

## One Book on the streets



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

A book that explores a mentally ill musician's troubled life is being used by nonprofits to build bridges. Dennis Jones got a copy at a homeless shelter. "I can relate," he said.

# 'Soloist' resonates with homeless

By Jennifer Lin  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Som was a loan officer in another life. Today, he's homeless, and he understands why.

"Paranoid schizophrenic," he said. "Do you know what that means? You believe in your thoughts. Mine are all against the government."

Som — who gave his age, 42, but not his last name — used to encamp on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, until police took away his blankets and threatened to arrest him for trespassing. Now he sleeps in a city drop-in shelter at Eighth and Arch Streets. A worker gave him a book about a mentally ill homeless man in Los Angeles helped by a newspaper columnist.

Som was immediately pulled into *The Soloist*, by Steve Lopez.

"He showed how homeless people do have talent," Som said of Lopez. "They are people — not just dirty people."

*The Soloist* is the featured title of One Book, One Philadelphia, a three-month effort by Mayor Nutter's office and the Free Library to get the entire city reading the same book. In it, Lopez describes his friendship with Nathaniel Ayers, a Juilliard-trained double bassist lost to mental illness on Skid Row in Los Angeles.

Locally, *The Soloist* is drawing strong reviews from people who are living it. As part of the One Book project, the Free Library has handed out 600 copies to groups that work with the homeless. Shelters are giving paperback editions to clients and holding book discussions for residents, volunteers, and staff.

See **BOOK** on B6



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Dennis Jones and his keys at a shelter. His mental-health issues are less severe than those described in "The Soloist," he says.

## Tale of dreams lost, friendship resonates here

### BOOK from B1

The nonfiction book — about to be released as a movie starring Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jr. — grew out of a column that Lopez, a former Inquirer columnist, wrote for the Los Angeles Times. One column became another, and soon Lopez was enmeshed in the life of the musically gifted Nathaniel.

Homeless people applaud the portrayal of Nathaniel as a man with a history and hopes, frustrations and failures, problems and passions.

Dennis Jones, 55, said he could relate. The military veteran walks around the city with his electronic keyboard slung in a case over his shoulder.

At night, he sleeps at the Arch Street shelter. By day, he sits at the front table by the window of the Starbucks at Broad and Pine Streets, painting or listening through headphones as he plays keyboard.

"Music to me is like walking," said Jones, who got *The Soloist* from a shelter worker and is on Chapter 6.

Evicted from an apartment in Lebanon, Pa., a few years ago, Jones is trying to get his life together. He has issues with anxiety, short-term memory loss, and posttraumatic stress — nothing, he says, as severe as what ails Nathaniel.

"He has delusions of grandeur," he said. "Yet I can relate to how he feels about music, how it takes him away."

Music frees him, Jones said. "It's better than any pill that any doctor can give me."

As part of the One Book calendar, nonprofit groups that work with the homeless, such as Project HOME and Bethesda Project, are using *The Soloist* to build bridges. They are hosting book discussions, inviting former and current clients to share their experiences with broader audiences. And they are reaching out to neighborhoods that are seeing more people living on sidewalks or in parks.

At the library branch on Rittenhouse Square, 35 people heard the executive director of Bethesda Project, Angelo Sgro, talk about the causes of homelessness.

"The book gives people a view of homelessness that personalizes it in a way just meeting someone on the streets does not," said Beth Palubinsky, director of development for Bethesda Project, which operates shelters and provides housing for the homeless.

In particular, *The Soloist* shows how hard it is to help the mentally ill leave the

streets. Studies show that more than half of the homeless individuals living on Philadelphia streets suffer from severe mental illness, as Nathaniel did.

"Helping the homeless is one thing. But sharing your life with someone like Nathaniel is a different ride altogether," said the Rev. Bill Golderer, of the Broad Street Ministry near Broad and Pine. "It's consuming. There's no 'off' button."

In the winter, Broad Street Ministry turns its basement into a drop-in emergency shelter — in city-speak, an "overnight cafe."

Golderer said Lopez was so overwhelmed by the challenge of helping Nathaniel that "he almost becomes unhinged. I wanted to hug him and say, 'Come talk to me.'"

Gerri Trooskin, the One Book project manager

at the Free Library, said events were drawing "record turnout." A recent panel discussion at the library on the psychological perspective on homelessness drew 150.

The reason is clear to anyone who works or lives in Center City. In the last homeless census on Jan. 28, the city counted 283 people living on streets, in parks, under highways, or at transit stations.

One Book organizers haven't shied from using *The Soloist* to spur debate among groups with differing opinions on how the city should manage this population.

On March 4, the Free Library will present a panel discussion that will include nonprofits that advocate for the homeless and civic groups that want more assertive law enforcement against loitering.

The One Book events will wrap up March 29 — less than a month before *The Soloist* movie's scheduled April 24 release.

Franklin Wallace, 52, who lives in a transitional residence run by Bethesda Project, hopes to see it. He is reading the book with his caseworker, Lakisha Burroughs. "Some of the words I can't read," he said.

Wallace was homeless for the better part of the last decade. But for the last three years, the former machinist and heavy-equipment operator has been sober and trying to make changes in his life — like Nathaniel.

"Nathaniel did good," Wallace said. "He turned himself around. It's never too late, but you have to want it."

### The Free Library has handed out copies of the book to groups that work with the homeless.

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