Jim Withers tries to convince this young homeless woman to make an appointment at the clinic, but she seems a little confused and afraid of walking such a distance. “I walk that all the time,” he assures her. (At right is Mike Sallows.)
“I’VE GOT NOTHING”

Every Monday, Jim Withers slips on his army-green backpack and walks the streets of Pittsburgh. He and Mike Sallows loop through the shiny PPG buildings or underneath the highway where cars passing overhead make a thu-wap sound. They climb around the south bank of the Allegheny River. They crawl through dark doorways into dilapidated factories.

There was a time when Withers (MD ’84) and Sallows roamed the streets every night. Eleven years ago, Withers, who was treating patients at homeless shelters, realized there was a large population of people who were so alienated from society that they didn’t even go to shelters or clinics. Sallows, a former transient turned outreach worker, had been looking for a physician to treat these people. He asked doctor after doctor for help, often getting the same answer: Sounds great. Where can I send my check? Withers asked, What should I do? And Operation Safety Net was born.
Pitt med student Kerry Sutherland talks with a man as Withers calls the hospital. Withers is trying to locate the man’s friend, who has been absent from the street for days; both men have diabetes.
TOP: Withers examines this man's infected teeth, then refers him to a dentist who volunteers for Operation Safety Net. Many homeless people have serious dental problems.

BOTTOM: A memorial for “Little Eva.” Eva Haniak, a 79-year-old woman who lived on the streets when her mental illness flared up, was bludgeoned to death in March.
In the Strip District, an OSN team, including from left, Eric Hong (Class of '06), Children's Hospital nurse Rebecca Wellinger, and osteopathic medicine student Jim Parry, examine a man's nose. They’re checking to see if an abrasion is infected.
Withers and Art Leibowitz, an OSN volunteer who was once homeless, stand outside the van in the Hill District.

Bottom: Sallows, Hong, and Withers place their hands on a man reciting the 23rd Psalm.
L
ght from the new stadiums bounces
off the Allegheny River, creating ripples
of colors. Withers, Sallows, and Pitt
med students Kerry Sutherland and Jessie
Smith walk briskly toward the Roberto
Clemente Bridge. A tall, lanky form appears
from underneath. It’s a man with disheveled
hair. His arms flail out as he takes long strides.
He’s about to pass the Operation Safety Net
hair. His arms flail out as he takes long strides.

Society has opened for the homeless,
though it is less than 20 degrees and the cold
is everywhere. “It’s more important to know what
person the disease has rather than what disease a
person has,” he likes to say.

Through the years, OSN has evolved from
Withers and Sallows on rounds on the streets
every night to more than 30 clinical volun-
teers in 16 teams. Each team consists of a
formerly homeless person and a medical pro-
fessional. The formerly homeless person
serves as a guide for nurses, physicians, and
medical students, introducing them to the
culture of the streets.

Last year, Withers won the Robert Wood
Johnson Community Health Leadership
Award—the latest of many honors with which
the Pitt alum and his colleagues have been rec-
ognized since 1992. OSN, now a Mercy
Hospital program, continues to grow under
Withers’ guidance. He sees change as a natur-
al part of an organization.

In 1997, Nell Davidson, a nurse who vol-
unteers for OSN, began to address a problem
she’d noticed. A lot of people living in
Pittsburgh’s Hill District didn’t seem to be get-
ting adequate medical care. She filled her blue
pickup truck with medical supplies and drove
into the neighborhood. Parked at a busy street
corner, Davidson worked out of the back of
her truck, treating residents who came by. It
didn’t take long before people gathered around
the truck waiting for care. Today, taking the
place of Davidson and her pickup, the well-
staffed and equipped OSN van is in the Hill
District every week.

The van is a sparkling RV that would make
any road warrior retiree jealous. An exam
room is in the back, where a bathroom and a
bed would normally be. One day this winter,
Withers observes a resident treating patients.
Education is an important part of OSN,
Withers says. He would like to create a fellow-
ship “without walls.” Medical students and
residents only spend a short time with
Withers, yet it can take a lot of time for a doc-
tor to earn the trust of such alienated people.
So a fellowship or residency would give new
physicians the time to learn about and treat
the complex problems many homeless have.

A tall man wearing a stocking cap limps to
the back of the van and crouches down onto a
bench. He holds his arm at a funny angle,
cradling it close to his body.

“How long has it hurt? Can you lift it?”

The resident asks the patient questions
then solicits Withers’ help.

Withers leans over the man, pressing his
shoulder. After surmising the patient has a
muscle abscess, he asks him to stay while he
treats others. Later the van will take him to the
hospital.

Abscesses normally require surgery,
Withers explains. He suspects a lot of people
who needed treatment for abscesses used to
just “sit on them” before OSN had a presence
here. “It’s very rewarding,” Withers says.

The patient asks if he can leave. He’ll
return in 15 minutes, he says, then steps out of
the van. Crossing the street, the man walks
past a pub with a crooked sign and bars cover-
ing the windows. This street is a main artery in
the neighborhood, but there aren’t any gas sta-
tions, pharmacies, or grocery stores in sight.
Many of the homes are pocked with graffiti;
plywood covers windows.

Withers treats a few other patients. An
older man asks to see the doctor alone, so
Withers guides him into the back, sliding a
white door behind them. Ten minutes pass;
Withers peaks his head out, leans over, and
whispers to a nurse. Sighing, he leans his head
on the door frame. A moment later, he
straightens up; his blue eyes sparkle again as he
smiles and returns to the exam room.