

‘Tonight thank God it’s them instead of you’

By Kathryn Reed

“At Christmastime it’s hard, but when you’re having fun

There’s a world outside your window

And it’s a world of dread and fear

Where the only water flowing

Is the bitter sting of tears

*And the Christmas bells that ring there are the clanging
chimes of doom*

Well tonight thank God it’s them instead of you”

The lyrics from “Do they know it’s Christmas” is about Africa, but it might as well be Lake Tahoe.

For some on the South Shore, the material riches of Christmas are only something to dream about.

For Rich Barkley, he woke up this morning outside. That’s where he lives. For Laurie, she was in a chilly trailer, unable to afford any decorations, and without her teen-age daughter who is in foster care.

Thousands of people are in the Lake Tahoe Basin now – vacationing, spending a holiday in one of the most beautiful places in the world. And, yet, for so many who call this place home, it is less than idyllic.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, nearly 554,000 people across the country are homeless. The South Shore is part of that equation.

Barkley and Laurie share having income insecurity. He has a job, but no home. She has a home, but no job. It’s a

precarious situation for both.

Poverty with a view – Lake Tahoe’s longtime moniker – is getting more real for more people almost on a daily basis.



Even though it has been below freezing every night for weeks, Rich Barkley lives in the woods in Stateline. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Finding his way in Lake Tahoe

Barkley was in Lakeside Inn at Stateline on Thursday, trying desperately not to fall asleep. They don't take kindly to vagrants using their establishment as a warm room, so to speak.

"Lakeside doesn't give me crap if I'm not sleeping," he says. It's a place to hang when he has nowhere else to be and the daytime high is hovering at freezing.

While the hotel-casino doesn't have a homeless policy per se,

it doesn't tolerate loitering.

"Anyone who makes our guests uncomfortable is asked to leave," Stacy Noyes with Lakeside told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Barkley lives in the woods not far from the casino. His two sleeping bags keep him warm, though there are nights he has sought out public places to give him a little shelter, a little break from the bone-chilling wind.

Snow he can handle. It's the rain, when everything is soaked that makes life difficult. It is impossible to get warm. He insists he doesn't start fires.

Barkley packs his stuff up every day, putting it in a garbage bag and then placing it in a ditch. He doesn't want the little that he has to be stolen or thrown away.

He carries a small backpack with him. Some of what he has is how he is able to eat. He's a harmonica player with a fairly regular gig at Base Camp Pizza in Heavenly Village. Owner Ted Kennedy gives him food credit for his playing.

"We helped him because he's a friend. The Bible calls on us to do that. In fact, Christ said, you guys didn't feed or shelter me when I needed it. The folks said – wait, we never saw you hungry. Christ said when you didn't do those things for the most needy among you, then you didn't do it for me," Kennedy told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Rich is also a hell of a harmonica player and we love his music."

Barkley has seven harmonicas; using them to join other musicians who are at the restaurant.

Barkley has been in the area for more than seven years, having come from San Diego. Like so many who call Lake Tahoe home, he saw that lake in pictures and wanted to be here. It's what keeps him here.

He secured a seasonal job right away at Kirkwood Mountain

Resort. At Heavenly Mountain Resort he's taught skiing, at various hotels he has done maintenance. Today he is working at the snowplay area across from MontBleu.

He doesn't explain what happened to his vehicle. He doesn't explain why it's been so hard to keep a traditional roof over his head. He's had roommates, even places to himself. He admits he doesn't like living with other people. Friends let him stay on occasion, or just come in to shower. He does work for them in exchange. The recreation center in South Lake Tahoe is a place to get clean as well.

Barkley won't use the warm room, saying he can fend for himself.

Hanging out at the South Lake Tahoe Library is common, as it is for others who are homeless. It's easier to get to compared to the library in Zephyr Cove.

"I actually enjoy not being in a fixed location," he said.

What Barkley would really like is to save money for an old truck to fill it with tools so he could drive around fixing things for people. An RV would do, too, so then he has that roof.

"My goal is to save money to get my electrician's license," he tells *Lake Tahoe News* in between bites of a hot meal at Lakeside.



Health issues keep Laurie from having steady work; begging puts food on the table and heats her trailer. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A life of uncertainty

Laurie is a bit of a fixture at the main post in South Lake Tahoe where she sits on the steps with a sign saying she needs work. On this particular day her quest is to collect \$25 from strangers so she can fill her propane tank. This will last five to seven days.

She's been begging there on and off since 2014.

She doesn't want her last name used because of legal reasons. When her daughter was with her, she was getting welfare checks. While her daughter is still in her life, she isn't living with her. It was illegal to keep the money even though some of the money was spent on the 17-year-old. Laurie is willing to pay the money back, but the payments have to work for her.

Her court date is set for late January.

"I can't be locked up. I wouldn't have this trailer," Laurie tells *Lake Tahoe News* through tears.

While this felony lingers, it's makes getting a job difficult.

Health issues are what led her to unemployment. She said she's been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, which she said is not on the list of maladies to trigger disability.

Calling in sick one too many times forced her to lose her jobs at Jamba Juice and Doc's Cottages.

She doesn't like to beg, but doesn't know what else to do. A regular job is hard to commit to. And right now a bike is her main means of transportation.

"There are some angels out there and some haters," she says of the people she encounters. Laurie says she is the example where drugs, alcohol and mental health issues are not the cause of her problems.

She's had an array of jobs – clerical, retail, cleaning, even topless dancing. Laurie says she wants to work.

A friend may be giving the 59-year-old a car after the first of the year so then she could work for a cleaning agency that said it would hire her.

Her daughter's father has never been part of her life. The South Tahoe High School senior is living with a friend and her mom. She has plans to go to college, with the hopes of going into the medical profession.

"Her happiness is the reason I breath every day," Laurie says of her daughter. They see each other nearly every day.

On Friday they celebrated Christmas with a few gifts exchanged.

Laurie has been in Tahoe for 25 years. Her illness has been

part of her life since her daughter was 5. It's been a struggle ever since, with living conditions for the two of them that have included hotel rooms and a shed.

Sitting in Laurie's trailer near the Y it's cold even with a jacket on. It's never more than 65 degrees inside. Blankets cover the windows. A picture of her daughter is on the table, one of the few items that makes it look like a home rather than an ordinary travel trailer.

Laurie has been at this location since the summer. She does work for the landlord in exchange for the trailer.

She is able to get food at Bread & Broth once a week, and when she's able to transport the goods Christmas Cheer is also a resource.

"Cash goes to things I run out of – propane, soap, laundry detergent," Laurie said. "Asking for help is really hard."