An Oral History of

Krista Lee

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

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Interviewer: Alicia Barber, Ph.D.

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The 4th Street | Prater Way History Project is a collaborative community history project launched by the Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County in 2011. The project's website, with full transcripts, photographs, and other historical material about the 4th Street | Prater Way corridor through Reno and Sparks, Nevada, may be found at http://4thprater.onlinenevada.org/.

Photo by Patrick Cummings

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Barber: I am sitting with Krista Lee, who is the Management Analyst and Homeless Coordinator for the Community Resources Division for the City of Reno, and we're in her office at City Hall. It's Monday, October 24, 2011. Krista, could you tell me where you were born and where you went to school?

Lee: I was born in Topeka, Kansas, and I lived in Kansas until four years ago. Two of my grandparents were born and raised in Kansas City and lived their whole lives there, and I'm not sure if my other two grandparents were born in Kansas, but they lived a significant part of their lives there.

I grew up in a small town and then I moved to Lawrence, where I attended the University of Kansas for six or seven years, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student. As an undergraduate, I majored in psychology and sociology with a concentration in women's studies, and my master's degree is in social work.

In between my undergraduate and graduate programs, I took about six months off, thinking that I would find a job, but I couldn't find a decent-paying one, so I decided to get my master's degree. When you get a liberal arts degree as an undergrad, they don't warn you ahead of time that it's not very useful in the real world.

I wanted to work with people in poverty, and I was really interested in psychology and sociology, so my main interest was in working for a Mental Health Center or working for the Division of Welfare, something along those lines. I just like learning about psychology and sociology, so I thought, why not try to get a job in that area?

It soon became clear that to get a job, either a graduate degree or more experience was necessary, and when I was looking for a job, it was really hard to get my foot in the door. I liked Lawrence and I liked living there. At that point in my life, I wasn't ready to move away.

Barber: Tell me about that graduate program. What is the degree program and what kind of coursework did you take?

Lee: My degree is a Master's in Social Work (MSW), and the program at K.U. is a little bit different than the University of Nevada, Reno's program, in that you get to pick what

kind of track you want to follow. You can pick a clinical track, and within the clinical track there are four different concentrations: health and mental health, children and families, aging, and another one I can't recall. Or you could pick the Administration and Advocacy track, which is what I chose. That track focuses more on the macro side of social work—policies and advocacy—and a lot of people who choose that track end up being managers. I really didn't have an interest in being a director of an agency, at least not then and really not now, but I like advocacy and policy, making an impact on the larger picture.

Barber: During the degree program, did you work in the communities surrounding the university?

Lee: Yes. You have to do two years of practicum, because I was in a two-year program. So my first year I did my practicum at the Douglas County AIDS Project, working with individuals who were either homeless or near homeless who had HIV or AIDS, and that was really interesting. They get HOPWA, Housing Opportunity for People with AIDS. It's a federal grant to house people who have HIV, and we worked with those individuals doing case management, helping them get to their appointments, that sort of thing.

Barber: This was in the city of Lawrence?

Lee: Yes. Then my second year I did my practicum for an agency called MAACLink, Mid America Assistance Coalition. It's in Kansas City, Missouri, and they do a lot of different things. At the time, they had an information referral line for people needing all types of assistance, and they had a lady who helped provide support. She held support groups for case managers in the community, people who were working with people who were homeless. So she did trainings and support groups for them. They had funds for back-to-school supplies.

They did a wide variety of stuff, but one of their major roles was to serve as the database administrators for the Kansas City Homeless Management Information System. It's a federally mandated database, and anyone who receives federal funds related to homelessness is required to participate in entering client-level data into the system. So they administered that system, and in fact, my current office is the grant recipient for the HMIS funding for Reno and rural Nevada.

Barber: What drew you to this kind of work?

Lee: For two years or so during my undergraduate years, I did a couple of other jobs related to direct service. I worked overnight at a homeless shelter and in between my graduation and entering grad school, I worked for the 1-800-Medicare line. I was already a little burned out on the direct client work, but I still liked the whole topic and liked knowing that maybe I could make an impact somewhere on the issue of poverty. I chose the advocacy track because I thought maybe it wouldn't require that I do a whole lot of direct service but I could still be involved.

Barber: After you received your degree, you then started to look for a job?

Lee: I got my MSW in 2006, and actually, I got a job even before I graduated, at our Mental Health Center in Lawrence. The city of Lawrence had provided funding to hire several homeless outreach workers to provide street outreach to the people who were either staying in shelters or who weren't, to try to connect them with mental health services and housing and everything that they needed.
One of my professors specialized in homelessness and she was really involved in the community's efforts to address homelessness. She told me about the job and gave me a referral, and although I had to interview, I got my foot in the door through that avenue.

I did that for about a year, and I just got really burned out. It was really hard. It's really draining on you. I was working with homeless families, and I was working three other jobs on top of it because I had so many student loans. I realized that I needed to find one good-paying job, so I started looking online and found my current job.

Barber: What was the title of the job you applied for?

Lee: The title was Homeless Coordinator, Housing Resource Specialist, and the job description included a lot of administrative tasks like working with providers, helping to coordinate services, helping to make sure the providers were all talking to one another, and making sure that the Community Assistance Center was providing the services it was intended to provide. It was primarily administrative with some advocacy. We can't lobby because we're federally funded, but we advocate just to make sure that we're implementing the right kinds of policies and that the community is thinking about the clients when they're implementing new policies.

Barber: Was it a new position?

Lee: Yes, it was a brand-new position, and it coincided with the building of the Community Assistance Center. Once the city started construction on that, I think they realized that it was going to take a lot more work than just building a building, that you needed to have somebody there to help make sure things went smoothly on the larger-picture side of things.

Until that point, Leann McElroy, who was the former chief of staff, was working more in an advisory capacity. She retired right when I got hired, but she had been involved in attending a lot of the community meetings about the planning of this whole campus. I don't know if she attended meetings before that happened, but she was really the community liaison for homelessness.

Barber: Did you come to Reno to interview for the job?

Lee: Yes. I'd never been here before my interview, and I came out here for my interview and was here two days and left.

Barber: The Community Assistance Center was under construction at that time, just south of East Fourth Street on Record Street. Did someone from the city take you down to look at it?

Lee: No. They suggested that if I had time before I left, I could go down and see it, and so I did. I went down and introduced myself to Ray Trevino over at St. Vincent's Dining Hall and told him that I was just in town interviewing for the job, but I was really interested in seeing what the campus looked like and how it operated. Ray had been running the dining hall for a long time. He talked to me for a few minutes. I had to leave town that day, so I didn't get a whole tour, but I did come down and look at it.

Barber: Was the dining hall that St. Vincent's operated part of the Center or was that a separate program?

Lee: It's hard to describe, because the dining hall and the Gospel Mission were part of the whole construction process. There was some sort of agreement—and this was all before my time—where I believe the Gospel Mission and St. Vincent's transferred the title to their existing properties then located in the central downtown area to the city in exchange for these new buildings and new properties.

The Community Assistance Center is enclosed within a gate, and so even though they're right next door, people differ over whether St. Vincent's and the Gospel Mission are considered part of the Community Assistance Center. If I'm talking to someone who isn't familiar with the services, I describe the whole area as the Community Assistance Center, but to somebody who really knows the area and knows the services, I make the distinction that the Community Assistance Center is officially just the area inside the gate.

However, they are all invited to the provider meetings and the directors' meetings we hold within the gates, so they are kept informed about what's going on and what the needs are.

Barber: After you interviewed and then went back to Kansas, did you get a call with the job offer?

Lee: Yes. They called me and offered me the position, and I hesitated. I think I actually turned it down at first. [laughs]

Barber: Really? Why?

Lee: Because I was inexperienced in job searches, besides working retail and that sort of thing. I thought that at my first real type of job I would be able to negotiate. City positions at that time—I don't know if they still do—listed a salary range and potential for bonus, so I thought there was room to negotiate and there wasn't. They just offered me the lowest pay. I was surprised, but I don't know what I was thinking. I'd also never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd get the job, so I was thinking, "I can't move." I cried all night, thinking, "What did I just do?" I called them the next day, and asked, "Is the job still available?" They said yes, and I said, "Oh, I'll take it." [laughs]

It was really embarrassing. I can feel my face getting hot just talking about that. But it was a big move and I didn't know anybody out here and I just hadn't really believed that I would get the job. I gave a month's notice at my current job and then

moved to Reno in September of 2007.

Barber: Where was your office?

Lee: I began working on the fourth floor of City Hall. This was back when there wasn't enough room for all the employees, back before the economy was as bad as it is today. The Community Resources Division was housed with the Redevelopment Agency, and there wasn't any office space available there, so they placed me in an open cubicle on the fourth floor with another division. I was back in my own corner by myself, and it was lonely. But I was only there for probably nine months or so before I was essentially relocated to operate our first tent city down at the Community Assistance Center. We formally organized it in June of 2008. So from June through October, I was working six to seven days a week down there, running a campground, basically.

Barber: Can you tell me which parts of the Community Assistance Center were completed when you arrived and what was still being constructed when you began to work at the site?

Lee: When I first started my job, the only part that was complete was the Men's Shelter, and that's in 315 Record Street on the second floor of the building. The interior of the first floor of the building wasn't finished. After I got hired, they started construction on the Women's Shelter and the Triage Center, which were both in the 315 Record Street building, and the Reno Police Department Crisis Intervention Team office, which is in that building, too.

Once we started the first tent city, I believe the Women's Shelter was just about completed, because I recall that I used the front desk area as a meeting space where I kept my cold drinks because it was so hot. I had some resource materials in there, but most of my time was spent outdoors because that's where all the clients were.

At that time, they must have already started construction on phase 2B, which was the 335 building, which opened in October of 2008. It's three stories high and the roof has a playground on it. The Family Shelter is in that building. We opened up that building in October and then we opened up the Women's Shelter the same month and the Men's Cold Weather Shelter around November 1st. Then we closed the tent city down.

We didn't really realize it at the time, but there is always, it seems, a group of people who just are not able to or choose not to utilize traditional shelter settings. So once we closed the tent city and opened up the shelters, there was still a small group of individuals who tried to camp out on the property, and we relocated them, I guess, several times—unintentionally, of course. We didn't really want them camping there because there were facilities available for them to use.

At one point they set up camp in an alleyway between the 315 and 335 buildings. They didn't really set up tents, from what I recall, but they set up a lot of mattresses and blankets. It just became like a big junkyard, with trash everywhere. You could hardly walk through the alley, it was so full of stuff.

Eventually we removed them from that area and fenced it in so that they couldn't go back there. After that, I don't recall if they tried to sleep anywhere else on the campus during that winter, but once the Cold Weather Shelter closed in March of '09, there was

another situation where men who had been staying all winter in that shelter now had nowhere else to go because the regular Men's Shelter is pretty much always full. This is where I start to lose my timeline because we've had so many different renditions of these tent cities. I believe that it was in the spring of 2009 that we designated an outdoor sleeping area just beyond the day-use area that's at the CAC. The city of Reno hired staff to allow people to sleep overnight on the ground in this designated area, but they weren't allowed to bring tents or anything. They could bring their bedding and that sort of thing, but then they had to remove it all in the daytime.

We did that all summer long, and then the majority of the individuals who we hired for that stayed on and operated the Cold Weather Shelter that winter. So from the winter of '09 to '10, the same group of people, for the most part, operated that for the city of Reno. That's really the first time the city has provided direct service, as far as operating a shelter—I mean outside of that first tent city—and I wouldn't really consider that a shelter operation. But in the previous year the Gospel Mission had operated the Cold Weather Shelter.

So the city decided to do it, and then that spring, March of 2010, there was again a large group of men who had been staying there all winter long, who now had nowhere else to go. A lot of the individuals who stay in the Cold Weather Shelters are chronically homeless; they've been homeless for a long time. A lot of them have drug and alcohol issues, mental health issues, that sort of thing, and quite a few of the gentlemen who stay in that shelter prefer that one because there's no case management requirement, really. You just go in, you sleep, you get up and you leave, and so there's not really any expectation that you're going to try to move on and obtain housing or a job or anything else.

So come that spring, there were all these guys again who didn't have anywhere else to go, and so they started sleeping out next to the railroad tracks where's there's a railroad spur, as we call it. I don't know what the formal line is called, but it runs along Record Street between St. Vincent's Dining Hall and the Record Street buildings. It's in use, but only about twice a day; they go one way and then come back. They were sleeping and they set up tents along there, right behind St. Vincent's Dining Hall, and then just as the days went by, each day it pretty much doubled in size. Pretty soon it extended clear down the tracks for a little bit.

Finally one day the mayor came down and said, "Get them inside," or something like that, because it was really hazardous for them to be sleeping there, basically without supervision. There were just a lot of problems, and we'd seen that the first time we had a tent city, before we organized it—that they had tried to set up their own tent city, but there was a lot of prostitution and drug use. At one point there was even a gang started of people living there who were trying to rule the other people there, and it just was not a good situation.

So staff came down and created this new tent city which we ended up calling "Safe Ground," on the model that they had in Sacramento. There's a group or coalition called Safe Ground in Sacramento, and they call it Safe Ground with the idea that it's a safe place to camp for people who cannot or choose not to access shelter. At least it's a safe place for them to be. They may have had some different rules than we did—some of they say absolutely no drugs or alcohol, that sort of thing. Of course, we say that, but once they get inside the tents they can do whatever they want. Once we organized it

again, it very quickly grew to over 200 people living there.

Barber: It was in one specific area?

Lee: Yes, it was relocated into our day area where we had all these shade structures up. The day area is a place for people who are living at the Community Assistance Center to go outside and smoke or talk to their friends, that sort of thing, and not be in the way of traffic, because there's really no other space besides the parking lot for them to be in. The day area allows them to get out of the traffic.

We ended up having to move the shade structures at some point. We allowed them to set up their tents, and before you knew it, it was full. You couldn't fit another tent in there. We said, "Okay, no more tents. No more. Whoever is here can stay here, but we're not taking any more new people."

Somewhere around that time, too, we tried to implement a committee of individuals living there to help police the area. They ended up being elected. We said, "If you are interested in fulfilling this role, turn in your name," and then we created a ballot and everybody living there voted for the committee members. So there was a committee and they called themselves the Betterment Committee.

In the Safe Ground they actually started some reform very early on because they helped to provide some input on what the rules were. The city said, "These are some rules that we can't live without," and then the committee put in rules that they thought were good ideas too. The city had some safety rules prohibiting flames, saying you can't have a fire or a propane heater or something similar in your tent with a flame because of the risk of catching everyone else's tent on fire, and no drugs and alcohol, no prostitution, some of the legal criminal issues. I don't remember what kind of rules the committee put in. For the most part, they agreed with what we said.

Barber: How did it work?

Lee: The first committee was all right, but over time, they agreed to hold reelections every so often. I don't remember if it was every six weeks or what. Several months into it, we started getting a lot of complaints, and actually there were committee members quitting left and right because there were allegations that some of the committee members were taking bribes to allow new people to come in and sleep or to let people get away with doing other types of illegal activities. There was just a lot of corruption going on. In fact, after we said no more people, probably a month or two went by and the numbers came down slowly just from people leaving or getting kicked out. If they were blatantly violating the rules, then they'd be asked to leave.

On September 1st of 2010 we organized it again, and we said, "No more committee. This isn't working. We gave you plenty of opportunities to try to fix it." So we said, "On September 1st if you want to continue living here, then you need to participate in case management and try to find a job or housing or whatever it is that you need to try to get out of this situation."

We removed everyone on the first and we did a cleanup of the area. We picked up all the trash and everything that was accumulating, and then that same day we re-registered everybody who wanted to be there back into the area. So there were roughly

120 people who re-registered on September 1st to stay there, and we ended up keeping a couple of the committee members on to help with re-registration each week. Once a week they were required to come in and tell whoever the person was at the time, "Yes, I'm still staying here." If you didn't re-register, we would post a notice on your tent that you didn't re-register, saying, "Please come in and tell us whether you're there or not."

If they still didn't come in, then we would take down their tent because there were a lot of times when people would just move out and they'd leave all their bedding and a lot of their stuff behind because they couldn't carry it with them. We wouldn't know where they went, if they went to jail or if they got an apartment or whatever. Usually if they went to jail or the hospital, somebody else there knew that and they'd tell us, so we would make accommodations as we needed to. But if they just picked up and left and nobody knew where they were, then there was a process we had to go through.

Fairly quickly we began to tell them, "At a minimum, once a month you have to meet with a case manager." So I was the case manager.

Barber: Another part of your job.

Lee: Yes. So they were required to meet with me once a month and within that first month, probably twenty to thirty people either said, "I'm not going to meet with you. I don't want to meet with you," or they were given some sort of notice like, "You haven't met with your case manager by the 31st and must exit Safe Ground," and still didn't come in. That first month they wouldn't have been asked to leave based on not doing anything; they would have been asked to leave because they didn't meet with the case manager.

Quite a few people were asked to leave at the end of the first month, and from there on out, each month a few more people would either leave or be asked to leave. I felt like I was really flexible with them as far as demonstrating that they were trying to do something. "Sign up for housing," I'd say, "I'll give you the application. Just fill it out, bring it back in, and we'll mail it or turn it in," or, "Go look for a job and bring me applications that you're applying for jobs or something."

There were some individuals who just wouldn't do anything, and so, unfortunately, I had to ask them to leave. When we started the case management, I pretty much let them set their own goals: "Whatever it is that you need to get out of here, then let's work on it." Some of them weren't able to do it due to drug and alcohol addiction issues, or just didn't want to. It's not a large percentage at all, but there are some people who prefer the outdoor sleeping environment and at least felt safer doing it in a place where it was allowed for free, versus along the river or wherever else they would go. So each month we lost a few more people.

We actually did have quite a few who obtained housing, once they got into the process. I don't have the exact numbers handy, but there were over twenty who got into some sort of permanent living environment, whether it was subsidized housing or people who got their Social Security retirement in the time they lived there. I tried to help get one guy into senior housing, and he said, "No, I don't want to live with those old people," and he went and rented a motel. Still, he made the choice to go rent the motel, so I still consider that a permanent living environment because he was eligible for cheaper housing and chose not to take it.

By June of 2011, we had three or four people left living there, and they had been

there for over a year. There was shelter space available for a few individuals—on the first of the month there are always shelter beds available because a lot of people get disability income or retirement income, and so they go out and rent a hotel for a week or two and then they gamble or drink the rest of it away and come back. On the first, you can always get a shelter bed.

We said, "There's really no reason why you guys are still here. Yes, you've done everything we've asked." But at that point, do you say, "You can live here forever"? A couple of the guys had pretty significant criminal backgrounds and weren't able to obtain housing. One of them was seeking disability and one of them was seeking employment, and he did get a part-time job. They were eligible for the shelter and so we just asked them to go into the shelter and we closed that final tent city.

Currently, there's no more city-provided or city-condoned tent city or any outdoor sleeping accommodations. The jurisdictions do not have funding for the Cold Weather Shelter this year, so the Reno Area Alliance for the Homeless has been trying to come up with a resolution to that, either by providing a Cold Weather Shelter from November to March or, at a minimum, at least on nights when it's really, really cold out. They haven't found a location yet.

Barber: Where has it been in the past?

Lee: It was held on North Edison Way, but those buildings were part of the flood project and the ones that we've used in the past are being demolished. The problem is funding, really. There's no money to pay for utilities or transporting people out there.

Barber: Did the city operate buses to take the clients out there in the past?

Lee: Well, this past year we contracted the shelter out to the Volunteers of America. They're the contractor for the regular shelter, and they have their own mini bus that they used to transport them out. The year that the city operated it, we actually leased a van from one of the local car companies, and it would leave from the Community Assistance Center. It required a lot of back-and-forth travel because either transportation method only held fifteen to thirty people, and the shelter's capacity was seventy-five men. They would transport them back and forth as long as it took—three to five round trips—and then they'd transport them back downtown in the morning. The shelter was just open during the nighttime, for sleeping.

Barber: So prior to the tent city that emerged when you arrived to work for the city, had something like that happened ever before in Reno?

Lee: Not that I know of. As far as I know, there have always been people camping along the river and in the woods, places that aren't in the public eye as much. As far as I know, there haven't been any other tent cities organized within or on public property.

Barber: In your experience and from your education, are tent cities common throughout the country, or did it seem unique to you?

Lee: These days it's pretty common, but three or four years ago when it started, we did do some research. It was kind of unique, I would say, because Reno is small in comparison to the major cities that have them. Seattle is the major one that comes to mind. Seattle had one for years; they had several tent cities. We did a lot of research on how theirs worked, but at that time there were maybe one or two others we could find that were actually organized.

You always hear about New York encampments of people sleeping under the bridges, but it's not really the same thing. They're doing that on their own. They probably have their own organization within themselves, but it isn't a matter of a third party coming in. Really, of the Seattle tent cities that I've read about, most are actually consumer-operated. They have their own council that enforces the rules. We just haven't had a lot of luck with that model here.

Barber: For its size, does Reno have a proportionately large homeless population?

Lee: I've never compared Reno's population to any other community, so I'm not really sure. We have issues that are unique to Reno, like gambling. I would say that the majority of the seniors who we serve are gambling addicts, so that's a unique factor here.

Right now the economy is so bad that we are serving a lot of men who might not have become homeless in previous years. A lot of them have issues, but when there were more jobs than there were people, they would have had no problem finding a job if they lost a previous one. They might fall off the wagon or something else would happen, and then have to come back down to use the shelter, but for a very short time, not years at a time. That has played a significant role, I believe, with our population.

Barber: Is there treatment offered in the Community Assistance Center for things like gambling addiction and alcoholism, or does that happen somewhere else? Do you refer people?

Lee: Some people would disagree with me, but I don't see that there are a whole lot of resources available for gambling addictions. For those who we know are gambling addicts, we try to inform them about payee services, where an agency would step in and their check would come to the agency, and then the agency would pay their bills or their rent and give them the rest of the money. So we try to inform them about that.

I know that there's a Gamblers Anonymous, there's the Problem Gambling Center and those types of organizations, but they've never, to my knowledge, done outreach to our folks. I've tried to contact them to come to meetings and tell us about their services, and they've never been open to it. I may be misinformed, though—that's just my observation.

Barber: What about drug and alcohol treatment?

Lee: For drug and alcohol treatment, currently we have WestCare. They operate the Community Triage Center on the back side of the 315 building. They provide drug and alcohol detox services. Typically a client will stay there from three to five days in detox, with the hope that they're going to transition them to a longer-term rehabilitation

program. There have been a lot of challenges because the longer-term recovery programs out there have pretty lengthy waiting lists unless you have a way to pay for it yourself, which most of our people don't. We also have AA groups on site too.

Barber: Are those pretty well attended?

Lee: No.

Barber: Prior to September of 2010, when you were requiring case management, was there any requirement for case management in any part of the center?

Lee: All the shelters require participants to work with a case manager, and in our very first tent city we required them to show proof, each week when they re-registered, that they were trying to do something, but it kind of became a joke. They'd just go grab an application at Cal Neva and bring it back and say, "I'm looking for a job."

I'd say, "Okay, that works." They only had to bring in one thing, and most of the time they didn't follow through on it; they'd just go get an application or they'd share one amongst themselves. So it was kind of a joke, but that was our first attempt at it.

Barber: How many people were down there? Did you have other staff who have been working one-on-one with the populations in the same way you have? You said you became kind of a case worker, really.

Lee: For the tent cities I was the only staff person assigned there. Within the shelters they have case managers for the shelter clients, but they don't provide services if you're not in the shelter.

Barber: You were saying it's kind of a fluid population in terms of people staying at the homeless shelter who are able to get housing for a week or two weeks at a time, and then return.

Lee: Yes. A lot of the individuals living in weekly motels along Fourth Street and the downtown Reno area—well, even Sparks, too—those people most of the time are on the verge of being homeless, if just one thing should happen. They say that about everyone, but those people are really on the verge, and the conditions that some of them are living in are just unimaginable. There are a lot of bed bugs in some of the motels. They're notorious for bed-bug issues. You can read the paper and see the crime that happens along Fourth Street. They're just not very safe.

The school district actually considers families with minor children to be homeless if they're living in a motel, so there are extra services available to those kids, but for adults, legally they're not homeless.

Barber: And there are a lot of those motels.

Lee: Oh, yes, yes.

Barber: Does it seem to you that there's always room in the motels for any of these folks who want to stay there?

Lee: Yes, they're just expensive. Some of the individuals who are disabled get just under $700 a month in SSI income, and most of the motels rent for a minimum of $125 a week. That doesn't leave much for food or medication or anything else.

Barber: Do you find that those folks who are living in the motels often still come down to St. Vincent's for the food?

Lee: Oh, yes, yes. And they use Good Shepherd's Clothes Closet, which is at the campus, to get free clothing. They come down to the Resource Center to get their mail and use the phones. They're still accessing pretty much all the same services, just not the shelter.

Barber: So that might account for a lot of them walking back and forth from the motels to the Center during the days and at night.

Lee: Yes.

Barber: What do people need to do to access the food there at the dining hall? Can they just show up and eat?

Lee: Yes, for St. Vincent's you can just show up and eat, luckily. We have food stamp outreach too. The Food Bank provides a food stamp outreach team that comes down to the Resource Center once a week, and they sign people up for food stamps.

Barber: How do you qualify for food stamps? Just signing up?

Lee: You need to apply. I couldn't tell you all their requirements, but it's income-based and they take into account how much you're paying in rent and medical expenses, and how many people are in your household. I believe you have to have certain forms of identification.

Barber: What are the capacities of the indoor shelters, as far as how many people they sleep?

Lee: The Women's Shelter holds 50 adult women. The Men's Shelter holds 158 adult men, and the Family Shelter is set up a little bit differently. They're actually given individual units in the Family Shelter, whereas the men's and women's shelters are basically each a large dormitory room. The Family Shelter has twenty-one family units and six units for what we call the maternity unit, which consists of six rooms either for women in their last trimester of pregnancy or for women with small children. Each of those units consists of one bedroom with a shared common area and kitchen area, whereas the rest of the family units are almost like apartments. They each have their own little kitchenette and bathroom and living area and bedroom. There are no stoves, just microwaves, a refrigerator, and a sink.

Barber: Is there a limit to how long people can stay in those shelters?

Lee: Yes. For the Women's and Men's Shelters, you can stay up to ninety days if you're meeting with a case manager. For the Family Shelter, you can currently stay up to six months, as long as you're working with a case manager and making progress.

We're not really sure if that's going to stay the same, because there's federal legislation coming out requiring communities to try to shorten shelter stays and reduce recidivism of people becoming homeless. Depending on what the actual regulations in those bills say, that could impact what we do. But it's going to be really difficult with a lack of affordable housing to reduce the shelter stay, especially for the families in the Family Shelter. One of the really positive things about being able to stay six months is that a family can get their name on the waiting list for subsidized housing and actually be able to attain it. If we shorten the allowed time, then I'm not sure what would happen. It's a real balance between keeping the federal funds that you're getting and showing the outcomes that they want you to have, and actually doing what is working, so time will tell.

Barber: Is there subsidized housing in a number of different areas in town?

Lee: There are a lot of different forms of subsidized housing; for instance, the state offers tax credits for a variety of properties. There are quite a few of those, but those apartments don't necessarily target the homeless unless they have an income, a more than minimum-wage income.

There are very limited resources for housing based on a person's income. Section 8 through the Housing Authority and the public housing units are one option, and then there are other properties in town that get some sort of Section 8 assistance or public assistance to offer very low rent so the person only pays 30 percent of their income or thereabouts towards rent. If your income is $600, then you're going to just pay 30 percent of the $600 in rent, or roughly that. You can't find a standard market rate unit for that price. But those are very limited and most of those properties have waiting lists.

Barber: Can you tell me about the gates around the Community Assistance Center? Why are they locked? What are they for?

Lee: The drive-through gates close early in the winter. They close at six p.m. in the wintertime, and they close at nine p.m. in the summertime. Then there's a pedestrian gate on the side, where the people who live there can move in and out until about nine o'clock.

Actually, the gates came after the campus was really up and running. We had quite a few incidents where people who weren't living at the campus would come through in the late evening hours and try to sell drugs or they'd do a drive-by, scoping the place out, and we weren't sure if they were gang-bangers or what they were looking for. They'd just come in and try to start problems with the people who were living there. So that's why we started closing the gate at nighttime.

Barber: Is there a person staffing the pedestrian gate?

Lee: We have security guards there all night, so if somebody shows up after nine, they may have to stand there for a couple of minutes if the guard's doing rounds on the other side of the building. But as long as you can demonstrate that you're supposed to be living there and you're not completely inebriated, then they'll let them in.

Barber: Was the first tent city outside of those gates?

Lee: No. Well, I don't know that we had the gates back then, but we did end up at some point putting up a temporary gate on the back side of it because the first tent city was in a dirt lot that's now a parking lot. There was a fence on the back side, and then at some point we started having a security guard set up at nighttime to check people. They were given I.D. cards saying they stayed there, and if they came in after nine or so, they'd have to have a card to get in.

Barber: You spent a lot of time on the site at all times of day. What has the relationship been with the surrounding businesses or with other property owners?

Lee: I think most of the business issues were addressed back before I was with the city. I know that before I started, they had neighborhood meetings, and the executive director of Catholic Charities at the time, organized those. He's no longer there. His name was Michael Ford. They would hold meetings to let the businesses know what was going on, and I know that there had been a lot of discussions with the neighborhood even before they started construction, in the planning process.

Since it was built, we really haven't had a whole lot of interaction with them. There have been a couple of times when we had people sleeping out on the sidewalk this past winter, and two or three neighbors put in complaints about it. I contacted them back and said, "We're working on it and this is what we're doing. If you want to come during public comment, you can speak out on this." It puts more pressure on the issue and sometimes helps us resolve it a little quicker if it's not just us saying it's a problem.

Barber: It seems that site was chosen because it was pretty centrally located, close to downtown. Does it seem to be a good location to you? Are there any problems with the location?

Lee: Well, I don't know that I could speak to that. I think that as long as you have the services that the homeless people need in one place, it might not really matter where it was, as long as you still have access to transportation and other services. They don't take buses a lot, but you need to have transportation available for those who do. The one advantage to being downtown is that it's near the main transportation hub, which is just a block away. And it's easy for them to ride their bikes around to get to places. There are quite a few men, especially, who ride their bikes.

Barber: I talked to the folks at the Reno Bike Project, and they've worked with a number of people who worked with them to get a bike, and they said that's been a pretty positive

experience.

Lee: Definitely.

Barber: So are there people who are living at the homeless shelter who do have jobs and they just don't have enough money to rent an apartment, or do they mostly not have jobs?

Lee: Most of them don't, but there are people who have jobs. Some of the individuals who do get jobs are there for a variety of reasons—either they've got garnishments on their wages and they aren't making enough to afford rent, or they have other addictions. Yes, they're able to hold a job, but they spend their money on other things or they just got a job and they're saving up to be able to move into a place.

Barber: Can they come back after some window of time if they've reached the limit of how long they can stay there?

Lee: Yes. If you stayed your ninety days or you haven't stayed ninety days in a row but you've been there three different times within ninety days, then you have to be gone for six months before you can come back.

Barber: Do you see that happening very much?

Lee: Yes.

Barber: And where have they been in the meantime? Are they able to find housing for that long or do you think they sometimes end up sleeping on the street?

Lee: Most of the ones who leave by their own choosing, who haven't maxed out their time, probably go into motels with friends or get a room themselves, but then they lose it at some point and come back.

If they've used up all their time and are asked to leave, it's hard to tell where they go. Some of them, I'm sure, do end up on the street, but those people are hidden. We don't really have a way to identify that. And there are so many people in the shelters that at this point we don't even have a way to ask them, "Hey, where are you going?" or even to try to keep track of that. You just don't know. Some of them may leave town. The transient population will go on to another shelter somewhere else. Those are few but they do exist.

Barber: Did you tell me that there's a garden somewhere on the campus?

Lee: Yes, on the roof of the Family Shelter. I think it's through the school district. It's a program for the kids in the Family Shelter to teach them about eating healthy.

Barber: And there's a play area up there too? What kind of stuff is up there for the kids to play with?

Lee: There's playground equipment. The only people who can get up there are people with keys, and those staying in the Family Shelter units are the only ones who have them. On the main campus, we have sex offenders, we have people with all kinds of backgrounds, and so the rooftop playground is unique and it's safe. I think it's a really cool idea. I don't know that any of the other homeless campus facilities out there have anything like that.

Also, this summer, we gated off an area back in between the buildings where the people used to sleep—there's a pedestrian gate to get through—and the Rotary Club came down and installed a basketball hoop with boxes full of balls and a giant Checkers set, and Hopscotch, and maybe Four Square or something else in that area too.
The parents aren't allowed to smoke on the roof, and so they can go down there and smoke and the kids can play.

Barber: I wanted to ask you some transportation questions because the RTC is interested in knowing what you might see as transportation needs on the street, how anything physically can be changed that you think might help the populations that you're familiar with. They're talking about improving the street for traffic, for bikes, for pedestrians, for buses. Is there anything you can give some input on?

Lee: A lot of our clients do ride bikes. On Fourth Street I'm not as familiar with the Sparks side, but it would be really nice to have a bike lane on Fourth Street. I've lived on Fourth Street before, and at one of my prior residences I also traveled down Fourth Street to get on I-80, and there are a lot of places where you have to get completely out of the lane to avoid the bicyclists because the lane is pretty narrow. Then you're risking a traffic accident because you're stopped there and other cars are going around you, and it's really difficult and dangerous for the bicyclists, especially because a lot of our clients don't wear helmets or don't take the precautions to be a safe bicyclist as some other people do.

I don't know that they can do anything about this, either, but at the intersection of Fourth and Record Street, if you're turning left onto Fourth Street—especially when there's a lot of traffic, like when the Aces games are going on and people are parked on the street—you have to pull your car out almost into the intersection to be able to see if any cars are coming. At least that was my circumstance. I just have a car. Maybe if I had a truck I could see over everything, but that has been problematic.

I do appreciate that they put in a new crosswalk at Evans Street, but I still see a lot of people crossing the street at the railroad track crossing, too. I don't think it's as bad as it used to be, but it's still problematic sometimes.
I don't know that this makes any difference either, but it seems like there's a streetlight, which I don't recommend removing because I think it provides some safety, but there's a streetlight right at the corner of Fourth and Record on the west side of the building. Maybe it's part of the railroad track or the railroad crossing lights, but it's a large pole that is right in the middle of the sidewalk, and you have to maneuver one way or the other around this pole. I don't even see how a wheelchair would get around it. It's a pain if you've got a bunch of people walking. If you're by yourself, it doesn't matter, but at certain times of day there's a lot of sidewalk traffic.

Overall, not that RTC can do anything about it, it would be nice to see some more pride, as far as the neighborhood goes, on the Reno side. There's just a lot of trash along

the street and around the vacant buildings. There's always a ton of trash within the fenced-in area around the Alpine Glass building.

Whenever I used to drive home along Fourth Street, you could tell it wasn't as clean as the rest of the city. I lived on West Fourth near Ralston in an apartment when I first moved here, and just from East Fourth to West Fourth, even downtown, you could really tell the difference.

Barber: Is there any expectation that you'll go back down to the site to work down there again or don't you really know? You're working in City Hall now.

Lee: Yes, I'm enjoying being at City Hall. Like I said at the beginning, I chose administrative advocacy social work because I was more interested in the larger picture. Working with the population on a daily basis is really draining and difficult, and with the limited resources we have, my experience has been that it's not a forty-hour workweek job, not that my current job is either, but there were a lot of weeks I was working sixty, seventy hours a week, and it's just not manageable for my personal life and my mental health.

It might be a different story if we had unlimited resources to be able to do creative new things and have more success in getting people housed, but when you see the same individuals over and over again for years, the opportunities to feel rewarded are very few and far between. So I don't know. I am enjoying working back at City Hall a lot.