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Homeless use Internet to be connected

Addresses on the Web let them keep in touch; Logging on at libraries, shelters

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📷 **David Kriss**
(Sun photo by Doug Kapustin)
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David Kriss doesn't have a home or a regular place to sleep, but he's got several addresses - all of them on the Internet.

The 34-year-old gets his mail electronically, he meets friends at virtual message boards, and he stores his ideas on several Web sites he has helped develop.

Homeless for the past year and a half, Kriss is part of a growing number of displaced people turning to the Internet for help, companionship and psychological release. While society's most disadvantaged members and the latest in communications technology may seem an odd fit, the Internet age has been a welcome advance for the homeless as computers have become more available in community centers, public libraries and the like.

"I use it for everything," Kriss said last week from a community computer lab at the nonprofit South Baltimore Learning Center in **Federal Hill**.

A couple of other people sat at terminals in the bright room, using one of the dozen or so computers. A few doors down the street, Kriss' belongings - a couple of pairs of pants and some socks stored in a duffel bag - were being watched by friends at the Light Street branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, which also offers free Internet access for limited periods.

"I play games sometimes when I'm bored, keep in touch," said Kriss - his beard scruffy, but his hands and hazel eyes animated and active as he spoke about the wonders of the World Wide Web. "I'm homeless, I can't afford to call, but I can send an e-mail for free."

In recent years, homeless people from Vermont to Hawaii have created online journals chronicling their experiences, set up message boards to help others find shelter and food, and

designed sites that offer a clearinghouse of survival information.

Federal Web site

Service providers have picked up on the trend, creating Web pages that tell people how to get help and encouraging use of free e-mail accounts from providers such as Yahoo and Hotmail.

This summer, the U.S. Department of Labor launched a site designed for homeless people - to criticism from some who found it ironic - meant to help them find work.

Among other electronic resources, a public policy advocacy group based in Seattle called Community Voice Mail (www.cvm.org) offers free voice mail to homeless people in 37 cities in 19 states, including Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Free instruction

Although a count of homeless people using computers is difficult to come by, those who work with the homeless and the homeless themselves note an increased presence on the Web. The Labor Department's special Web site, for example, has gotten about 7,500 visitors since its launch in July.

People don't have to have a home computer, much less a home, to gain access to the Internet, social service workers point out. It's often available free in public places like libraries and homeless advocacy centers, said Roslyn Hannibal-Booker, director of Development at the Maryland Center for Veterans Education and Training in Baltimore. Her center offers housing help and skills development, including computer instruction, to homeless veterans, who make up about a quarter of the 2 million to 3 million Americans with no place to live.

The biggest barrier to Internet usage is in the individual: Many homeless people suffer from disabilities, diseases and active addictions that make self-help difficult.

"For those more vulnerable or struggling just to know what day it is, this is not going to be a tool accessible to them," said Kevin Lindamood, spokesman for Health Care for the Homeless in Baltimore. Between 3,000 and 5,000 people are homeless in the city on any given night, and more than 30,000 people experience homelessness in Baltimore every year, he said.

Lindamood's organization provides medical care and addiction treatment to the homeless. Its consumer advisory committee - consisting of current and former homeless people - uses the Internet as its chief mode of communication, and clients of the association often use e-mail to reach staff.

The Internet has "become this great equalizer," he said. "It gives everyone access to information, in some respects, regardless of an individual's personal wealth or affluence."

Kriss, who is from Columbia, S.C., became interested in the Internet seven years ago, after suffering a heart attack induced from crack cocaine use, he said. He winced a little as he said it, clenching his hands together.

His father bought him a computer to use during his recovery, and he quickly became

obsessed, by his description. He spent days at a time teaching himself about the Internet and communicating with hackers. He said they taught him how to break into Web sites, which, in turn, also taught him how to protect them.

Kriss, who receives state aid, is hoping to find work in Web security, protecting sites from hackers. The Internet gave him focus and "freedom," he said, which he has struggled to hang on to through arrests for alcohol and drug addiction and several prison stints for crimes related to both.

He came to Baltimore about two years ago, hoping to stand on his own without his father's help and find work. But potential employers found his criminal record and prison tattoos difficult to get past, Kriss said. His arms are covered with them and the knuckles of his right hand are permanently inked with the letters "LYNX."

"You can't hide that," he said, shrugging. Within six months of coming to the city, in early 2003, he was still jobless, out of money and evicted from his apartment.

He went to stay at a men's shelter in Baltimore for a while, where he met Dan McAfee, another homeless man with computer skills.

The pair "pooled their resources" and went to work developing Web sites for homeless Baltimoreans, said Jim Fragomeni, program manager at the South Baltimore Learning Center, an adult literacy and diploma preparation school that recently underwent a $2.3 million renovation.

Old police station

Housed in an 1896 brick building that was once the city's Southern District police station, the center almost seems luxurious, particularly to someone without a home. It's bright and quiet, with spacious rooms, wainscoting and clean, modern restrooms. Kriss and McAfee often went to the center to go online, although McAfee hasn't been there in several months.

"They're both kind of advocates for homelessness, obviously, but also for using the Web for homeless to help themselves," Fragomeni said. "They've turned on a lot of guys at the rescue mission place to come in and use our lab."

The Enoch Pratt Library branch on Light Street, which Kriss frequents, has also seen more people coming in to use the Internet.

A Web log

"We've always had a steady stream of homeless traffic," said librarian Melanie Oliver, who encourages everyone to use the library's resources, regardless of economic status. "At first, they would just come in to use the public restrooms or sit and read magazines or public newspapers, but more are wanting to use the Internet."

It's a natural fit, said Kriss, who now prefers to stay with friends if he can or sleep outside instead of going to the shelter.

Morgan W. Brown, a 48-year-old homeless man in Montpelier, Vt., has been writing a Web

log - or "blog" (http://norsehorses-turf.blogspot.com) - for two years, first about homeless issues, then about his personal experiences.

"Having an outlet is real important," Brown said by phone last week from a motel, a rare luxury he sprung for to clear his head and clean up, he said. "Especially with being homeless, it's taken on a bit different meaning."

Runaway

Brown's first experience with homelessness came when he was 17 and running away from an abusive, alcoholic father, he said. He spent the next 20-plus years sporadically homeless until about seven years ago, when he last had a residence. He's been "couch surfing" at friends' homes or camping out ever since.

The journal gives him a home on the Web and a way to communicate with family, without having to e-mail each individually.

"It's important to be able to connect with people about stuff that's going on and not feel isolated," Brown said.

'A certain release'

Michael Hussey, 35, who says he is homeless by choice in Tampa, Fla., and plans to attend a blogger convention next weekend, also keeps a blog (http://sullivan40.diaryland.com), but he said he largely uses his to rail at the current government administration.

"I'm still writing about my life as a homeless person - there's definitely a certain release to it, but I kind of already wrote all about that stuff and really don't need it as a release anymore," he said by phone. He has been having trouble getting online lately because of the hurricanes that have hammered Florida - the same reason Kriss' Web site was down last week.

McAfee created a message board a year ago for homeless people (http://groups.msn.com/HOMELESSinbaltimoremd/home.htm). Kriss helped him develop it further by adding coding that makes the site pop up first in certain search engine results.

Since then, they've collaborated on two resource Web sites. The first (www.affuswwa.org/baltimorehomeless/aboutus .html) was created on donated space from Bowie-based CeeMe Enterprises, whose servers in Florida were down last week because of the weather, according to President Carol Paterick.

McAfee - who is no longer living in the shelter and responded to The Sun via e-mail - is trying to raise money for his Web efforts and survival through the second site - http://homelessin baltimore.helpingourhomeless. com - which is under development.

"Really, we're just a network of homeless people all trying to help each other," Kriss said. "When we all put our heads together, hopefully we'll create something that you can go to to get help."

Next 'Dr. Phil'

Fans of homeless diary-keepers say they get something out of the blogs, too.

"I've learned a lot about the struggle people go through," said Stuart Rosen, a Californian who reads several homeless bloggers and says he wants to be the next "Dr. Phil," dispensing his own brand of wisdom. He keeps a blog online under the name "gurustu." There, he has written about, among other things, his contact with - and efforts to help - homeless bloggers, some of whom he considers friends, though he says he remains wary of their chronicles.

"Just because they type a blog doesn't mean they're on the up and up," he said. For the most part though, Rosen said, he doesn't believe the online connections are about corruption.

"It's not about the fame or the fortune or even trying to get a handout. It's about having a story to tell," he said. "The Internet is a home. It's a place to go and connect to people and get support."

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