

AROUND TOWN

people and events and happenings

Homeless in HdG



Matt Button/Record staff

K and T, the two homeless women standing in Havre de Grace, recently began wearing signs speaking of Rosa Parks. They believe their fight has taken on a similar light as that of the civil rights legend who refused to give up her seat.



Matt Button/Record staff

These two ladies, known only as "K" (the mom) and "T" (the daughter), have become fixtures in Havre de Grace, particularly at the intersection of Route 40, Otsego Street and Ohio Street, where they stand and pass each day.

Two mysterious women become a mainstay of HdG

By Erika Butler
Record staff

Anyone who drives Route 40 in Havre de Grace has seen the two women standing on the corner near One Stop Liquors at the busy intersection of the highway, Otsego Street and Ohio Street.

Day in and day out, they're there. Standing. They don't sit. They stand and read, talk to each other and watch what's going on around them.

It's been so long, no one can really say how long they've been there.

Before they moved to Route 40, the pair was closer to downtown Havre de Grace, camping out at the high school one summer a few years ago.

They also made the Havre de Grace Post Office their home base for a while.

They've stood on different places along Route 40, but in the last year or two, they've taken up residence at the corner. At night, sometimes they sleep behind the Weis grocery store, near vents that put out heat.

Everyone has seen them, the mother and daughter, but few, if any, know their story. They opened up a few days ago to provide a few details, but for the most part, they're not saying much and they wouldn't give their names.

Lou Ward, owner of The Bayou restaurant just up Route 40 from where the two stand, used to talk to

them often. He said he never knew their names, but thought they went by the letters "K" (the mom) and "T" (the daughter).

They say their story is all about principle. Principle and respect and freedom and independence.

They won't say what put them in their situation, other than something about identity theft. And because of their situation — living on the streets — K's son who is T's brother was taken away from them, they say.

They have been wronged, and they're waiting for it to be made right.

"We're here to do a job and get my son back," said the older of the two women, K, who looks young, but must

be in her mid to late 40s. "I'm not giving him up for nothin' in this world."

K's son was born in 1995 and was taken away by social services almost six years ago. They say they've been trying to get him back ever since.

"When they took him I told my son, who was 7 then, 'Nothing but death can keep me from you,'" K said.

K also said something about identity theft, at a high-paying job she used to have, and that's part of the reason they're where they are. But she wouldn't explain further.

They're working on their case, they said, but wouldn't say who is helping them or what avenues they're taking to try and get back on their feet.

"It's not a choice," K said. "We don't

want to be out here."

They'll stand there as long as it takes.

"People are afraid of the change that's coming. That's justice," K said. "I want justice, and it's coming."

In the last few months, K and T have taken to wearing signs around their necks that say "Rose Parks" and "Rosa Parks denied."

Rosa Parks was a black woman who wouldn't give up her seat on a bus in December 1955 for a white passenger.

"She was tired," T said. "We were tired."

"Something has been done wrong to

Please see HOMESLESS, B4

An interchange unique on I-95

Forty-four years and two months after the Northeastern Expressway — John F. Kennedy Highway — I-95 first opened to motorists, the interchange at Route 155 northwest of Havre de Grace remains a veritable oasis.

Between Baltimore and Wilmington, Del., all other interchanges that opened with the highway in November 1963 have seen some amount of commercial development nearby, as has the Riverside-Route 543 interchange that opened a quarter century later. The one other exception is the Joppa-Route 152 interchange, where there is only a smattering of commercial building close by compared to the other interchanges.

Still, the Route 155 interchange has zero, zilch, nothing. Through all the years and various schemes by developers, the interchange has been spared the glare of gas stations, fast-food joints and motels.

It seems unlikely, however, that the area will stay that way much longer. Havre de Grace's municipal boundaries have leapt out Route 155 and Chapel Road in the last 15 years, to the point where the city limits now butt up against

the interchange. Water and sewer service, whose absence was long a drawback to any development, are nearby, and developers are chomping at the bit.

Late last year, a North Carolina developer announced plans to develop a business park on what is generally known as the Barker property right at the southeast corner of the interchange. Up to 900,000 square feet of retail and office space could be developed, according to the developer's local representative, Tom Fidler, a commercial broker who is also president of the Harford County Board of Education.

In addition to this plan, Upper Chesapeake Health has signed a contract to purchase 30 acres across Bulle Rock Parkway from the Barker site, immediately fueling speculation the nonprofit Harford County healthcare company intends to eventually relocate its Harford Memorial Hospital in downtown Havre de Grace to the interchange area.

Most of this talk is just that — chatter and posturing. And, it's hardly anything new.

The outfit that wants to develop the Barker property is considering



ALLAN VOUGHT

a 70-foot high building, described by Fidler as a "gateway" building. There's a 55-foot limit in Havre de Grace, although zoning variances can always be granted. But if you go back in history a little, when the Barker property was still in the county, its owners obtained zoning for a hotel back in the late 1960s, although there was a height limit imposed on the six acres involved. Many people at the time feared a high rise monstrosity would otherwise be the result. The height limitation, and I don't recall exactly what it was, maybe three stories, maybe six, actually was considered a hindrance by developers and was often cited as one reason — the

other being the lack of public water and sewer — the property was never developed for a hotel.

As for the Harford Memorial speculation, we've heard that one before, too. Back in the early 1980s, when the hospital seemed to be floundering and losing patients to other hospitals in the region, the downtown Havre de Grace location was cited as a drawback. The late Dr. Wallace Sadowsky, who felt the hospital needed to have an aggressive marketing and redevelopment plan, suggested to me that Harford Memorial wouldn't survive if it didn't move closer to I-95 and to the population growth in central Harford County. He also felt, however, such a move was unlikely to happen because so many of the doctors who practiced at the hospital had invested in downtown Havre de Grace properties for their offices.

If you fast forward to the 1990s, when Upper Chesapeake, now in control of Harford Memorial, was planning its new hospital in Bel Air, there was concern within Havre de Grace's medical and business community that Harford Memorial would either close outright or be significantly downgraded. This

opposition succeeded in stalling the Bel Air project for a number of years and forced Upper Chesapeake officials to make some concessions regarding Harford Memorial's future, all of which have been honored, as best I can determine. While Harford Memorial isn't the same institution it was when I-95 opened, or even 30 years ago, the hospital seems to be flourishing.

Which is not to say Upper Chesapeake wouldn't entertain moving closer to I-95 and building a new hospital similar to the behemoth campus it has in Bel Air. With the huge usage at the Bel Air hospital since it opened just seven years ago, the marketplace has shown Harford County can probably support two full-service hospitals.

Maybe we've finally reached the point where development of the I-95/Route 155 interchange, seemingly preordained eons ago, is finally going to become reality. Then again, we've heard such talk before, so let's not take too much stock in it until we actually see the bulldozers and the cranes arrive.



Matt Button/Record staff

K and T have been in and around Havre de Grace for a few years. They have stayed at a variety of locations around the city, but most recently have set up camp on Route 40 in front of the One Stop Liquor store.



Matt Button/Record staff

HOMELESS:

Mysterious women live on HdG streets

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us and we have rights, as individuals and as a family, a family of three," K said.

They also want respect. Just because they're living on the streets doesn't mean they should be treated any differently than anyone else, T said.

"You can't disrespect someone you don't know or because they don't look like you," she said.

Standing on the corner, they've been subject to all kinds of comments, most of them not very nice, from passersby.

But they just ignore it the best they can.

Some personal notes

While K and T talked for close to two hours, they chose their words carefully. If it sounded like K was going to say too much (because she's the outspoken one), T would put an arm on her mother's shoulder and say, "let's leave it at that."

They're very close, and it's obvious T is very protective of her mother.

"I have to be. We're all we have," T said.

Others have said it's the other way around, K is the one who controls T.

They wouldn't go into their entire story because they said they didn't think The Record was the right place for it. They need a paper that's larger, one that will more likely spur some kind of action, they said, where more people will see what's been happening to them.

Not only will K and T not talk about their situation except in vague terms, they won't divulge much personal information. But some things are revealed during regular conversation.

They're intelligent women who are very well-spoken and very well-informed. They read the newspapers, and sometimes the gossip magazines, too.

When Mayor Wayne Dougherty stopped by, K said to him: "I know you look good in a dress," referring to a picture in The Record of Dougherty dressing up in drag for a "fashion show" at the Havre de Grace Activity Center a few months ago.

They're also very observant. They see the mayor drive past them every morning. They see the people walking by on the street. Not much goes on in their little corner of Havre de Grace that they don't know about.

However dependent they are on each other, they're that independent as a team. They don't want help from anyone else, they said, they just want their situation to be corrected.

"We don't want to be taken care of, we want to take care of ourselves," K said.

But they also seem afraid. When a car drives by and the windows are open, they stop talking. When someone walks by, they stop talking.

"I don't want people in my business," K said.

Both of them say they went to college, but neither finished. K says she wants to go back one day and get her degree.

K also wants to open her own business someday.

"We are determined to get where we need to be in life, and we plan to do

that as a family," K said.

They used to wear clothes from Lord and Taylor, and they had a house and a car, they said.

Their belongings are limited to what they can carry with them and wear on their backs.

They wear similar outfits: work boots, navy pants that look like Dickies and several layers on top - a shirt, a fleece, a heavier down-type jacket.

Their clothes were somewhat dirty, but neither of them smelled. And they're relatively attractive women.

They drag their things with them wherever they go. Their things consist of two large suitcases, one of which is heavily duct-taped. Strapped to one are two umbrellas, one of those is broken so it's questionable how effective it is. They also have two large duffel bags and two shoulder-briefcase type of bags.

They eat, often salmon, they said. And the other day they were eating at Waffle House, where some people made comments, looking in their direction, about "going home to a warm bed."

But they wouldn't say where they sleep, how they pay for their food or how they get their money. Just that they're together and they survive.

Obedying the law

K and T said they'll stay where they are as long as they need to.

"You don't leave the scene of a crime," K said.

And as long as they're not doing anything illegal, the police can't make them move, Havre de Grace Police Maj. John Van Gilder said.

"The bottom line is they're not breaking the law, they're not in imminent danger to anyone else or themselves," Van Gilder said. "We can't force them to get help, if they choose not to."

His officers have tried to talk to K and T over the years, he said, but they've never been very receptive.

He's sent female officers up there, and black officers up there, but they just won't talk, he said.

"We tried every avenue [to help them], but communication is really a challenge. For whatever reason, they choose not to interact with anyone from our organization," Van Gilder said.

Offers of help

It's the same story from everyone. In the last year or so, Havre de Grace Mayor Wayne Dougherty said, he's tried just about anything he can think of to help K and T.

"They pretty much totally refused," he said. "They made a comment about Jesus taking care of them, they don't want any assistance from us."

He recently contacted Mobile Crisis Services of Sheppard Pratt Health System, which could intervene and provide mental health care for the women.

But like everyone else who's tried to help, they refuse.

"All the agencies you can imagine are all extremely frustrated because these women will not accept any help," said Shawn Dundon, program coordinator for Sheppard Pratt Mobile Crisis Services. "We have worked with all kinds of other agencies; they've called us, police called us, random passersby called us. There's really not a whole lot that can be done because they're not really in danger or dangerous to anyone else."

One or the other of the two could be treated for mental health issues, but that poses two problems. They've both tended to be hostile toward mental health people and police, so they may not get anywhere. The other issue would be possible ramifications from splitting the two of them, who

ever. Sometimes, police and others see them taking things from people who stop by to talk.

A roof over their heads

When they would stand outside The Bayou Restaurant, Ward would often offer them food, but they wouldn't take it. He said he found they would take it if he just left it out for them and then walked away.

At one point, they asked Ward if he could help them find a place to live. He went to the city for help, he said, and they found a place on Vancherie Court where they wouldn't have to fill out any paperwork.

"They wouldn't do it," Ward said.

Some time later, he worked with Charlie Hiner of BCH Real Estate and together they found a place on Wilson Street where K and T could stay for a while, without having to give any identification or fill out any paperwork.

Hiner wouldn't charge rent, and Ward would take care of the utilities, at least to help them get back on their feet.

"Our hope was maybe we could help them in the long term, if we helped them in the short-term," Hiner said.

"They didn't want it," Ward said.

"After that, I said 'Look, I don't know what to do. You're not going to get your son back. You have to start somewhere,'" he said.

He's had no contact with them since.

Hiner was a little more

'We don't want to be taken care of, we want to take care of ourselves.'

— K

are each dependent on the other.

"Most people I've talked to about them have mostly conversed with the mother. I never heard of anyone who's actually spoken to the daughter. The mom is very protective of her," Dundon said. "That's one of our fears in kicking around ideas. If it came to where law enforcement stepped in, what would happen if they were separated?"

Right now, there doesn't seem to be anything Dundon or his agency can do, since they won't accept help.

"We're stumped. I know everybody's frustrated. We're just one of the many agencies who don't really know what it is we can do," he said. "We know about them, we think about them every day. But unless they agreed to something, it would be impossible to take them in any positive direction."

The police department has gotten dozens of phone calls from people asking about the two women on the corner. The callers ask how they can help, or why no one has helped them.

The answer from police, as well as from others who have offered help, is that they have tried, but there's nothing they can do.

K and T don't refuse all help, how-

Dougherty told them when he stopped to join the conversation. They mayor lives on Camilla Street at the top of Otsego Street behind One Stop and every morning drives through the intersection where they stand.

"Standing in that median, with your dark clothes on early in the morning before the sun comes up, scares me to death that I'm going to see you both lying in the middle of the road," he told them.

"Say what you want about me, but I say a prayer: my God I hope they make it through the night," he said.

The mayor said he wants to see the women in some kind of housing where they can get warm meals and are safe.

"You are very capable of taking care of yourselves," he told them. "I'd like the opportunity to help you, get you a place to stay, so you're not looking over your shoulder, or behind you."

The help K and T ask the mayor for was to allow them to use the Havre de Grace post office, from which they've been barred.

"As citizens, we should be able to patronize it," T said.

They have business they need to conduct, and they need to use the post office to do their business, though they wouldn't say what the business is.

They were kicked out of the post office in summer 2006 by a postal inspector and police.

While K and T deny it, others said they would sleep in and around the post office, occasionally defecate outside the building. Then they started defecating inside the 24-hour lobby.

Sometimes, they'd set up the artificial plants as barriers, to make rooms for themselves.

Some of the shift workers who would use the post office at off-hours sometimes got scared when they'd go inside in the wee hours of the morning and find two people sleeping on the floor.

Eventually, post office employees called the inspector, who had the pair barred from the building.

Dougherty, during his conversation with them, said he would see what he could do so they could use the post office services.

As long as it takes

Do K and T consider themselves survivors?

"That's for someone else to say," T said.

At least someone does.

"They're survivors. They're able to do this day in and day out, months and years at a time, and somehow they get by," Dundon said.

And they said they'll stay on their corner as long as they must to get their son and brother back, but it's clear they're getting tired.

"It's been going on for a while, it's time to end," K said. "I love my son wholeheartedly."

"And I love my brother," T added.