



Yvette Wright in front of the West Oakland tiny home that neighbors Douglas Kittredge and Zach Carroll built for her in October.

Home Sweet TINY Home

Neighbors help homeless receive simple, livable housing

Story and photos by Gabriela Reni

Yvette Wright, 57, lives in a tiny house with her 12-year-old pit bull, Remy. “We are just two old women hanging out,” she says, smiling. Remy is laying on a big puffy couch cushion by the front door.

Yvette, who has three sons and a daughter, 16 to 28 years of age, has been living in this six-by-eight, 48-square-foot shelter since early October. Before that she was homeless. For six years.

Her three grown children are on their own. Her 16-year-old son is living with his sister. During those six years, Yvette didn’t go to a homeless shelter because she had Remy.

“It might be silly to choose the dog over my own habitat or livelihood,” she says, “but it’s something that I promised my son. She’s been great. She’s getting old like we all are,

but she’s still here.”

Yvette’s 26-year-old son, Wayne, has been in prison for four years and is expected to be released in 2020.

Since Remy is his dog, his mother wants to make sure that his companion will be there when he gets out.

“I’m hoping she will live another four years,” Yvette says. “Even though she’ll be old when he comes home, at least we have a chance to live that together.”

For Yvette and her son, Remy is a link to the past.

“Sometimes you are meant to go through certain things,” says Yvette. “I always had cars, I always had money, credit cards, you know...I didn’t really realize how great it was. It was like a fairytale life.”

She was the type of person who would stop

if she saw a homeless person on the street and give them a dollar. Her kids would ask her why, and she would respond “because you never know... you never know where you’re going to end up.”

Yvette used to live in a nice home near Lake Merritt in Piedmont, where she was raised since the age of three. Her four children were also born and raised in the only home she had ever known.

Things started to unravel, though, when the house developed a plumbing leak. She and her 80-year-old mother were talked into a reverse mortgage. After the death of her mother, the loan was due, and Yvette was unable to pay it.

“We were forced to move out. So me and my kids became homeless.”

The 26 bus line runs from her former



Zach Carroll (left) and Douglas Kittredge, the builders of Yvette Wright's tiny home.

"It didn't sit well with us...we were starting to feel a little bit despicable, we were allowing a fellow human being to live under a piece of plastic on our street." – Zach Carroll

Piedmont home down Lakeshore Avenue and 14th Street to Willow Park, the first place she would sleep after becoming homeless.

Her voice cracks as she says, "It's ironic that I would end up from the top to the bottom in a straight line."

It's kinda sad, she says, knowing she can always go up the street to visit her old neighborhood. But she hasn't been there in years.

After moving in and out of several places, she ran out of money and options. She decided to live on the streets with Remy so her kids would not have to support her.

She was frightened to death.

"I didn't know anything about camping out or starting a fire, or keeping warm, or sleeping under the stars," Yvette says. "For a time it was very exciting, and then the excitement started to wear off and reality started to set in. It was like, 'I really don't have anywhere to go, I just really don't.'"

Even temporary shelter options on the street are limited.

When she was sleeping in a bathroom at Willow Park, people complained and she had to leave. When she was sleeping under a tree in Raimondi Park, people complained and she had to leave.

After spending a short time in People's Park in Berkeley, Yvette decided to go back to West Oakland, where she stayed in the back of a broken down truck on 17th Street for six months.

Jennifer Carlin-Dawgert, chair of the Behavioral Sciences Department at City College, says homeless people are almost always stereotyped in a negative way.

"When you have repeated negative experiences and you don't have a way of making it better, you can begin to learn that you have no way out," she says. "Breaking that internal cycle of feeling helpless and hopeless can be very common among people who have chronic homelessness."

Yvette admits it has tested her faith and courage. Before she lost her mom and her

house, she always felt secure because she had family and a place to call home.

"There have been times when I didn't know what to do, or where to go, or what was next," Yvette says. It was a helpless feeling.

She has learned to rely on herself as well as others.

Neighbors pay her to help them clean their kitchens and bathrooms, and cook for them.

"I make money doing something I enjoy doing, around people I get along with. What more can I ask for?" Yvette says.

Douglas Kittredge, who lives in the neighborhood, didn't know her at all. And the 45-year-old carpenter had never built a tiny house before.

He'd say hello to her every day as he passed by on his way to and from work. She was living in the back of the broken down truck at the time. When he saw police towing the truck away and Yvette setting up a tarp along a fence line, he felt he needed to help. He was concerned about the changing weather.

The news was forecasting El Niño and heavy rains.

Kittredge says he got tired of seeing her situation worsen, and asked her if she would be OK with him building her a small shelter.

"I knew I had a bunch of scrap materials. She seemed pretty happy about the idea. It seemed like a no-brainer, it had to be done."

His work partner and friend Zach Carroll wanted to help him with the project. The situation was frustrating for Carroll as well.

"We were allowing a fellow human being to live under a piece of plastic on our street," says Carroll, who felt that continuing to turn a blind eye "would signify a certain poverty of spirit within yourself."

Two days later, they delivered the six-by-eight-by-seven-foot, 48-square-foot, wooden shiplap-sided structure. With one window, a built-in bed, and minimal shelving, it's pretty basic. No toilet, no running water.

Yvette has to walk a block to Raimondi Park to use the bathroom. Neighbors let her fill her five-gallon plastic water jug from their garden hoses.

Though minimal in size and amenities, she has privacy and can lock the door.

Not exactly like ABC-TV's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. But she loves it and dreams of the possibilities.

"I would like to be the first tiny house with solar in this neighborhood," Yvette says.

She feels blessed. She now has a place where she feels safe and can rest undisturbed.

She loves having a home, even if it is tiny. If she didn't have errands to do, she would prefer staying home and relaxing.

"I really am a homebody," Yvette says. "But I miss having a kitchen."

Cushions line her built-in bed. A tiny TV that no longer works lets her listen to NPR. A few little tables and shelves hold an orchid, canned foods and a collection of her books, including a complete anthology of Edgar Allan Poe and a biography of artist James Ensor. A small vanity provides storage for her jewelry. A box and two bags of clothing are tucked under her bed and in a corner. Her lone window is adorned with a gnome named Harry.

She has a good relationship with her neighbors and the police who patrol the area. One officer told her that unless a neighbor complains, she could continue staying in her current location.

Because her home has wheels, she can always move somewhere else.

In the six months she has lived there, she has been able to concentrate on her writing and drawing again, passions she's had since

attending Piedmont High School. Her notebook and pieces of her artwork and are beside her bed.

"I really like to draw. I didn't know how much I missed it," Yvette says, laughing. "I am learning to paint, and I am loving it. I am adding color to my world."

She'd like to display and sell some of her artwork.

"I feel my art one way and I'm curious to know how other people feel about it."

If she moves off the street, she wouldn't take anything but Remy and her clothes. She says she would leave the tiny home to a friend or another homeless woman. She hopes it would inspire them to do great things, the same way it inspires her.

Kittredge has gotten to know her a lot better over the past six months. She strikes him as very intelligent and articulate.

"She seems happier," he says. "Of course having a roof over her head helps her sanity a lot."

"She definitely seems like she smiles a lot more."

Her oldest son, Robert, and his girlfriend visit her often. He works at the American Steel warehouse a few blocks away, and is always there if she needs him.

City College Behavioral Sciences Chair Jennifer Carlin-Dawgert notes that cultivating relationships is important to mental health.

"From an attachment theory perspective, as human beings we do not do well alone. We are not sea turtles swimming in the ocean by ourselves."

"In fact, when we are alone we have higher rates of mental health issues.... We really need each other."

For people like Yvette, attachment is super



Top and Above: Yvette Wright draws inside her tiny home while her pit bull Remy rests in bed next to her.

Yvette works at night with the aid of a flashlight to finish a detail in one of her drawings.



Yvette Wright walks outside her house after just waking up on a Sunday morning. She is heading to a water source to clean her dog's blanket.

"I am not an extraordinary person. I am not a very talented or gifted person. I am not a special person. But I am a person."

– Yvette Wright

important, Carlin-Dawgert says.

"It's interesting that once she got a place she could really start cultivating her attachments more."

Yvette's friend Dallas, who lives a block away in a small two-story, two-bedroom house on 16th Street, comes by every now and then to hang out. As an artist, she shares her perspective on Yvette's work.

Her network of friends includes Larry, who sleeps under a tree in Raimondi Park, and Earl, who used to be a gang member and who served time in prison, but now works for a rehab organization that helps young men escape violent lifestyles.

She also enjoys her regular visits with her friend Charlie, another tiny home occupant. He has a way of always getting a laugh out of her.

"Charlie-O is a survivor. No matter what happens, he's got a gadget, a way to fix it," Yvette says.

Charlie is Yvette's next door neighbor, who also lives in a tiny home. His is decorated like a '60s Volkswagen van. The word "groovy" is written across both the front and back.

In March, Charlie moved into the four-foot by seven-foot dwelling designed by Gregory Kloehn, who has built hundreds of tiny houses for homeless people throughout



Yvette and her tiny home neighbor Charlie joke around in front of her home in West Oakland.

the Bay Area.

“Our goal,” Kloehn says on his website, “is to bring together imaginative people and discarded material to make sturdy, innovative, mobile shelters for the homeless people.”

With 35,000 homeless in the Bay Area, good Samaritans and social activists like Kloehn, Kittredge and Carroll have their work cut out for them.

Not all social workers and homeless advocates are in agreement on the benefits of tiny homes, though.

Carol Denney, the human rights editor of Street Spirit, a homeless-activist newspaper

based in Berkeley, recently told the San Francisco Chronicle she is against proposed plans for tiny homes in Berkeley.

“Tiny homes are an insidious, seductive mechanism for pouring enormous amounts of resources into housing as few people as possible,” she says. “You can build real houses for a lot less for what you’re getting.”

The ‘cute’ factor of tiny homes attracts attention, she says, but doesn’t solve the bigger problem.

“We are a rich country. Why should homeless people have to live in something super-small just because they are poor?”

Meanwhile, Yvette, whose tiny home provides temporary shelter, says she is learning about the difference between wants and needs.

“We find out that most of them are wants, not necessarily needs. Wants become less and less important, and when you do have the opportunity to get what you want, it becomes more special.”

City College architecture instructor Simon Udell says homelessness is a problem we all have to address.

“It’s about human dignity. We should have the right to a decent place to live. It doesn’t have to be a big mansion, but I think we do have a right to these things.

“It is really a big problem, but it’s not an architecture problem. It is a society problem,” he says.

“We put a stigma on homeless people, like they did something bad in their life so they ended up in this situation and we are not gonna help them.”

Redevelopment plans in West Oakland could displace Yvette and other homeless and low-income people. Even so-called affordable housing is too expensive.

“There’s a whole lot of people out here who were raised in West Oakland and are homeless,” Yvette says. “I don’t know where they are gonna go.”

Kittredge says she is a good example of the type of people who have lost their home.

“You see people everywhere in the process of being evicted from their homes and many of them end up in the streets,” he says.

Kittredge is interested in developing tiny house designs and finding affordable solutions. He hopes to make tiny houses for all kinds of people.

“A lot of people are not very far from being homeless. With the real estate market going the way it is, there is overwhelming interest in tiny houses from all kinds of people.”

Yvette hopes her tiny house will be a bridge to a better life.

“There is so much goodness left in the world,” she says. “Everyone would have a sense of purpose if they just realized that giving from oneself unconditionally could really heal the world.

“I am not an extraordinary person. I am not a very talented or gifted person. I am not a special person. But I am a person,” Yvette says.

“It all comes down to being another human being.”