By Camila Castellanos

By most accounts, Bonnie Morrison was on track to live a pretty normal middle-class life in Pasadena. By middle age, she was married and had raised a family, gone back to school, finished her degrees and worked briefly in her field before trying to further her education even more. But a series of events interrupted that trajectory. She and her husband divorced, and Morrison, who had never paid bills before, suddenly struggled to make rent and keep up with details like insurance. She fought back depression. Then, her car collided with a Mack truck in a no-fault accident. She survived the crash but suffered an untreated head injury that heightened her depression and left her feeling isolated and incapacitated.

“Pretty much just let everything go after that,” said Morrison, 62, whose recollection of the accident remains hazy. “I suffered a tremendous amount of depression; I felt afraid,” she said. She couldn’t explain to those close to her what was going wrong or why, but she felt shame at her inability to stop it: “From there, I went into homelessness.”

Morrison went from couch surfing at friends’ and relatives’ homes to sleeping in her car. She couldn’t believe this was her situation, yet here she was. One day, she sought help through the internet.

“She came upon Friends In Deed,” a nonprofit that provides services to meet basic human needs and help homeless and at-risk neighbors in Pasadena. There, Morrison met a group at the Women’s Room who loaded her up with food, offered her a bed to rest in during the day and a place where she could shower and do laundry.

They also got Morrison into permanent housing. This was a big win — not just for her, but also for the nonprofit, which just launched its Friends In Deed Outreach Program in June 2018. With it, Friends In Deed is tackling the issue of the city’s homelessness — estimated at about 680 people — head on.

While the nonprofit has served the community since 1894, it has been increasing its services over the years as the homeless population has ballooned throughout Los Angeles County. Its other programs already offer critical-need services, including a widely used food pantry. Pasadena’s Bad Weather Shelter, rent assistance for those at risk of homelessness, school supplies for local students, and the Women’s Room, the innovative day program serving homeless women.

Now, the street Outreach Program is reaching out to those experiencing homelessness who aren’t already coming to the Washington Boulevard location for services.

“Our goal is to target but spots — we’re going out to them,” said Friends In Deed Director Joshua Levine Grater. “We’re trying to meet and engage people. Some people are ready to accept help right away, for some people it never happens, and for others it takes a while. But we target areas and make contact, and as soon as trust can be built up we do an intake and see which services we can connect them to.”

“When the person is ready, is so is Friends In Deed. So far, the nonprofit has permanently housed eight clients and been close to getting another seven off the streets. Each case can take multiple outreach attempts.

“That’s the goal, to get them housed,” said Grater, sitting down to discuss the program and pointing to the person at the helm, street outreach specialist Najwa Jones. A warm, outgoing woman with a wide smile and smooth voice, Jones said she approaches a transient the same way she would approach anyone.

“Well, I introduce myself, tell them where I’m from, and ask how they’re doing,” she said. “If I ask if there’s anything they need. And if I really do care about how they’re doing — can you fake it, or they’ll know right away. No fooling there.

Jones knows what’s she’s talking about — you might say she’s been there, done that, having been homeless herself about seven years ago. She struggled with addiction for years after multiple attempts at rehab, ending up on skid row. At one point, Jones was so tired of living on drugs and on the streets she even considered still remembering the cross streets near the railroad tracks where she was going to do it, when a phone call came from an old friend who saved her life.

“Sometimes that’s all a person needs, is a smile. To know someone cares. That’s all I try to do, give them a friendly face,” explained Jones. “I have to speak to them in a language that they can understand. I’ve been there, I’ve been on the ground, I’ve been dirty and I’ve been hungry.”

She shares her story with whomever will hear it, wherever it be beneath an overpass, behind a cafe or in a parking garage where they sleep. Many of them are wary or distrustful or have trouble making conversation.

“You have to meet people exactly where they’re at. I let them know it, that I’m no better than you all, I am one in a paycheck to where you’re at right now,” she said. “I’ve been through it, and I was able to do it. And if I can do it, anybody can do it, so can you, and I’m going to help you every step of the way.”

Morrison can attest that Jones means what she’s saying. After a series of financial setbacks. she and her husband divorced, and left her feeling isolated and incapacitated.

“From there, I went into homelessness.”

Jones, who shares her story with whomever will listen, said she knows what it’s like to be thrown into a scarce world, Morrison is overjoyed to be off the streets, safe and independent. And she found a kindred spirit in Jones, someone she considers a friend and a one-person support network.

“Najwa is pure inspiration, she makes me feel strong and comfortable,” said Morrison, who hopes to pay it forward one day. “She shared personal experiences with me which were very powerful and made me feel less shame about my situation.”

While Morrison’s story, that of a stable, educated woman going homeless, might seem out of the ordinary, Grater emphasized that it’s becoming more familiar. Amid soaring prices, minimum-wage earners are struggling to keep traditional housing.

“A 2016 Federal Reserve Board report found that 40% of American adults did not have enough savings to cover an emergency expense of $400 or more. That means little more than a missed mortgage payment, a car’s breakdown, a medical emergency or a combination of such misfortunes could put someone on the path to homelessness.

“It’s more common than you think,” said Grater. “Then there’s also the mental health side … there’s often a breaking point when issues go undiagnosed for many years, sometimes a whole bunch of things could go wrong at the same time. It’s a tough world out there.”

Celebrating its 125th year, Friends In Deed is continuing to meet the needs of the Pasadena community, whether it be food, shelter or support services. Grater has high hopes that the program can permanently house those experiencing homelessness.

“It’s very exciting and very promising, and we’re confident we can find more housing units. The program is being very successful,” he said.

As always, he noted, Friends In Deed can do more with more money. He’d like to grow the Outreach Program’s staff from two full-time employees to six, including permanent housing locators to find affordable rental units. A vehicle such as a van or SUV would also be immensely helpful for when the nonprofit needs to help move clients and their belongings. Currently, Jones uses her own small car to help someone move to safety, even making multiple trips.

The lack of affordable housing in Pasadena continues to be one of the biggest hurdles to getting people housed, Grater said, but he wants people to know the nonprofit works with landlords and its clients make good tenants.

“These neighbors will be good neighbors, and they’ll have help and case management. We can be proud that we’ve housed eight people, even though it’s a shame we can’t do it in their own community,” Grater noted, adding that Friends In Deed will keep working to eradicate homelessness, even if it’s just one person at a time. “We’re focused on their critical needs, through connection and compassion.”

Jones nodded in agreement. “We’ll get to them,” she said. “We’re small, but we’re effective.”

Friends In Deed Directer Joshua Levine Grater and street outreach specialist Najwa Jones are taking a new approach to getting the homeless housed. Head to the streets to make connections.

“Sometimes that’s all a person needs, is a smile. To know someone cares. That’s all I try to do, give them a friendly face.”

— Najwa Jones, Friends In Deed street outreach specialist

Friends In Deed outreach specialist Najwa Jones (right) helped find permanent housing for Bonnie Morrison, who suffered homelessness after a series of financial setbacks.

Friends In Deed Hits the Streets to Fight Homelessness