

## Giles, Denise: Places In The Heart A Hometown Hero <sup>(1)</sup>

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### Denise Giles: Places In The Heart A Hometown Hero

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>(2)</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 12/26/1999. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Denise Giles has come a long way since the days when she was homeless in Fayetteville and peddling her own blood to buy groceries. Getting off the streets and out of 18 years of alcoholism, she eventually earned her college degree. Now she is director of Cumberland Inter-Faith Hospitality Network, a church coalition that provides shelter and other help for homeless families.

I talked with Giles at her office at Ashton Woods, a Fayetteville housing complex that is being developed for homeless families who need a transitional place between the streets and a home of their own.

She laughed and cried often during our interview. Behind her laughter and tears, I heard a wisdom and compassion far beyond her 39 years.

She began her story when she was a little girl growing up in Fayetteville during the Vietnam War.

In Denise Giles's words:



**Denise Giles. Photo by Sher Stoneman, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.**

My father was a captain in the Army. He was considered a hometown hero. I remember lying in front of the TV every evening, when they were showing very vivid scenes of bodies and the dismay of the Vietnam War on the evening news, and when he came back from one tour to another in Vietnam, he began to change. Alcohol became a real big part of his life. Looking back on it now, I can understand a little more clearly and have a lot more compassion, but at the time I just didn't. Eventually alcohol became a priority in his life, after he was stationed back here at Fort Bragg. Rather than the happy homecoming I had imagined, I think someone else came home in his body. I can't explain that, except that his eyes weren't. I think he felt the military betrayed him. My father worshiped our government. He believed that you didn't ask questions, you just served and you did. When he got involved in that mission, he found that we might not necessarily be there for the long haul. I think he saw too much. He would lay there and cry sometimes with his head on the table, talking about Vietnamese children, that last picture he would have of their existence. Then he had a homecoming that resulted in him being pretty much. As his drinking progressed, and his confusion grew about where he was sometimes, I was afraid that he might actually kill us, thinking that he was somewhere else. Now I know that there's a thing called post-traumatic stress disorder, but at the time my mother did the best she could do. She was trying to make up the difference in income, because alcohol is an addiction that costs more than just the price of your soul. It costs financially as well.

I had a lot of responsibility in trying to take care of my brothers and to protect them from the rages that would fly through the house. And also to have some sort of normal appearance to life. We would go to school every day and just act like I'm not a person that says, "Well, you know, I lived in a bad situation and that's the reason I am the way I am." But I do believe the things that happen in our lives impact our abilities at having relationships with other people. Something changed. Eventually a neighbor came over and said this man has to be taken away. They took him downtown and encouraged him to call someone from Fort Bragg to pick him up. He moved into the officers quarters out at Fort Bragg and my mother got there. There were some sad times, where he would attempt to get sober. For a minute, you'd have a glimmer of the person you used to know, only to be disappointed shortly with the reality of a disease that was bigger than any one person. He was my mother really had to work hard to raise us. She was a dedicated Army wife and housewife. She had to start from the bottom. I didn't really understand what all was going on, and I felt as if she had abandoned me as well. As I've grown old that was one of the things we always discussed: "Now it's very important you don't get into trouble, because you know they'll come and take you away." We had a lot of fear of being taken away. I think it was still some of that old thinking, [the] that has a lot to do with why I stayed in the house to the length I did. I had wanted to leave since I was about 12, because of the things going on with my father, and the violence, the living in fear that he was going to come down the hall in the house. I began to have trouble in school. I think I was trying to ask for help in some kind of way, but obviously my plea was not heard for what it was. It was simply seen as what it looked like: rebellion and disrespect towards authority.

Now, when I look at children, I wonder: "What's going on at home? And where is it that you came from? And what is it that you are trying to say?" I think sometimes we have to listen a little more. Not look at what an action is, but maybe listen to what they're saying. I got involved in alcohol. My dad had left some alcohol in the house, and I had begun drinking that. I was 12, 13. There was this immediate "the world is OK" that hit me. I said to myself, "I don't want to be my father. I'm going to do this now because I'm not him." Well, within a couple of years I had dropped out of school. I had gotten pregnant and put a child up for adoption. My whole goal in life was to pursue this state of utopia, this place where I could be in myself and not feel ugly, dirty, overwhelmed. I would drink it all! I used to have a saying: If you drink wine like Wild Irish Rose, that was the definition of an alcoholic. Or if you drank in the morning, you were an alcoholic. Well, I didn't get up in the morning. It's amazing how insidious the addiction is. I went to a party essentially and I never came back home. There was a house with a lot of people my age, young military guys, other people. It was real neat with everybody coming together and saying Vietnam has made a disaster of everything. This was heaven for me. It was a lava lamp, black light kind of thing. I was, "I'm here to not feel, and I'm going to do whatever I have to do to do that."

I became pregnant with my daughter, who is 20 now. I was in such an oblivion that I wasn't really aware I was pregnant until I was 4 or 5 months along. I did everything wrong. I quit doing drugs, but I didn't quit drinking. I couldn't quit drinking. Thank God my daughter was healthy. We are graced at times for no apparent reason. In spite of me, she has grown up to be a beautiful young lady. It was very difficult for her. Her father pretty much took care of her. I am sure I humiliated her. The frustration began to grow for my husband. The man is either related to Job or he's a saint. Finally, he kind of looked at me and said: "I believe when you have a child, you have to be there. And that's why I am here." He let me know that n

#### **'The scourge of society':**

I began to steal from my husband. He would think the bills were paid and they weren't paid. We wound up homeless. We lived in a station wagon with two cats and a dog and our child. We would park at the Boulevard Drive-In during the day. We were homeless about six weeks. We lived in the car, and we would move the car as the evening approached and the people would start coming in the drive-in. I would sell plasma, or blood, so we had money, and my husband was working. I could tell by the way people looked at us that we were becoming kind of the scourge of society. I'll never forget people's eyes and that kind of downward tilt that they take as they go by you, like a dog. I hope I don't look at people like that, and there was a little place called Ozzie's that was down by Putt Putt on the boulevard. There were two Korean gentlemen that owned the place. I know that they thought we were crazy, but they allowed my husband to sweep the floors, pick up the trash. I wasn't somebody who walked around, "Hey buddy, would you give me a dime?" I would share with you how tragic life had been. People would just hand you \$5 or \$10, and I would use that money to get what we needed as far as staples go. Krispy Kreme had two outdoor bathrooms. Two gas stations in the area had outdoor bathrooms too. Back then, if you pulled up and wanted to use the bathroom somewhere, it wasn't a real big issue. Now we have got a "customer only" kind of bathroom. We also bathed in outdoor bathrooms. We had friends who had houses or apartments and occasionally we'd pop over there and take what we called a real shower and even cook a real meal. But for the most part, we were pretty much on our own. My husband was still working, and he was pulling in what he could and saving a portion to get into a place to live. That's what we did. Eventually, we contacted a landlord that I had met and they let us move in and pay as we went. The gentleman

With a new home, Denise began to search for help out of her alcoholism. She briefly joined a storefront church near her favorite bar. Later, she joined a religious cult that was recruiting in Fayetteville's bars, but she withdrew as soon as she realized it had an anti-Semitic and paramilitary background. Another night, she found herself in an African-American church whose members embraced her and made her realize how much she needed that sort of unconditional love. She didn't return to the church, but she still considers it a turning point in her recovery.

I cut my drinking down to maybe a weekend kind of thing. [But] when I didn't drink, all the things I drank for came rushing back: guilt, the shame. ... I felt bad, and unworthy. So I just staggered back to where all my friends were - the Shady La I got involved in drinking again, and I began using crack cocaine. Where I thought I had been being bottom was probably a penthouse apartment compared to the bottom I found myself into within a year. Everything I had never said I'd be, I remember sitting in a bar, not really sitting with anybody, realizing that the only thing we all had in common was that we were all in there drowning ourselves.

In 1991, a friend had Denise committed involuntarily to a local hospital while she was blacked out. It was the beginning of a long process of rehabilitation that involved her friends, family and some very committed alcoholism treatment staff at her local mental health center. For the first time since she was a little girl, she was ready to accept their help. Eventually, Denise enrolled in Fayetteville State University, where she found professors who also believed in her. She graduated in 1995.

That was the beginning of a lot of change in my life. We continued to struggle through the beginning of my recovery. But I think that in the first couple of years, I learned more about life than I had my entire time on the planet. I've been clean and sober eight years. When you're an alcoholic, that is your priority, not your children, not your family, not your friends. Now I treasure the moments with the people I love. I value winter, spring, summer and fall. I think I am be She was extremely adventuresome, very curious, always wanting to know why about everything. That little girl was very involved with animals and with nature. She was a girl that was absolutely fascinated by butterflies, and she could wander

I asked Denise how homelessness had changed between her own days on the street and what she sees now as director of the Cumberland Inter-Faith Hospitality Network.

Homelessness is a whole lot different. You may have seen a person around a barrel, but I'm not sure they were actually homeless. They may have been just not able to get home. It wasn't something you saw a lot of. I don't recall ever seeing During the Reagan administration, they pretty much shut down everything between an institution and the street, places where people could go to learn different ways of life - recovering addicts, recovering alcoholics, people with borderline me Losing those residential-type settings immediately impacted what we see on our streets. We see a lot of people who are schizophrenic, and also Alzheimer's patients. We have three women that are wandering around our streets now that are We have got another group of people that are working people that can't afford to live here. They juggle between paying rent and utilities and eventually a child gets the chickenpox for three days and is out of day care. Mom doesn't get to work The homeless population is definitely increasing. We've been staying pretty much at full capacity for two years. That means we have a waiting list sometimes of up to 20 families to get into this program. At any given time, we have 1,500 home We have people here who are surviving day to day, that are so busy trying to get that meal, trying to find a place to park that buggy, trying to get a change of clothes and dip in a creek somewhere to get clean, that there just isn't a whole lot o Our community has embraced the stigma that people want to be homeless. They're just a bunch of bums, a bunch of drunks, a bunch of drug addicts. They're this, they're that. I'm like, even so, they're not going away, so what are we going to I contribute. I am not unique. One thing I have learned, just as much as I was just a garden-variety alcoholic - drunk - I'm just as much a garden-variety human being, with no special talents or anything. I'm just like everybody else. But I sincer I think that the stigma is so easy to grab onto, because then we can walk away. We don't have to take ownership of what's our part in Cumberland County or in North Carolina, that allows these conditions to keep on going. We can wander ar When we see \$100,000 and \$200,000 homes being built, and we know darn well only a small portion in our community can afford those, why don't we demand that reasonable housing be developed? Why don't we demand that city property I personally don't feel it's good enough to give people a place to sleep. If we don't give people options and choices and hope, we might as well not even bother. Because there are people that are ready. I wasn't ready the entire time people tri One of the things we ask is, "When you were a child, what did you dream of being?" Because what I find is, nine times out of 10, homeless people have been stripped of hope and dreams. They're not even there. Let's get back to that: What v The thing that grips me most is the children in each family: Children who don't understand how their whole life changed in a day. Everything that they owned is gone. They're being dragged from place to place. People are looking at them, mal I think that if any time you get to where you wonder why in the world you should go on, you should come here and visit one of these children. They give me every reason every day to continue doing what I do. And to be truly grateful for what v You have to be grateful for what you have at some point, instead of looking at what you don't have. I've had little kids come in and say simply, "We have a meal, we've got a bed, we've got people who care for us. We're happy." They don't ha And yet they come in after school and come running up with pictures that they drew and give us hugs. They feed us! They come in ready with gifts. I think that's the most outstanding thing that I have ever seen. I know people who go to work v On some days I am just absolutely disgusted how we could allow this to continue here. People just walk away. People walk by you! It's happening here in Fayetteville. You could be dead on the street and somebody just walk by you like you're But then, on the other side, I remember the people who stopped for me. What I have to make sure is that I stop. And that I tell other people to stop. If each of us just stops, it makes a difference.

This extended oral history, compiled by historian David Cecelski, who contributes "Listening to History" each month in Sunday Journal, is an excerpt from the [Listening for A Change](#)<sup>[3]</sup> project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#)<sup>[4]</sup> at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[Audio Recording](#)<sup>[5]</sup>: Interview with Denise Giles by David S. Cecelski, 4 August 1999, K-0264, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/15093><sup>[5]</sup>

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