After almost a quarter century, Chris Shaeffer is ready to retire. For City College’s homeless students, he has been the heart of the HARTS program here.

He founded the Homeless At-Risk Transitional Students program in 1992 because he recognized that homelessness was not only a city-wide and national problem – it was a challenge for students in higher education.

The HARTS program has served roughly 3,000 homeless students, and currently averages about 250 students a year.

In 2014, more than 56,000 college students nationwide identified themselves as homeless, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Last year, a study conducted by several organizations, including the Association of Community College Trustees, found 13 percent of community college students have experienced some form of homelessness.

For Shaeffer, statistics don’t tell the whole story.

“I’ve been homeless. I’ve been poor. But I’ve always been treated well by people,” Shaeffer said.

“Piece together your world and see how you can help. That’s where you start out. City College was where my piece of the world started.”

Shaeffer’s combed-back white hair, gray half-rim glasses and calm gray eyes belie his adventurous spirit.

“He’s visited every Latin American country,” said Martha Hurtado, a work-study student in the HARTS office. “You know Machu Picchu? He walked it. He’s walked everywhere. And everywhere he went he got people to invite him into their houses.”

Shaeffer’s personable nature and many adventures lead to a flow of tales about his life.

“Sometimes when there’s no one else in the office he tells me stories,” Hurtado said. “It’s pretty cool.”

“He affects me in a positive way. He doesn’t wallow in the crap and he always wants people to succeed. He always celebrates when people get one step closer to their goals. He’s very smiley and congratulatory when that happens.”

His former employees always come back to visit him.

Shaeffer believes education is paramount, especially for those who are at a disadvantage.

During his 36 years of teaching – 13 as a part-timer – he’s taught a broad range of classes, including noncredit GED, noncredit physics, practical mathematics for engineering technology, typewriter repair and computer repair.

“I did a lot of substitute work,” Shaeffer said. “Day, night, summer. I wanted to make a living teaching in San Francisco.”

Teaching noncredit courses gave him the chance to work with students who have been overlooked by the educational system.

Schaeffer estimates 20 percent of the people in his program are ex-offenders. But he never asks them about their criminal records.

“It’s tough when you wake up on the wrong side of the tracks,” he said. “They’re great people. Interesting people.”

One of his former HARTS students, Carolina Moscoso, graduated from Mills College last spring.

“She spent five years at City, getting her English and math together,” Schaeffer said fondly. “Now she’s going to law school. Before she lived in a car with her younger brother and mother.”

She still visits Schaeffer at the HARTS office about once a year.

“Mr. Schaeffer is a very compassionate man,” Moscoso said. “He’s a very resourceful man. He basically taught me how to look for housing. My starting point was Larkin Youth Services, which helps get young people off the streets. Then I learned about the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation that advocates for low-income families. They were the ones I got housing from.”

Although the HARTS program is Schaeffer’s brainchild, in the beginning he was unsure how to involve others. He didn’t get help or direction at first.
“I thought I was supposed to recruit people from streets, from jails,” Shaeffer said. “I’d go to the Tenderloin and try to convince them to go to City College instead of lying around.”

He told them about the advantages of returning to school, but he didn’t get much of a response.

Back then, Shaeffer was teaching GED courses part-time at the Southeast Campus and to inmates at the San Francisco County Jail in San Bruno.

Shaeffer credits Chuck Agala, who was on the California Community Colleges Board of Governors for over a decade, with creating a task force that helped make the HARTS program a reality.

“He brought people from all over the city to address the challenge of homeless students,” Shaeffer said.

The task force elected Shaeffer as director. He would spend 60 percent of his time coordinating HARTS and the rest teaching classes.

HARTS was originally located in Shaeffer’s office at the Southeast Campus in Bayview-Hunters Point.

“It was a lovely place, but it wasn’t the place to be,” Shaeffer said.

After visiting the main campus, he realized the students most in need of assistance were already enrolled there and “living inside vans, sleeping inside parks.”

In 1993, Shaeffer got his tenure, which prompted him to move his office and change his teaching schedule. It did not, however, change his mission.

Through a 1995 donation that HARTS received from Pacific Bell, he set up a $250 scholarship fund for his students, which he refers to as a “stepping stone scholarship.”

“They write an essay on their lives and I look at their transcripts,” Shaeffer said. “It’s a little thing to keep the rain off of them.”

HARTS students receive discounted Clipper cards and meal cards that are funded through Associated Students.

They pay $25 for BART cards and $15 for Muni-only cards instead of $83 and $70.

Prior to 2010, students didn’t pay for Clipper cards at all. With the ever-increasing prices of public transportation, Shaeffer had no choice but to ask students to chip in.

He personally picks up the Clipper cards once a month at the SFMTA service center.

The other most useful benefit is the personalized food card worth $180 at the Ocean Campus cafeteria.

Shaeffer distributes the cards on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the HARTS office. “Pick up days” can attract up to 40 at-risk and homeless students.

At heart, there is a definite hunger for sustenance and connection.

Richard Lucientes, a work-study student, discovered HARTS while wandering around campus. Before he became part of its staff, Lucientes spent time getting to know and trust Shaeffer.

“I used to hang out for a few minutes just to talk to the professor,” Lucientes said.

“His whole being said, ‘tell me what you need’ without all the red tape you get everywhere else. Without all the bureaucratic bullshit. He gets through all that stuff and takes care of things.

“Later, he said, ‘Hey you, wanna work here?’”

It was the break Lucientes was looking for. He still uses the food card. And Clipper

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Go to school.
It’s work. It ain’t easy.”

– Chris Shaeffer

Chris Shaeffer, founder and director of the HARTS program at City College, talks with student Virlea Johnson in his office. (Franchon Smith/Etc. Magazine)
cards are an absolute necessity because he resides in a halfway house where he is required to report back in-person several times a day.

Lucientes was placed into a reentry program after serving a 22-year sentence for possessing methamphetamines. His goal now is to complete an associate degree in health work, so he can help others navigate through troubled times.

“People don’t know what it’s like getting out of prison, and I think this is the way to do it.”

He wants to influence people’s lives the way Shaeffer has.

“If you’re halfway where he is, you’re in a good place,” Lucientes said.

The sweater vest, button-up shirt and belted slacks Shaeffer wears suggest he has come a long way.

In 1963, he was a student at UC Berkeley when his mother told him the military was looking for him. He joined the National Guard to avoid Vietnam.

“The Vietnam War was a terrible thing,” Shaeffer said, repeating “terrible” five times.

Unlike his father, who died in World War II, Shaeffer didn’t want to sacrifice his life for something he didn’t believe in.

“I was a weekend warrior. Once a month you hang out and take apart M1 carbines and put them back together,” he said. “Didn’t learn anything.”

He later joined the U.S. Army Reserve, but didn’t see any action. He received an honorable discharge in 1967.

Shaeffer returned to Berkeley to finish his bachelor’s degree in physics in 1965.

After graduation, he left the United States and traveled aimlessly for seven years. His sister drove him to Tijuana and from there he took a bus to Guatemala.

He visited Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Australia, sleeping in front of buildings, in jungles and in Peace Corps hostels.

“I wanted to find out if there were better places to live,” Shaeffer said.

He couldn’t find any.

After returning to California in 1975 with almost nothing, he took up painting houses to earn money.

Shaeffer found work as a handyman in Potrero Hill. His home for six months was an attic inside an abandoned building.

When a woman he worked for learned that he was squatting, she took him into her home.

“I call her Mrs. H.,” Shaeffer said. “Lovely, tough woman. I stayed with her until I got my act together.”

He got it together by resuming his education. His initial plan was medical school, but he hadn’t been inside a classroom for nine years.

“I’m a rough guy who went through rough times. I thought if anyone could handle me, it would be a philosophy department,” Shaeffer said. “I took philosophy classes at Berkeley and liked the staff there. So I decided to get a master’s in philosophy at SF State.”

He attended classes at night and worked a variety of jobs by day – house painting, work-study, tutoring and developing curriculum for Vietnam veterans.

By the age of 43, he completed his master’s degree. It took him nine years.

“Education is important,” Shaeffer said. “Want to change? Go to school. It’s work. It ain’t easy.”

He found his calling in helping disadvantaged students navigate the confusing process of entering the academic world. He takes pride in his students’ achievements.

“Give them a year and they change,” Shaeffer said. “Their speech changes. Their attitude changes. These are life-defining changes.

“I’ve seen people change and grow like the lotus flower out of the mud. I’ve also seen people who haven’t gotten far with their lives,” Shaeffer said. “That’s what education is about – reorganizing your thought processing on a higher level.”

Shaeffer, 74, wasn’t planning to retire this year, but he was diagnosed in March with Parkinson’s disease.

“I thought I might go on until I’m 75, but I got this.” He held up both hands, palms down, and they shook slightly.

Shaeffer also recognized he has become increasingly forgetful. One morning, he forgot to take his medication before work, then forgot to tell his son to bring it to him. He struggled throughout the rest of the day. It reinforced for him that it was time to retire.

Yet, he still finds things to do.

In March, he worked with University of the Pacific’s School of Dentistry in SOMA to bring free dental assistance for those under his care.

He said he will take it easy after he retires, but is already talking about recording his life’s adventures.

“Got some stories to tell and my kids can read it later,” he said.

Shaeffer and his wife Xian have a 19-year-old son and a 21-year-old daughter who attend City College. His daughter is an engineering major. His son is undecided. They are continuing a tradition at the school where their father found his calling.

“It’s been a life, you know;” he said. “I’ll miss the students... Helping people get their lives together and helping them stay there... Just hanging out and talking to them.”

Looking back, he said it doesn’t seem like that long ago.

HARTS Director Chris Shaeffer outside his office on Ocean Campus. (Gabriela Reni/Etc. Magazine)