

After an injury and drug dependency left him unable to work, Allan MacWilliam lost control of his finances. Now, ready to put panhandling behind him, he's determined he's **going somewhere** and will no longer be

The man on the side of the road



Outside, the Texas sun made it blazing hot, and you could tell by the man's rough, tan skin that he had endured many scorching days. As the cars lined up behind the red light, he walked up the road with a peculiar limp. With each step he took, he would give an odd little swivel and his right leg would bend backwards and smash against his left leg, which was in a medical boot. His weird strut caused the sign around his neck — “25 cents would help a lot. God Bless” — to jump against his chest.

He and I made eye contact, and I knew right then that there was no going back. I looked down at the bag of toiletries and granola bars in the reusable grocery bag that my best friend Cade Ritter and I had bought in HEB 10 minutes before, and I started to have uncertainty about my purchase. Would he get offended that I thought he needed the items in the bag?

My legs trembled as I went right up to him, held out my hand and said, “Hi! I’m Olivia, and this is Cade.”

His eyes stared straight into mine, and I saw that they were kind and gentle. They showed struggle and hardships, but I could tell he had a good heart.

“My name is Allan MacWilliam,” he said in a deep and scruffy voice. He and I shook hands. His hands had tough calluses that could only be developed by hard, manual labor.

I took a deep breath and stumbled over the words that I had rehearsed repeatedly on the way over.

“We were wondering if we could talk to you somewhere with more shade? We’re curious about you, and we think that the rest of the Westlake community is, too.”

His face broke into a huge smile, stretching ear to ear. His kind eyes sparkled.

“Sure,” he said. “I have a story to tell.”

I tentatively handed him the bag. As we walked to the spot under the bridge where his belongings lay, there was an uncomfortable silence, and I started to question whether this was a good idea.

I looked down to see a small green backpack. His possessions were categorized in ziplock bags, clean and organized. Once we sat down, it only took a simple “Where are you from, Allan?” to get him to start pouring out his heart.

“[I’m from] upstate New York,” he said. “I came down about 10 years ago, working. I was a carpenter and yeah, it’s been a journey. I was working pretty steady until about six years ago. My back got messed up real bad in the military back in ‘83; I fell two steps off of a ladder and that caused a sciatic nerve injury, and that’s why I have this boot. The doctors strung me out on pain meds. I had a drug problem. I kept working through it, and it just got worse and worse and the doctor’s solution was more pain medicine. Eventually it got to the point where I couldn’t function without the medicine. Between that and alcohol, I just couldn’t pay the bills anymore.”

His hands fidgeted, but his eyes remained steady.

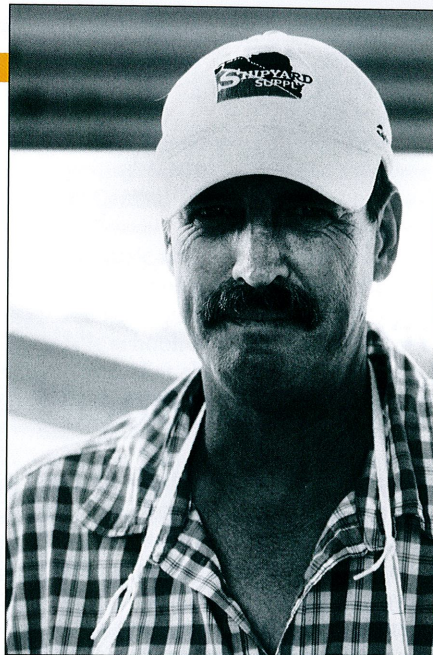
“Where did you go?” I asked.

“I was living behind a [Veteran’s Association] outpatient clinic,” he began. “Then I moved out to Lockhart with a girl, and I was with her for awhile, but me and her went our separate ways. Afterwards I was fortunate enough that someone I go to church with introduced me to someone, and I’ve been staying over there with them for a little bit.”

Throughout our whole conversation, MacWilliam kept repeating



photos by Cade Ritter



Above: Local icon Allan MacWilliam takes a break under the Bee Caves and 360 intersection.

Right: MacWilliam's sign lays atop his personal items as he sits down.

Left: Leaning against his crutch, MacWilliam stands by the side of the road. MacWilliam visits this spot four or five times per month, creating familiarity between him and the Westlake community.



"It's been a journey." He told Cade and me about his everyday experiences with people and his attitude was genuinely positive.

"Westlake is great; the community so supportive," he said. "This is the only corner I go to. I've been here for about five years. If you go somewhere else, there's a bunch of junks on the corner. Being here is further from the bus stop, and it's easier for me to not drink or do drugs like I used to. I had to get away from the problem."

You could see in his demeanor and his eyes the costly mark of the outside world that very few people in our Westlake bubble will ever experience.

MacWilliam explained to us that this corner was very competitive, so if there was more than one person who wanted to be on 360 and Bee Caves, they would take it in shifts. One person would stand there for 30 minutes, and then the next person would take his or her turn.

Hundreds of cars pass the people on the side of the road every day as each person goes through his daily routine. Most don't give a second thought to people like Allan MacWilliam.

"What's the best thing that someone could give you when you're on the street?" I asked him.

"Actually, believe it or not, it's a conversation," he said promptly. "Just for people to let you know that [they're] not shunning you. You know what I mean? I know it's tough for the whole world right now, and I don't want nobody else to be out here. Although, it's a good idea

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—Allan MacWilliam

to give us food or supplies rather than money. Not everyone is like this, but some people will stand on the corner just to get money for drugs or booze. A simple \$5 gift card to McDonald's can go a long way."

The three of us sat in a comfortable silence for a while, listening to the cars go by until MacWilliam spoke again.

"You know, things are looking up for me," he said. "I'm not homeless anymore, and I only have this boot for four to six more weeks, and then I'm gonna try to work again. Eventually I'm gonna start my

own newspaper, and it's gonna be called *The Vine*. I'll send you the first copy if you want."

Cade and I wrote down our email addresses for him in a little journal that he keeps for his ideas for *The Vine*. You could tell that he was planning on working hard to get himself off the streets.

Allan MacWilliam does not stand on the side of the road to get money for drugs and alcohol. He used to beg on the streets every day, but recently this has decreased to four to five times per month after he was introduced to Pride of the Hills Church. He explained to us that the church brought him out of his rut and helped him to turn his life around.

"I'll never go back to that pain medicine," he said. "I'd rather live with the pain. If I'd have lived with the pain, I probably would've never been homeless."

—Olivia Kight