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A Voice From the Winthrop

*After disabling injuries,
David Allen finds uneasy
peace inside the Winthrop*

**Article and Photo By Todd Matthews,
Editor**

Meet the first David Allen.

He graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in accounting, and owns his own public accounting firm in Tacoma. He makes a good living, somewhere in the low six figures, which allows him to have a home on a quiet street in Tacoma and a car for his daily commute to the office. There is even enough for a few perks, like box seats to the opera and a vacation overseas. He has a life to which many people might aspire.

Meet the second David Allen.

He lives in the Winthrop building in downtown Tacoma, a crumbling, 84-year-old, 12-story building that is home to 200 low-income residents. The former hotel's penthouse suite was boarded up long ago, rain water now leaks from the roof through any available crevice and into a standing pool in the

**CONTINUED
ON PAGE 2**



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 basement, and the building sheds masonry like old molted skin. At least once a week, someone prank-pulls the fire alarm, or presses all the buttons in the elevator, lighting up the panel and burning out the motor. Allen lives month-to-month. He turns the key on his mail box hoping to find a familiar envelope that contains his disability check. He might have enough money left over for some "luxuries": a pack of cigarettes or bottles of Diet Coke. Inside his small apartment, Allen finds some measure of peace. He checks his e-mail. He surfs the Web for the latest news. But mostly he rests, a requirement these days because of the constant pain he is in from the severe back injury he suffered 15 years ago. Beyond the protection of his apartment door, however, another world exists. He says he hears people argue over drug deals, and the odors of marijuana or the chemicals used to cook meth-amphetamines turns his stomach. If he has to leave his apartment, he holds his breath, moves quickly through the hall, and slips inside the elevator. One night, someone banged on his door demanding drugs. 'You have the wrong apartment!' Allen hollered back.

Of course, there is only one David Allen. But these life stories read like those of two different people. What separates the first Allen from the second Allen are two life-changing events: automobile accidents caused by two different drunk drivers over the course of less than two years. The accidents left him with chronic back injuries and short- and long-term memory loss.

"People say money can't buy happiness, but it sure can buy whatever misery you want to buy," he says, laughing. He pauses a moment to reflect, then adds, "I miss that lifestyle big-time."

Allen is the latest subject of the Tacoma Daily Index's series of interviews with Winthrop residents. Like most of the people interviewed for this series, Allen is candid about his personal life and experience living in the old historic hotel. "It's an old Michigan trait," says Allen, 45,

"I know what it's like to have lost everything. I know both sides. I've been in a position where I've had lots of money, and now I'm living month-to-month."

who was born and raised in Trenton, Mich. "Tell it like it is." He doesn't gloss over the depression he felt when he had to sell his possessions in order to pay medical bills or when realized he could no longer support himself because of his injuries. Nor does he downplay or deflect the Winthrop's reputation as being a shady place to live.

"The Winthrop has good points and bad points," he explains. "But it has more bad points than good points. I like that there's a laundry room in the Winthrop. The transit system is right here. If you want to go grocery shopping or shop for clothes, it's right there. Subway is right behind the building on Broadway. The teriyaki restaurant is right there. The bad points about the Winthrop are the drugs and [the building's owner] not putting the money it should into fixing repairs that need to be fixed so people could have a nice living environment."

However bad it might be, the Winthrop is home. The biggest stressor for Allen has been the the building's uncertain future. Many people

have quick opinions on what to do with the Winthrop. Some want to see it restored as an historic hotel; others point to the building's track record as a magnet for crime and want it shut down; and still others want city leaders to find alternate housing so residents aren't concentrated in one location. In May, Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) announced that it was asked by Prium (the current building owner who had originally planned to convert the building into a four-star hotel) if it wanted to purchase the building (see "THA weighs Winthrop building purchase," TDI, 05/29/09 and "Historic hotel or affordable housing? Tough economy shines realistic light on Winthrop development plan," TDI, 08/04/09).

"You don't know from month-to-month if you're going to have a place to live because of all the different dealings that are going on," says Allen, who has testified at Tacoma City Council meetings when there has been discussion over what to do with the building. "The future is unclear. My nerves stay up. The more rumors I hear about things going on, the more I get really upset." In a weird twist, Allen hopes the tens of millions of dollars in deferred maintenance will be enough to keep any would-be hotel developers away and allow him to stay in his apartment.

Here is what Allen had to say about his life and experience living in the Winthrop.

"I came out to Washington State for a visit, fell in love with it, and then moved out here."

I was born in Trenton, Michigan, to a middle-class family. My dad died when I was 14. I went to the University of Michigan and high school at the same time. I would go to high school during the day, and then University of Michigan in the afternoon, sometimes on the weekends. I didn't have my diploma yet so I had to test out. I had to get my General Equivalency Degree just to show the university that I had the smarts. I got a Bachelor's Degree in accounting. My emphasis was on finance and my minor was in computer science. I

worked at Ford Motor Company. I also worked as part of the General Motors team that created the training manual that a lot of corporations use to train their employees. I worked at Blue Cross / Blue Shield. Then I went into regular public accounting for awhile. My sister's husband was stationed at Fort Lewis and that's what introduced me to Washington State. I came out for a visit, fell in love with it, and then moved out here in 1989. I had my own public accounting practice here in Tacoma.

"I had five fractured vertebrae in my spine. I messed up my left hip. It was just a lot of different things. My teeth were all loose. They had to try to reset them."

I was involved in two automobile accidents. Both times, I was hit by drunk drivers. The first time was in January 1994. A driver rear-ended me at over 50 miles per hour. I had five fractured vertebrae in my spine. I messed up my left hip. It was just a lot of different things. My teeth were

all loose. They had to try to reset them. I ended up having some problems, so they had to pull some in the back and everything else. In May 1995, I was going up Union near 19th Street, headed toward University Place, when, 'Bam!' I was what they call 'double-kissed.' The other driver was going 50 miles per hour, drunk, hit me broadside, the car spun around and kept on going, and I was smashed in the back. That accident gave me permanent spinal problems and memory problems. I wasn't fully recovered when I got into the second accident. My mother was still alive at the time, and she was a big woman. She was 450 pounds and in a wheelchair. I was the only one that was taking care of her and I was pushing her around with five fractured vertebrae. It couldn't heal just right. With the second accident, I ended up with post-concussion syndrome, memory loss, and everything else. My head hit the steering wheel.

"I lost everything."

I was making great money at the time of my accidents. But once you have no income and you can't work . . . I lost everything. I lost my business. I lost my car. I lost my house. What are you going to do? It took me many years to try and recover. After awhile, it was like, 'Well, you're unemployable. You haven't been in the field awhile. You're not up on the current regulations.' I lost all my expensive possessions first, like jewelry, antiques, and everything else. I had to see doctors. When you're not working, you can't pay for medical insurance. After awhile, you might get welfare or something like that. But even they don't cover everything like certain specialists. MRI's [Magnetic Resonance Imaging] are \$1,600 each. I was self-employed at the time. I had insurance, but it wouldn't carry forward when I couldn't pay the premium anymore. I'm in pain 24/7. I see a doctor and I'm on anti-inflammatories, muscle relaxers, pain pills -- I've been that way for 15 years. I didn't have the funds to start my own business again. The memory loss was a big injury. I have some short-term and long-term memory loss, so I have to write things down. But then a lot of people have to write things down. I can't sit in one place for a long time without being in pain. When you are in accounting, you are at a computer or a desk all day. That's part of the reason I'm so overweight because everything involves your spine. Like me breathing in and out, it hurts. Walking hurts. What hurts the most is standing in one place because you are using certain muscles to stabilize yourself. The pain just feels like there's no tomorrow.

"All your dreams are gone and the only thing you do is exist. You just exist and take up space. That's it."

I was depressed. Your life is over. Your ability to earn and sustain an income defines who you are in society. I don't look down on homeless people because I know what it's like to have lost everything. I know both sides. I've been in a position where I've had lots of money, and now I'm living month-to-month. Back then, the lowest year I made \$125,000. I used to have a box seat at the opera, I wore gold jewelry, I went to Europe. Now, I'm just hoping my check comes next week. It's sad. Because I didn't work a lot of years and was disabled at such a young age, my social security is very minimal. My dream of ever owning a house is gone. Owning a car is gone. I can drive. I have

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ON PAGE 3**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2 a valid driver's license. But it costs money to buy a car.

All your dreams are gone and the only thing you do is exist. You just exist and take up space. That's it. As far as dreams and reality, I'm a realist. I used to be an optimist, but then my realist side beat down my optimist side and the reality is there's no hope. The only thing you do is live month-to-month, exist, and pray you get through that month in order to get to the next month just to start the whole process over again -- paying your bills and existing on basically nothing.

"I have that type of heart. Even today, if I've got it, here you go."

Even when I had money, I would still go help the homeless and feed the homeless and sometimes work at a soup kitchen. In Detroit, there are a lot of homeless people on Griswold Street. Woodward is major drugs, prostitution, homelessness. I would pass them, they would ask for money, and I would say, 'Here's twenty. Here's a hundred.' That was just me. I have that type of heart. Even today, if I've got it, here you go. It was just in my upbringing. I'm second-generation American. My family came from Europe. I guess I don't have a lot of that self-centeredness that Americans do. It seems Europeans are more giving and more sympathetic to people who are less fortunate and have a bigger heart for family, friends, and neighbors.

"In the 1990s, it wasn't that bad. Granted there was some crime. But there weren't all the drugs like there are now."

The first time I ended up at the Winthrop was in February 1996. I lived there until September 1997. I moved back to Michigan because I thought my family was going to help me out. They didn't. I ended up in a nice apartment complex in Taylor, Michigan, even though it was Housing and Urban Development (HUD). I came out here in 2004 for a visit. I told myself I was going to try to apply at the Winthrop. In the 1990s, it wasn't that bad. There was some crime. But there weren't all the drugs like there are now. I applied at the Winthrop and already knew the assistant manager. She said it was going to be a two-year waiting list. I went back to Michigan and waited about nine months before [someone from the] Winthrop called. I had to rent a U-Haul. With all the gas and everything else, it was about \$2,000 to move out here. When I got here, the apartment wasn't clean. It was dirty. It was filthy. I stayed at a Quality Inn in Fife while I was cleaning it.

"What's amazing is there aren't as much drugs [in Detroit] as there as there are [in Tacoma]."

Moving back to the Winthrop for the second time was positive because I was in the state where I belonged. As far as the building, the maintenance was less and the building was a little dingier. People's attitudes were a little more rude. In the Detroit area, the water is dirty there, there's so much crime. What's amazing is there aren't as much drugs out there as there are out here. It's totally different than Michigan.

"To move out here, I had to use my credit card. It takes a while to pay that off."

My rent is \$197 per month right now. It will probably go up to \$220 after yearly re-certifica-

tion on my lease. To move out here, I had to use my credit card. It takes a while to pay that off. I have to have a cell phone on me at all times because I've had strokes. I need to call an ambulance. Then I have my home phone, cable, Internet. My income is \$731 per month in regular disability.

"I'm afraid to walk outside of my apartment because people roam the halls who don't even live there, and they are looking for trouble. I've heard screaming matches and fighting over drugs."

I'm worried about what's happening in the building because it affects my life as far as bad

home. As far as trying to keep things somewhat stable in that building, yeah, I listen to all the residents' problems and complaints and offer advice and solutions -- whatever I can. But then there are some things in that building that can't be resolved.

"It depends on what floor you're on."

Parts of the Winthrop are bad, parts aren't. Just like every city. Some parts of some cities are bad and run-down, some parts are really good. It depends on what floor you're on. Some floors tend to have problems. The tenth floor is the preferred floor because you get a fantastic view. I wish I had an apartment on that floor, but one wasn't



drug deals going down and bullets going through the wall. Not that that has happened, but it is a possibility. I'm afraid to walk outside of my apartment because people roam the halls who don't even live there, and they are looking for trouble. I've heard screaming matches and fighting over drugs. As far as that aspect, I'm concerned about that for myself but also the elderly residents who are in wheelchairs. There are some people who can't defend themselves. Lately, we've gone back to someone pulling the fire alarm at 3:30 in the morning. You don't know if there's actually a fire and the building is going to burn down. If someone is leaving the building due to a bad drug deal, they will pull the fire alarm because they are pissed off. If I try to enter the Winthrop, there are people lined up out front and they are trying to force their way past me into the building. I've almost gotten into many altercations: 'I don't know you. I'm not going to let you in the building I live in.' If you let someone in the building you don't know, they could terminate your lease. But the younger crowd doesn't care. There have been so many younger people coming in. With younger people, you're going to have more drugs, more prostitution. And at Frost Park, all it is is turf wars between different gang members, drugs, and fights. With the younger people coming in the building -- single mothers with kids looking to make friends -- they eventually end up at Frost Park. And then the gang members jump off the bus, come from the East Side -- I've run into them and had fights with them -- the bus brings them here, they do all their business, then they go right across the street and get a pop or whatever, and they can stay down here all day and all night, and then take the last bus back

available. Upstairs is pretty quiet. It seems like on my floor they concentrate the young people. I've walked through our hall and sometimes you will smell so many chemicals from all the different stuff they are doing. You're gagging and trying to hold your breath so you can make it to the elevator. That's why I stay in my apartment so much. When I walk out my apartment, you've got either the crime element, drug element, or breathing in all those toxic fumes. I would rather stay in my apartment, keep the windows open, and pray the fumes don't come through my door. Once you are in your apartment, you have to get a full medical note from a doctor saying you are suffering undue stress and all sorts of things. In other words, it's impossible to move up. I've only known of one person to do it. The place is a trip.

 For earlier installments of the Winthrop interview series, visit the Index archives online for the following articles:

1. "A Voice From the Winthrop: After 15 years at downtown's most notorious address, Glenn Grigsby has seen it all," TDI, 06/16/09
2. "A Voice From the Winthrop: In downtown Tacoma's most notorious building, Otha Adams finds independence," TDI, 06/26/09
3. "A Voice From the Winthrop: Nanette Colby's urban experience," TDI, 07/15/09
4. "A Voice From the Winthrop: The ups and downs of 'Yo-Yo Man,'" TDI, 07/30/09