



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.)



A STREET DOCTOR OFFERS
MORE THAN MEDICAL CARE
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“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.



Light 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 (OSN) crew but stops.

"Where are you guys from?" he asks. "I've seen you before."

"We're from Operation Safety Net," Withers says.

"Yeah, I know you guys."

"How ya doin' tonight?" Sallows asks.

"Oh, I'm drunk. I've got nothing. I just lost my job. I'd be better off dead."

He speeds away. Withers and Sallows spin around to follow him. They catch up and talk with the man. Watching the episode from afar, the students wonder if Withers will "302" the man; 302 refers to the statute for involuntary mental health commitment. Withers and Sallows return about 10 minutes later. The man is upset about losing his job. After talking to him, they've ascertained that he is depressed but not suicidal.

The group heads for the bridge. Even though it is less than 20 degrees and the cold shelters have opened for the homeless, Withers is still doing rounds. OSN has identified at least 15 people who never take shelter. He wants to make sure they have enough socks, enough food, and a sleeping bag that

withstands frigid temperatures.

Shelters and street clinics targeting the homeless are fairly prevalent, but in few if any other cities in this country do doctors actually go to the streets to treat people. Withers does. Along the way, he reminds the residents and med students who volunteer for OSN that they're treating much more than physical conditions.

"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 volunteers in 16 teams. Each team consists of a formerly homeless person and a medical professional. 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 recognized since 1992. OSN, now a Mercy Hospital program, continues to grow under Withers' guidance. He sees change as a natural part of an organization.

In 1997, Nell Davidson, a nurse who volunteers 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 getting 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 fellowship "without walls." Medical students and residents only spend a short time with Withers, yet it can take a lot of time for a doctor 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 eases 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 covering the windows. This street is a main artery in the neighborhood, but there aren't any gas stations, 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. ■