is an issue, domestic violence is an issue, or simply the rent is too high. People can't afford even working the best job they're capable of working to be able to afford rent.

For one bedroom, only 10 percent of the country can you work a minimum wage job and afford a place to live. So there's some complex structural issues that people discard, that people certainly have a different narrative about. So all of those are huge misconceptions.

It's not easy to get out. Once you get in, you face all kinds of barriers to be able to get to the other side of it. So it's not an easy task. At the core of it is that we just don't have enough resources to meet the needs of the population. And many communities, because they get frustrated by that, they start to use criminalization practices or forced institutionalization. Neither of those work. Once you get out of the institution or you get out of the jail, you're still homeless. So you haven't solved anything.

Torah:

What does work? I mean, there's a lot of barriers and difficulties to get out, as you said.

Donald:

So if you're severely mentally ill or you have substance abuse disorders, permanent supportive housing is the perfect solution to that. And it has an 80 percent success rate. However, that is not a solution for people who are just there because of economic reasons. Or if you're a woman with domestic violence issues, you're not in that category that permanent supportive housing is necessary. So we need a variety of different solutions. And we also need to do much more when it comes to prevention. The easiest way to keep homelessness from growing is making sure that people don't get into homelessness in the first place.

Torah:

So one of the things of course is the lack of both personal resources and then the resources to help. Should I give a homeless person money?

Donald:

So here's my stance on that.

Panhandling is a form of desperation. You have to be really desperate to go out and ask other people for money. And so what I believe is that if we give directly to a person, it does lessen the desperation on their part. And they don't have to do something more desperate. So I do give, but I do it what I believe to be a very constructive way. So gift card, so they can certainly eat that day. Or a pair of socks, because socks are invaluable as a homeless person. Or I give them information about how to get services.

One of the important things is that even if you don't give, you don't dehumanize that

person. You make contact with them. You ask them how their day is going. Because at some point when you're out and you're homeless, you lose touch with the human race. You don't hear people call your name. People don't interact with you. And that human contact may be the catalyst for you to think about a change in your life.

Torah:

What is something you'd like everyone to understand about homelessness?

Donald:

The biggest thing to me is that homelessness is not an issue that is related to a person's morality. Anybody can become homeless. I've served doctors and lawyers, pro football players, boxers, just a whole gamut of our population. And until we bring the resources to the level of the need, we'll never end homelessness.

It's not a static population; 22 percent of the people that enter the population are new to homelessness. They've never been homeless before. They've lived productive lives, and they just can't keep up with rising cost. We have to do something. People are not ripping the country off. They're not stealing. They're surviving. And we have to stop the demonization of people at the bottom of the economic ladder, or we'll never be able to solve this issue.

Torah:

Donald, thank you for your story and your insights. Really informative.

Donald:

Well, thank you. And I really appreciate the opportunity to be with you today.

Torah:

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people.

We share a new story every other week, but if you are in the mood for another one right now. Scroll back in time to one of our earlier episodes.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at [OnStar.com/podcast](https://onstar.com/podcast).