

# Protecting and serving the homeless

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A cop who encounters a homeless man can ignore him, question him or arrest him. Or he can simply tell him to move on.

Not Jeremy Turner. In his off-hours, the [DeKalb County](#) police officer carries on the work his father died for. Turner's father, an advocate for the homeless, was killed in 1998 while trying to help build a house for a homeless family.

Now, Turner trolls under bridges in the pre-dawn darkness bringing food, first aid and advice for the anonymous and unseen people who live there.

"We're not here to arrest you," Turner told a homeless man during a recent foray into that underworld. "We're not here to hinder you in any way."

"We have food. We're taking people to the hospital," Turner said to the man who had panicked at the sight of a uniformed police officer shining a flashlight on him. On this trip, Turner was there in his official capacity as a DeKalb community police officer.

The man's name was Bill, just Bill, he said. Like the other residents camped under the bridges along North Peachtree Creek in [DeKalb County](#), Bill had shed his last name as well as his past.

Bill said yes to the bread and doughnuts, no to the offer of a bath and a trip to an alcohol treatment center. But he helped Turner and the officer's companions, most of them members of various social service agencies, carry Bill's friend, Miss Cindy, to a waiting ambulance on the street above.

Miss Cindy hadn't eaten in more than 24 hours and was coughing violently.

"Usually when the police come around, they're pretty bad," Bill said. "This one seems real nice."

Helping people is part of Turner's family history, but it has come at a price. In 1998, within the space of six months, he suffered the violent deaths of his father, Robert, and his brother, Jonathan.

In July of that year, Jonathan Turner, a servicemen who'd just returned from duty in the Middle East, was struck and killed by a drunken driver after stopping to change a tire for a stranded mother and her infant.

In November 1998, Robert Turner was shot and killed by a robber while trying to defend

a handyman working on the house he was building for a homeless family in southeast Atlanta. The slaying not only devastated Robert Turner's family, it destroyed the charity he had founded, Mission America.

It also compelled Jeremy Turner to become a police officer instead of a salesman or a lawyer, as his father was. Turner worked hard to become a detective in DeKalb's Robbery/Homicide Unit.

"I didn't ask for any other assignment," Turner said.

Turner got the job, but it did not prove to be the cathartic experience he had hoped for. "You can get burned out working robberies and homicides. You're on call all the time. You're dealing with a lot of stress," Turner said. "It can get depressing."

In 2007, when then-police chief Terrell Bolton set up DeKalb's community policing program, Turner signed up. He also set out to replace his father's non-profit. The new organization, Contribute2America, is currently awaiting approval for tax-exempt status, Turner said.

"I think Jeremy Turner personifies the phrase 'protect and serve,'" Joannie Strauss said. "I call him my guardian angel."

Strauss and Turner met last August. At the time, Strauss said, she was homeless, living in an abandoned house with no heat or electricity.

Strauss, who grew up in the Druid Hills area and is a former licensed clinical social worker, had fallen onto hard times. She'd stopped taking her medication for bipolar disorder and had replaced it with cocaine. Strauss also suffered from a degenerative disk problem in her back that was getting worse.

"The house I lived in had no heat or electricity, but he saw that we had wood in the fireplace," Strauss said. "There were days when I had nothing to eat. He brought food."

Turner even found an animal hospital to board Strauss' two cats at reduced rate while she went into a drug treatment program.

Strauss said she expects to be released from the Ridgeview Institute later this month. After that, according to Strauss and Turner, she will go to work as a part-time resource worker and grant writer for Contribute2America.

When he asked why he spends so much time both on and off duty, away from his wife and children, to help strangers in trouble, Turner said it's not just altruism that motivates him.

"I think the best gratification any human can get is to help another person."



