Patience is everything when you're homeless. Crisis Ministries, the local shelter, opens its doors for the evening at 7 p.m., and there's always a line of several dozen men and women waiting to be let in. Then there are lines for the showers and for dinner. It takes months to earn the right to come and go as you please. Going anywhere—to work, for instance—means waiting for the bus. Many homeless people are not well, and for them there's waiting to heal, waiting for disability applications to come through.

When the weather is hot and muggy or cold and rainy, the shelter is filled to capacity. But Crisis is more than a roof and a bowl of soup—for every person who walks through these doors, Crisis has a plan and a caseworker to help them find alternatives. It's a place for hope, a place to stop being homeless.

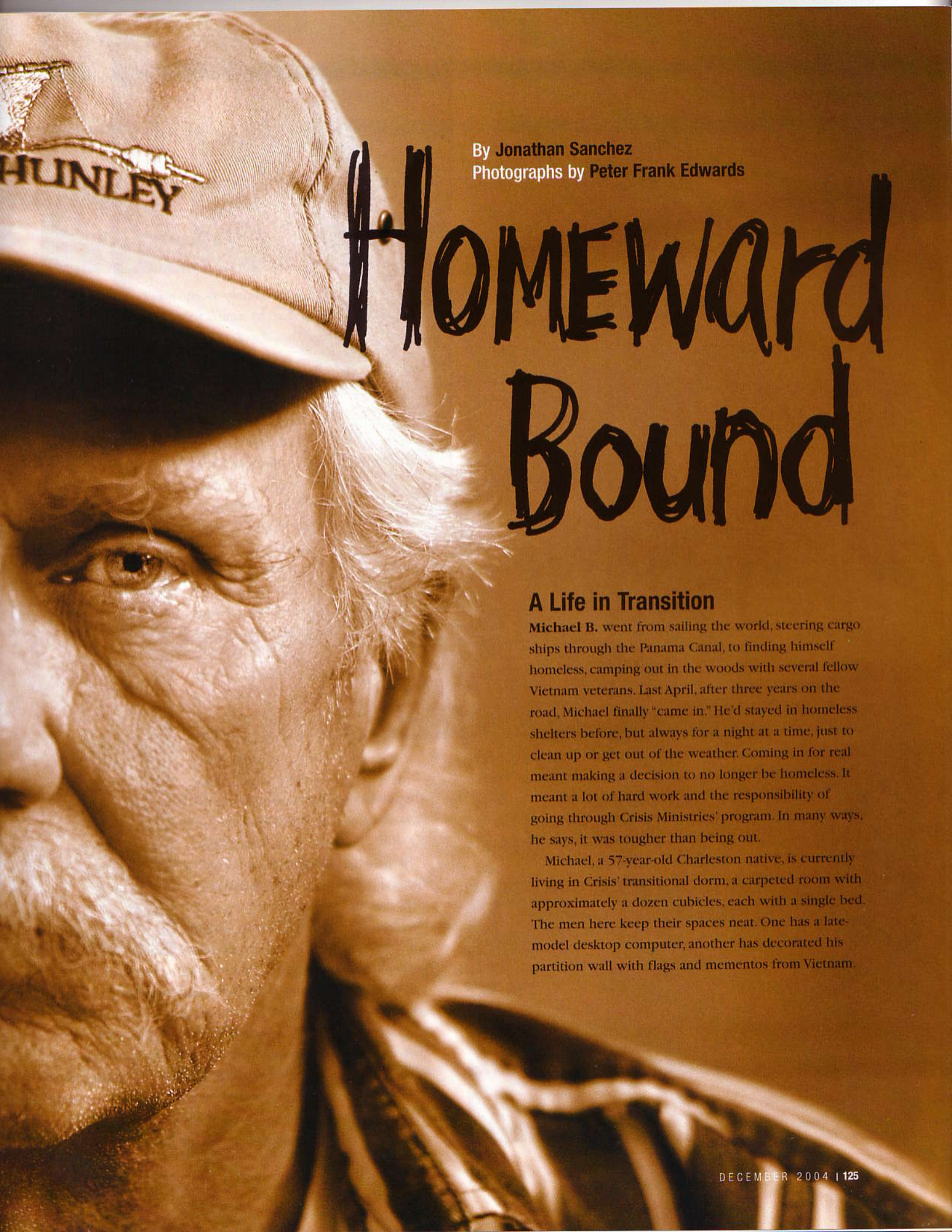
But this doesn't happen overnight. Most of the people you might see hanging around outside 573 Meeting Street, the center's address, are mentally or physically disabled. Others have begun work and may struggle for months to get back on their feet. You might say climbing out of homelessness is in itself an exercise in patience.

Meet two of Crisis Ministries' clients: a Vietnam vet who has spent months working his way up but says he's still not out of the woods; and a former two-year resident who has moved into her own apartment and says she's as happy as she's ever been.

These are their stories.

"I don't know if I'm going to make it or not, but you have to decide that you don't want to be homeless."

—Michael B.



By Jonathan Sanchez
Photographs by Peter Frank Edwards

Homeward Bound

A Life in Transition

Michael B. went from sailing the world, steering cargo ships through the Panama Canal, to finding himself homeless, camping out in the woods with several fellow Vietnam veterans. Last April, after three years on the road, Michael finally "came in." He'd stayed in homeless shelters before, but always for a night at a time, just to clean up or get out of the weather. Coming in for real meant making a decision to no longer be homeless. It meant a lot of hard work and the responsibility of going through Crisis Ministries' program. In many ways, he says, it was tougher than being out.

Michael, a 57-year-old Charleston native, is currently living in Crisis' transitional dorm, a carpeted room with approximately a dozen cubicles, each with a single bed. The men here keep their spaces neat. One has a late-model desktop computer, another has decorated his partition wall with flags and mementos from Vietnam.

"I've been to a lot of homeless shelters, and this is the safest. That's what enabled me to stay and do these things I needed to do."
—Michael B.

They all work and can come and go as they please. It's more like a large college dorm room or a youth hostel. "This is a big, big deal," Michael says, "a real privilege."

He paid his dues to get here, spending four months in the General Population room, waiting in line every single night for a spot on the floor. "It was nerve-wracking," he says. "You're talking about 70 men in an area the size of a basketball court, so you can imagine the chaos. People are getting up in the middle of the night and stepping on you."

But Michael found a job, attended regular meetings with counselors and doctors, and after two months was promoted to "First Steps," something of a VIP status. There were still the same shared showers and the same crowds, but he was let in an hour early, which gave him the chance to clean up and maybe get one of the better floor mats. Two months later, he moved into the transitional dorm. But he was always on his best behavior; a slip-up at any time could have meant going back to waiting in line.

A Charleston police officer spends nights on duty in the shelter. After Michael's first couple of months, conditions changed dramatically when Pvt. Kay Wang came on the beat. "Officer Wang knows every single person who stays here by name. He can tell if you're drinking, and he'll sit you down—maybe he'll let you in, maybe he won't," Michael says. "He's just done amazing things for this place. He's not a very big man, but he has complete control. I've been to a lot of homeless shelters, and this is the safest. That's what enabled me to stay and do these things I needed to do."

Homeless since 2001, Michael B. has found shelter at Crisis Ministries and earned his way into "First Steps," a cubicle, a job, and the freedom to come and go.

Michael is well spoken and presentable—he says he could never stand being dirty even when he was on the road. He served in the Navy in Vietnam, crewing on amphibious landing craft. And while he insists that his tour was mild compared to most, it has colored his life ever since. When he returned to Charleston Airport in his uniform, people called him names and threw things at him. For a long time he lied and said he'd served in Japan. He spent 17 years as a merchant seaman and has only recently come to see that it is post-traumatic stress disorder that makes him crave open spaces and solitude.

As he reached mid-life back on shore, Michael found himself taking off from his family, disappearing for stretches of time to take jags around the country on Amtrak. After the death of his father, a disputed will led to his eviction from the family home on James Island. Michael says the dispute made him more sad than angry, and in 2001 he hit the road for good, hitchhiking, taking buses, and working as a day laborer. He spent last winter back in the Charleston area, camping out in the woods with other veterans, some of whom have been there for years, living off disability checks and food stamps. "It's just easier being homeless at home," he says. "You know where the library is, where you're allowed to sit."

Married for 23 years, Michael is still in touch with his wife and two grown daughters in Ohio and says there's a strong chance for reconciliation. "She's kind of waiting for me to get better," he says. "Unless you have a home and a job, you just can't be married."

Goodwill Industries tailor-made a job for Michael, accepting donated goods. He's extremely grateful for it, and plans to stay at Crisis through the winter and then go back to the sea. "It's a real personal decision when you decide that you want it. Now, I don't know if I'm going to make it or not, but you have to decide that you don't want to be homeless. I can definitely see myself driving out of here in the spring to catch a ship. I couldn't see that for a long time."

A Success Story

Edith Gillians is a woman of such strength and optimism that she almost—*almost*—makes her ordeal seem easy.

Of course, it's behind her now, a long, mysterious illness that caused her to lose half of her body weight, not to mention the ability to support herself. She spent two years at Crisis Ministries. Now she's back on her feet, although those feet are still swollen as she recovers from malnutrition. Gillians lives at the northern end of downtown Charleston in Joseph Floyd Manor, in an immaculate, cozy efficiency she's cordoned off into a one-bedroom. She shows a picture of herself while she was at the shelter in which she looks considerably older and less spry than she does now.

She also shows photos of her space at Crisis, the garden she planted, the friends she made, telling of how she and the other women would help take care of the children. Her pictures show more smiles, more color than the average visitor to the shelter might expect.

Edith Gillians (above) in her tidy, one-bedroom apartment at the Joseph Floyd Manor. Although she's happy in her new home, Edith hopes to one day move back to the country.

A self-described country girl, Gillians, 62, grew up in rural Berkeley County. She's still married but estranged from her husband and has one biological son and one unofficially adopted son. She worked all her life—as a custodian, a cook, a babysitter. She was employed at Sangaree Manufactured Homes in Summerville when she became so ill that she was unable to keep any food down. With no savings, income, or insurance, Gillians was taken in and cared for by fellow Jehovah's Witnesses for two years before finally being admitted to Memorial Hospital. Her weight had dropped from 180 to 106 pounds, but all doctors could surmise was that her condition was a result of a car accident years back.

Still too sick to manage on her own, Gillians was released into Crisis' Family Center, a separate facility for women and parents and their children. She became such a universally respected fixture there—an inspiration even, with her bevy of stuffed animals arranged in her tidy cubicle—that

Edith's caseworker, Erin Cobb, says the shelter's garden has gone to seed without "Miss Edith." Perhaps people in such desperate situations don't like to think they might be at the shelter long enough to watch plants bear fruit.

it's almost hard to imagine her nervous first night. "Sure, you know, any place you go at first, you're gonna feel kind of funny," she says. "But you've got to just look around and pray, keep the faith, be humble, and do what they say you gotta do."

It didn't take long for Gillians to gain weight, and she made friends easily. Some took her walking in Hampton Park. Working with a local nonprofit that establishes community gardens, Gillians helped plant vegetables and flowers. "I've always liked getting in the yard, digging in the dirt," she says, flipping through a photo album. "Those are the flowers we planted, and the okra. Man, we had a beautiful garden."

Her caseworker, Erin Cobb, says the garden has gone to seed without "Miss Edith." Perhaps people in such desperate situations don't like to think they might be at the shelter long enough to watch plants bear fruit. Gillians says she never felt she might be there indefinitely. "I know that it takes time for everything," she says. "You can't look for things to happen in two or three days, or maybe just a month or so, you've just got to wait, and pray, and trust God. You've got to keep the faith,