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A Degree of Homelessness

They're the most untraditional college students of all, but for these three homeless people in Hawaii, college may be their way out.

VICTORIA WISEMAN, PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELYSE BUTLER

Two years into an associate's degree at Leeward Community College, Falynn Medeiros was dealt a serious blow: The house in which she'd been living was in foreclosure. Medeiros, her daughter Haedyn, age 2, and Haedyn's dad, Peter, had 60 days to get out.

Medeiros' response? She doubled up on her classes.

"I had only been taking three or four at a time. So this fall I took six classes, then another six this semester. Being homeless got me motivated to hurry up and graduate."

The search for housing did not go well. Her credit wasn't great, so regular apartments wouldn't take them. Low-income housing, priced at \$700 a month, was more than she and Peter could afford with the income from their jobs; she as a shift supervisor at the Waianae Starbucks, making a little more than \$10 an hour, and he as a day laborer who wasn't getting many days of labor.

Her last resort was to ask her family for help.

"I wrote down everyone's names, going through the list of people we could live with. I had to cross them all out, because there was no room for us anywhere. Even Peter's mom couldn't help. They have an auntie sleeping on the couch already," she says. "It was scary."

In August, Medeiros became homeless. But despite her deteriorating living situation, she continued at Leeward Community College, making her one of a growing number of homeless who are looking to a college education, and the system of grants and loans that fund it, as a way out of poverty.

"There's always been one or two people going to college, every now and again," says Connie Mitchell, the Institute for Human Services' (IHS) executive director, who runs shelters in the Honolulu area. "But in the last year or so, it's been increasing."



Homeless Student: Falynn Medeiros. Attending:
Leeward Community College

“It’s a wise idea. The economy is so bad, if they go back for retraining, they’ll be better for the workforce when the economy picks back up,” Mitchell says.

It’s only been two years since homelessness was officially acknowledged in the financial-aid process itself, and right now data is scant and incomplete, as it only includes students who were homeless in high school. We spoke to three homeless Hawaii college students to find out what life is like in both worlds.



Homeless Student: Malia Kaahumanu. Attending: Heald College

From Street to School

It’s Tuesday morning, 5:30 a.m. The lights blaze on above Malia Kaahumanu’s bunk. She does not stir. Thirty minutes pass. Then, a chorus of yelling interrupts her sleep: “Good morning ladies, it’s time to get up!”

A persistent 15 minutes later, and the PA system blares: “Make sure you fix your bed! Make sure your feet are on the ground! Make sure you use the bathroom before you come downstairs for breakfast! Good morning and aloha!”

It’s a school day for Kaahumanu, who, like many college students, lives in a dorm. It’s close quarters, there are strict rules, and the women she lives with are feisty and unpredictable. But this is no ivy-draped college dorm. This is the IHS women’s shelter in Honolulu.



The rows of bunks where Malia Kaahumani studies.

After breakfast and dorm cleanup, it's time for the women to leave the shelter for the day. With no particular place to go, some sit on the sidewalk outside; on her way to the bus stop, Kaahumanu passes women holding babies, talking on cell phones and sitting on camp chairs in front of their cars, windows down, music pouring out. Today is a school day, so Kaahumanu can't join them.

Not long ago, this vibrant 26-year-old college coed woke up in a Waikiki stairwell, not knowing how she had gotten there after a night on the street, using drugs. "I looked at where I was, and said, 'This ain't me.'"

Born into a violent relationship, Kaahumanu was given to a local pastor to raise when she was only 3, while her mother left for the Mainland. The upbringing was strict and religious—her adopted father pressured her into marriage to her first boyfriend, at age 17, to keep her an "honest girl." It was not a pleasant union, and she was separated by 23.

Her next love affair was with the "wrong crowd"—people who used drugs carelessly, ran the streets and hustled for money. She floated through years this way, on the Mainland, Maui and Oahu. With addictions to feed, she turned to prostitution—she euphemistically calls it "watching her corner"—to support herself.

"A while back, everything started just going downhill. My boyfriend was leaving me alone a lot, the money wasn't right and we lost our place." She survived by hopping from apartment to apartment, staying on friends' couches or sleeping all day on the beach—junkies don't sleep at night.

After hitting rock bottom that day in the stairwell, she quit drugs cold turkey, enduring withdrawals and the temptation to use while living a street life. It was hard to stay clean

around people using drugs, and having sex for money was impossible without being high.

With nowhere to go, and desperate to get off the streets, she called the shelter. She didn't call her parents, and they had no idea how far she had fallen. "I had to do it by myself," she says.

"When I got to the shelter, everybody was looking at me. I was ashamed, because I am a pastor's daughter. I was like: *I can't believe I'm doing this*. But the people that checked me in made me laugh and smile."

Within a few months, Kaahumanu had started classes at Heald College in the medical-assistant program, encouraged by another IHS resident who was attending the same school. "I tried going to college twice while I was on the streets," Kaahumanu says. "Now I'm in my second quarter."

Kaahumanu battles frustration and lack of confidence every day. "I'll be on my bunk at the shelter with my books and I'll start thinking: 'I can't finish because I'm so stressed out' and I start having an anxiety attack. Then I just put all my books to the side, go outside and smoke a cigarette, and talk and laugh with some of the aunties. Then I go back and study."

Not all of the women are supportive of her college aspirations. "Sometimes they mess with me while I'm trying to study or rest. They're *trying* to irritate me. They don't understand why I need to study."

There is little private space in which Kaahumanu can study at the shelter, though she is afforded a "rest pass" which allows her to stay when other residents are asked to leave during the day. "I'm one of the lucky ones," she says, because she can actually take naps.

Though far from ideal, life at the shelter feels like a step forward for her. "It's a safety net, a place where I can be safe and stable. Even though it's stressful, it's home."

When school is done for the day, Kaahumanu's in no hurry to get home. She goes to the library, gets something to eat at KFC, or visits with other students at the bus stop. Many of them don't know she's homeless. She worries about falling back in with the wrong group of people. She even avoids the study group in her anatomy class because so many people have dropped out, it might make her want to quit, too.

Today, she stops by a bulletin board with a photo of last year's medical-assistant honor grads. She taps the photo and says: "I'm going to be there."

It's not a stretch. So far, she has a 3.0 average, an amazing accomplishment for a person who was put in special education for her four years of high school. Her behavior landed her there, and her grade-point average back then was about half what it is today. "I don't know how I graduated. I just showed up for every class."

About halfway through her associate's program, Kaahumanu plans to use Heald College's placement program for her first job. But it's clear that she wants something more from her life: her own family. She can't help but add a child of her own into her plans. "I could see owning my own business so I can work from home. I'd like to be a stay-at-home mom some day."



JAKE MILLER

A Second Chance

Jake Miller saves just one text message on his cell phone. It's from a friend back on the Mainland: "I admire what you have done, you inspire me," he reads aloud. For a man who lives in a shelter, this small encouragement is powerful stuff.

Miller came to Hawaii at 40, in search of a new life, imagining he'd be serving cocktails on the beach in short order. Restless at an East Coast bartending gig, he arrived with a suitcase, a little bit of cash, and no knowledge of the island.

"I was like, how cool would that be, to live in Hawaii and bartend? Then I get here and I realize it wasn't that easy to get a job, fresh off the plane," he says.

After a night sleeping in the airport, he checked in to a shelter. A year later, Miller was still there, without steady work.

"I felt like I was beating a dead horse. I'm 40. How long am I going to waiter or bartend? I don't really have skills. I'm going to keep struggling and struggling and it's going to go nowhere. I remember thinking: There's got to be a better alternative."

A few months ago, Miller attended a state-sponsored seminar on returning to college, which got him thinking: He could get loans for his education. He'd always loved science, so he set his sights on an associate degree at Kapiolani Community College.

Like any other college student, his first step was to find financial aid. "I knew nothing. I didn't know what a FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] was, I had no idea what information I needed. I thought there would be some sort of help, but I was completely on my own with it." The FAFSA is the paper gatekeeper to

the world of student aid; it determines how much financial help a student will get and must be filled out every year.

Miller knew of two other shelter residents attending Honolulu Community College, so he assumed there would be help for students in his situation.

“You want to better yourself, you’re in a shelter, I would think people would be coming out of the woodwork, saying, ‘Hey, you want to go to school? Let me help!’ No. Nobody. Nothing. It’s really frustrating.”

Once he sweated through the financial-aid process, Miller received a Pell Grant in time to start classes in January, part-time. He spends most days at the library, because studying at the shelter is next to impossible.

“When you’ve got a guy next to you talking to his hand for an hour, it wears on you. You’re like, ‘Oh God, why am I in this situation? I’m a normal guy.’ I don’t particularly want to see a guy talking to his hand. It’s really disturbing,” he says, laughing.

“To get anything done, I need to go. At the shelter, there’s no table, no quiet, nowhere you could study. Thank God I’m only taking two classes, because my plate is already full.”

Miller volunteers at the shelter, which allowed him to move into a smaller men’s dormitory—about 20 people to a room. “In the regular dorm area it’s a lot more likely that people will get in a fight—there’s a lot of arguments—or just stuff like somebody coughing without covering their mouth. If you want to just get a little bit better, you volunteer.”



Residents at the shelter Jake Miller lives in have two crates for their belongings.

Miller's few belongings must be dealt with carefully. Because of theft and the shelter rules, nothing can be left in the bunk areas, and possessions need to be packed and repacked daily, like a jigsaw puzzle.

"There's a crate room where you get two milk-crate-type things and you pack in whatever you can in there. They open it three times a day. I'm trying to fit a backpack, books, a computer for school, a pair of shoes, a bathroom bag into this confined area. It's hard to do simple things, like get a towel to dry."

There are struggles of a different kind once Miller is on campus. At KCC, he opens the door to the cafeteria, saying, "You know, I've never gone in here. It kind of makes me feel anxious, you know, because of the age thing."

"Most of the kids in there are in their 20s. I wonder if they're looking at me and thinking, 'why is he in college? What the heck have you done with your life up until now?' I couldn't see myself sitting in the middle of a table full of them."

Miller is acutely aware that these younger students have an edge academically. "I'll see the kids from my class just sitting around and BSing in the library, and I'm sitting there scratching my head and saying, 'How do I get my thoughts organized? How do I find my way to the books I need, and then do what I need to do?' It's so easy for them."

"My first project was an English paper. You do one wrong click and you screwed up your whole paper, which I did about 37 times. But I finally got it right. I had two short reports to do, and I got an A-minus on both of them."

Math class came with a different problem. "For the first week, I was waiting for the guy to start teaching. Then I found out it was a self-paced class. I was so mad at first. I

wanted someone to be teaching me, especially being out of it for so long. I'm teaching myself math after 21 years."

"I'm telling myself things like; Don't get frustrated, you weren't that great in math today. No big deal. Tomorrow you'll be better. My average in math right now is a 94. I'm really, really determined. I don't care if I gotta sleep at the library, I'm going to do it and do it well."

Future on Loan

College educations, even at a community college, don't come cheap. So how can these homeless students afford school, when by definition they are unable to afford even a place to live?

The answer lies in the unique objective of the student loan: to serve those with the most need. Other loans are based on the ability to pay money back. Student loans act more like an investment in a student's future.

"We serve the homeless as any other student. For financial-aid purposes, eligibility is based on financial need. And they definitely have need," says Jennifer Bradley, financial-aid specialist at KCC.

Both Kaahumanu and Miller receive less than \$1,000 in public assistance per month, putting them well within the low-income guidelines for a maximum student-aid award. Receiving school loans doesn't affect their ability to get public benefits, which is good, because both they both bank at least part of their small benefits for the future.

The prospect of payback doesn't bother them—yet. "I can't think about paying the money back yet. If I start stressing out, I'll lose my mind," Miller says.

"The good thing about student loans is they stretch it over 20, 30 years. Not that you want to do that, but it's not like I'll have this huge payment. You just have to start paying. Hopefully I'll have a good position then, and start paying my loans off."

Loaning money to the homeless is a bet, but most schools and lenders find it no more risky than betting on any other low-income student. For the homeless, it means a way out.

Home, for Now

Falynn Medeiros opens the door to the studio apartment she shares with her daughter and boyfriend, Peter. She was able to get a spot at the Ulu Ke Kukui transitional housing development, where they can stay for two years. It's no more than a room with a hot plate, coffeemaker and refrigerator, but the price is right: \$500 a month.

The desk, crammed between the front door and the foot of the bed, is piled six books high with course texts. She sits there every morning to study while her boyfriend and daughter sleep; one last-minute cram before school. Once they wake, her day is a blur of arranging for daycare, back-to-back classes, and an eight-hour evening shift at Starbucks. At work, she squeezes studying into her dinner break, which is only 10 minutes long.

This spring when she graduates, Medeiros will become the first person in her family to graduate college.

"When I had to fill out the application for welfare, it asks what your father's highest level of school is. My dad didn't even graduate from high school. It really made me think about it. It's going to be so awesome to be the first."

She's been accepted for the bachelor's program in anthropology at UH-West Oahu, where she'll pursue her dream of becoming a forensic anthropologist. It may seem

farfetched, but she's done her homework on how to get there.

"I'm going for my anthropology degree, but I can get a certificate in forensic anthropology at the same time. A lot of the classes overlap and it counts for both, so I figure, why not?" She has a list of places she'd like to work, a plan for interning and, most importantly, the drive to get it all done.

"People group everyone who's on welfare as just living off the system and not doing anything. I go to school and I work," she says. "I collect welfare for food, because if I didn't have that money for food, I wouldn't have money for anything else. But I'm not ashamed of where I am."