Article from the Mpls StPaul Magazine

The Invisible Student

Photo by Scott Streble

There are more than 4,000 homeless or highly mobile students in Twin Cities schools, but you won't see them.

May 2008

By John Rosengren

Bedtime for Ambrose. He pops the window of an unoccupied house and crawls through quietly. He creeps to the basement and makes his way upstairs room by room. Nobody else there. The place is his for the night.

Ambrose curls up on the carpet, makes a pillow of his backpack. Autumn has chilled the night air. There’s no heat. He pulls his hooded sweatshirt over his head. There are no sweet dreams, only the lullaby of sirens outside. Gunshots. He shoves aside the fear to make way for sleep.

With no alarm clock, he has trained himself to wake early. He knows it’s morning if he sees the city buses or kids on the street. Ambrose walks two blocks to 31st Street and Humboldt Avenue North and catches the school bus to Washburn High School. There, he showers quickly down in the locker room, where he’ll join his football teammates later for practice, dresses, and heads to his first-period class. So begins another school day.

Ambrose Achua is a seventeen-year-old junior at Washburn High without a home. Homeless, but that’s not how he sees it. “To me, homeless is the guy with the ends of the fingers cut off his gloves, all huddled up, with a long beard asking everybody for change,” he says. “I tell people I’m ‘out on my own.’ ”

Ambrose is handsome and muscular with dark brown skin and long eyelashes that curl over bright eyes. He likes to play video games, plug into his MP3 player and hang out at the mall. Sometimes he does his homework, sometimes he doesn’t. He’s wary around strangers, but once he warms to someone, he speaks quickly and articulately.

Ambrose fought with his mom. After stints with an older brother, with his grandparents, and in a shelter, Ambrose moved in with his older sister in Minneapolis, where he had been born and lived seven years before his mom moved to Des Moines. His father, who had never married his mother, lives in North Carolina, but Ambrose didn’t want to have to start over there. His sophomore year, he enrolled at Washburn, where he stayed out of trouble, earned As and Bs, played football, and ran track. But he wasn’t happy. His sister, almost twenty years older, bossed him too much.

When the school year ended, Ambrose returned to his mom’s house in Iowa. That lasted a week. After another fight, Ambrose left to live with an aunt in Ames. His aunt wanted him to spend his junior year in school there, but Ambrose was determined to return to Washburn in time to play football. “I was tired of moving around school to school,” he says. “I wanted to stay in one school.”

He announced his plan to ride his bicycle to Minneapolis, more than 200 miles north. No way, people said. That’ll take you three, four days. No, it won’t, he replied. “People tell me I’m hardheaded because I don’t listen to what they tell me to do,” he says. “I’m very determined. Whatever I feel needs to be done, I’m going to do what I need to do.”

He made it a little more than thirty miles up I–35 on his blue Mongoose mountain bike before a cop pulled him over and called his mom to fetch him. But Ambrose wouldn’t give up. He hitched a ride with some neighbors headed to the Mall of America and landed in Minneapolis. On his own. Homeless.

Ambrose reported to football practice the day after he arrived back in Minneapolis. He also found a job bagging groceries and stocking shelves at Project Solo on the North Side. He knew he needed money to buy food and warm clothes, to pay his bus fare and football fees. He never ate at friends’ houses, because he didn’t want to take from them. Nor did he want to tell them about his situation. The pride burned too brightly inside of him. He ate junk food from the grocery store, cheap stuff he could buy himself. Between workdays, he bought himself snacks at Cub or Target.

At night, the hunt began for a place to sleep. He was too embarrassed to ask his football teammates if he could stay with them. He crashed in sheds in strangers’ yards and garages he found unlocked. Some nights, he snuck onto a friend’s porch. He found the empty house, new construction not yet inhabited, where he crashed off and on for a couple of weeks. August gave way to autumn, and the nights grew steadily colder. In low moments, he wondered if he should go back to his sister’s house, but he chased that thought away. No way he wanted her bossing him again. He also feared she might ship him back to his mom in Iowa.

Ambrose recognized that school could give him a chance to improve his situation, but homework became a problem. He wanted to do it, but didn’t know that places like the public library had computers anyone could use. And he didn’t ask anyone. After school and football practice, he was tired and the priority was to find a place to sleep. “Wandering around trying to find a bed was making me seasick,” he says. More often than not, the homework stayed in his backpack without getting done.

The nights were getting too cold to stay in places without heat. In a roundabout way—not wanting to let on about his situation—Ambrose asked one of the football coaches if he knew of shelters where kids could sleep. The coach said no—told him to ask some of the other kids. Ambrose felt blown off.

He managed to pass all of his classes except one and stayed eligible for football. He didn’t miss a day of practice. He was starting jayvee as a running back, seeing a little action late in varsity games, but was still shy of his dream of starting varsity. He wrenched his groin and banged up his elbow so bad he couldn’t lift his arm above his head. He had to ask his teammates to help him take off his jersey and shoulder pads.

One afternoon in late October, he sprained his ankle in practice. The coaches suggested he have the team trainer look at it. No, Ambrose said. “I’ll let it heal on my own.” He didn’t trust the coaches. Didn’t believe they cared.

About that time, he learned from another kid about The Bridge, a shelter on 22nd and Emerson Avenue South for runaway youth. Ambrose checked in. When counselors saw him icing his swollen ankle, they sent him to Hennepin County Medical Center. He left without the doctor examining him because he didn’t want to have to answer prying questions about his background. “That was for a therapist,” he says. “She was just a doctor.”

Football ended. Ambrose left The Bridge, paid rent to stay with a friend, but couldn’t keep that up. He stayed for a while at Avenues, an emergency shelter in North Minneapolis for youth. He returned to The Bridge shortly before Christmas.

Ambrose acknowledges that his situation is constantly with him, that there are daily reminders of the family and home others have that he doesn’t. He feels isolated, that he’s the only person he can talk to. Walking down the street, he sings R & B songs to cheer himself up. But that doesn’t always work.

Sometimes—like after he’s talked to his cousins in Iowa or he thinks too hard about his situation—the pain becomes too heavy. He breaks down and the tears flow. “You roam the world freely once you’re out on your own, but at the same time, you’re still sad because you don’t get to spend time with family members,” Ambrose says. “After a while, it does get to you. You get that crying baby feeling. You’re still a kid. You want someone to wrap their arms around you and treat you like a kid and care for you.”

Walk with Ambrose down the Washburn hallways. His black sneakers with the red swoosh glide across the smooth floors. In his baggy pants and black T-shirt, he looks like most of the other kids, except these are the same clothes he wore yesterday. See that girl there, the one in the burgundy sweater, tight jeans, and checkered shoes? Last year, as a junior, she lived in three different houses because her mom kept ducking bills and skipping rent. Got to the point where the girl wouldn’t unpack when they arrived at a new place because she figured they’d soon move. Or that girl there, the skinny one with the Kaboom T-shirt? A sophomore, she’s lived in four different places already this school year—bouncing from her mom’s to her aunt’s back to her mom’s and then to her grandma’s—all because mom, thirty, and grandma, forty-five, disapproved of the girl getting pregnant at fourteen. The stress caused her to miscarry. Check out the guy in the letter jacket that Ambrose just gave a “What up”? Senior starting linebacker, homecoming king nominee, one of the most popular kids in school. Two years ago, he was sleeping in apartment entryways, crashing at friends’ places. Mom was a crack addict. He was selling drugs to buy food for his younger siblings. These kids blend into the faces streaming through the hallway. Invisible, unless you know otherwise.

There are twenty-one “homeless” or “highly-mobile” kids like Ambrose among Washburn’s student body of 1,080. The face of homelessness has changed. Today, homeless women and children far outnumber homeless men across the state. In Minneapolis alone, Ambrose is one of 3,034 K–12 kids identified by the district as homeless or highly mobile.

These kids don’t have a home, but they go to school. In its most comprehensive study, Wilder Research found in 2006 that 89 percent of unaccompanied youth statewide are enrolled in school. That figure is even higher for homeless and highly mobile children still with their parents. For many of them, school is the only stable aspect of their lives. And their only ticket to break the cycle of poverty.

That puts an enormous challenge on school districts. They have responded with dedicated resources and staff. But it may not be enough.

The McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act identifies students as homeless or highly mobile if they are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, campgrounds, cars, parks, abandoned buildings, shelters, or doubled up with other families. A disproportionate number are of color. In a state where less than 20 percent of the general population is of color, 78 percent of homeless youth in the metro area are black, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, or of mixed race, according to Wilder Research. Almost half of Minneapolis's 3,034 homeless or highly mobile K–12 students are in grades K–5, about 20 percent are in grades 6–8, and a little more than 30 percent are in grades 9–12. In St. Paul, 56 percent of the 1,089 homeless students are K–5, 26 percent are in 6–8, and and 23 percent are in 9–12. They are not limited to certain buildings; they are at every elementary, middle, and high school in St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Margo Hurrle's job with the Minneapolis school district is to find those school-age kids. In her first year, 1991, when federal law required schools to enroll homeless students, Hurrle found 50 kids, a handful of those in shelters, the majority out on the streets; this past year, she saw 4,000 children in the Minneapolis shelters. Families with young children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. "I definitely think homelessness is worse for families and children today," Hurrle says.

There's no one single reason for this increase, but the lack of affordable housing and shortage of jobs with decent wages factor heavily in the growing number of homeless families. In the 1990s, the last period with data available from Wilder Research, average rents in the Twin Cities increased 34 percent while median household income for renters went up only 9 percent. Yet kids wind up on their own for reasons other than those that determine the fates of adults.

The main reason kids twenty and younger cite for leaving home are fighting with parents, someone in the home they couldn't stand to be around, being kicked out, and not being willing to live by their parents' rules. Seventy percent believed they would be allowed to return home, but less than half (49 percent) thought there was a chance they would live with their family again, according to Wilder Research in 2006. "Kids don't run away from happy homes," says Becky Hicks, St. Paul public schools' homeless liaison. "They leave for a reason."

On any given night in Minnesota, Wilder estimates that between 550 and 650 kids ages seventeen and younger are on their own, like Ambrose, without an adult and without a place of their own. Some of those kids came from elsewhere, but 86 percent of them grew up in Minnesota. "These kids are our kids," says Elizabeth Hinz, the Minneapolis district liaison for homeless and highly mobile students. "They aren't somebody else's kids."

The McKinney–Vento legislation places two primary demands on school districts: They must enroll students within forty-eight hours, and they must allow them to stay in the school where they began the school year. A large part of Margo Hurrle's job is spent tending to the first requirement.

With an office in People Serving People, which has a capacity for 350 people a night and is one of Minneapolis's largest shelters, Hurrle canvasses the city's homeless, domestic-violence and youth shelters along with church shelters and motels to find school-age children. She registers them if they aren't already enrolled in a school, arranges transportation, and provides school supplies. Hurrle monitors the students' performance and advocates for them, whether that's intervening with a delinquent cab driver or paying for school pictures. "Whatever needs to happen, we try to make sure that happens so these kids don't miss out," she says.

School districts spend big money on the second requirement, reimbursed in part by the state. When kids move around—even out of the district—the district where they began the school year is responsible for providing transportation to the original school. That cost Minneapolis about $1.5 million last year; while St. Paul spent approximately $500,000. Hinz figures the expense is worth it. “The school community may be the single most stable and comforting location and group of people that these children know,” she says.

Not having a permanent address makes learning especially difficult. Homeless and highly mobile students grades K–12 miss school more often than other students. When they are in class, they are often preoccupied by stress and anxiety—or simply exhausted—which makes it difficult to focus or follow instructions. They may lack a family role model who values education and often don’t have someone available to go over multiplication tables or help them memorize a poem. They often lack the space to do homework and the materials required for projects. No surprise: They develop gaps in their education.

The challenges mount as kids advance to middle and high school. The gaps may seem insurmountable. The homework becomes more complex, the materials for science projects and displays harder to obtain. They may not have time for homework because they are caring for younger siblings. Lacking the proper shoes or shorts to participate in gym class, they are likely to feel ostracized and stigmatized. At an age when the desire to fit in is particularly strong, they don’t. “The older they get, the more anxious kids are about preserving the anonymity of their situation,” Hinz says. “That can cause kids to drop out.”

There are those who, despite extremely challenging circumstances, succeed. They make the honor roll and earn college scholarships. But they are the exception rather than the rule. On average, homeless and highly mobile students have poorer attendance records and significantly lower test scores than the general student body. They perform below grade-level expectations. It’s not hard to see how they can easily be condemned to a life of poverty—indeed, 23 percent of homeless adults surveyed by Wilder Research said their first experience of homelessness was as a child—unless the school can intervene.

In Minneapolis, Elizabeth Hinz trains anyone who comes into contact with students—from principals to psychologists to teachers to lunchroom workers—about the special needs homeless and highly mobile children have. She encourages creative and individual teaching strategies. “The teachers are very likely the only ones in that child’s life providing the basic learning pieces,” she says. “The kids may be getting a lot of emotional nurturing from others, but those others may not have the skills to get them into introductory algebra, and that’s where they need to go. Education is the key for these kids to have a more hopeful future. Addressing the needs of homeless children is critical in terms of long-term prevention as well as being morally right.”

Minneapolis receives nearly $900,000 in federal and state funds to address the needs of its homeless and highly mobile students. That pays for Margo Hurrle’s position and two other staff workers in her shelter office. It also covers screening for preschool kids, support teams in all high schools, some school supplies, a district attendance initiative, and a pilot project at twelve elementary schools to develop a model of social work practice to support students.

But money alone won’t save these kids. The desire demonstrated by Hinz and her St. Paul counterpart Becky Hicks needs to be more widespread. “We talk about the problem of homeless kids, but the community doesn’t get behind the effort of saying we’re not going to tolerate this,” says Carol Markham–Cousins, Washburn’s principal. “It isn’t just about funds—though those are very important—it’s also about will and focus.”

She believes “we can service these kids really well”—if the community will only put its heart where the money is.

Markham–Cousins has good reason to worry about Ambrose. Kids on their own are at higher risk to have serious problems. They are five times more likely than kids from stable homes to be treated for alcohol or drug problems, four times more likely to have been physically abused, four times more likely to have been sexually abused if they are a girl, twice as likely if they’re a boy. The boys are twice as likely as kids in the general population to have tried to kill themselves. Fourteen percent of all young people in the Wilder survey had traded sex for shelter, food, or clothing. The girls are seventeen times more likely to have been pregnant.

Ambrose doesn’t smoke or drink. In that way, his stubbornness has served him well. “If I wasn’t hardheaded I would do drugs or something stupid,” he says. He has avoided many of the other pitfalls as well. Still, Markham–Cousins wishes she knew more about his situation so she could know what he needed and how she could reach him. But he shut her out.

Ambrose doesn’t want the school principal or anyone else feeling sorry for him. Their well-intentioned sympathy or charity can put him in a position where he feels beneath them. That’s not what he wants. He wants to fit in, like any high school kid. “I feel like I’m a regular student,” he says. “Some people feel sorry for me because I’m out on my own. Don’t treat me like that. I joke around with others, I lift weights, I go to class. I’m the same as everybody else, equal.”

Ambrose’s determination to go it alone and efforts to conceal his situation ultimately work against him. It keeps away those who can help if he’d only let them. “They [kids like Ambrose] are so fragile, but they come across completely opposite,” Markham–Cousins says. “They show a tough exterior because they have to survive, but they are so vulnerable.”

If you mess up in a class at Washburn, you wind up in the office of Giovan Jenkins. That’s where Ambrose found himself near the end of the football season. Jenkins, the dean of students for ninth and eleventh graders and an assistant football coach, is a guy with a heart three times its normal size. The kind of guy who gives kids the shirt off his back. He stocks his office with his old clothes and shoes—still in perfectly wearable condition—to pass out to kids in need.

When Ambrose responded defensively to Jenkins’s request for his mom’s phone number—“I don’t have a mom. She doesn’t care about me”—Jenkins shifted from disciplinarian to advocate mode. He learned Ambrose was sleeping in an empty house and needed a place to stay.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jenkins asked.

“I didn’t think you’d care,” Ambrose said.

Jenkins notified the assistant principal, who called in a county social worker the next day to meet with Ambrose. She gave him information on resources available to kids, ranging from food stamps to apartments. Ambrose wasn’t interested in foster care.

He was reluctant at first to accept any help. Jenkins, also the strength coach, would stop to chat with Ambrose in the weight room. “Let me know if you need anything, OK?”

“Yeah, OK,” Ambrose would mumble.

Christmas morning, Ambrose woke up at the Bridge. He and the other kids there opened some presents donated by strangers—a $20 Sprint calling card, an Under Armour shirt, a wallet. Ambrose passed the afternoon roaming the Mall of America with a cousin. “It was like on my birthday. I didn’t get to celebrate,” he says. “I have no family to wish me merry Christmas or happy birthday.”

Word got back to Jenkins about Ambrose’s Christmas. That didn’t seem right, Jenkins thought. He and another assistant football coach, Tom Harrison, bought Ambrose a gift card to the Mall of America.

One January day after school, Ambrose spotted Jenkins sitting in his car in the parking lot. Jenkins waved him over. Ambrose climbed in. Jenkins had given him rides before. Ambrose buckled his seatbelt. “No, I’m not giving you a ride,” Jenkins said. “I’ve got something better for you.

“You know how you said you didn’t want any help? I hear you, but I’m not listening. Coach Harrison and I got you something.”

He held out an envelope to Ambrose. Ambrose didn’t want to take it. “You didn’t have to do anything for me.”

“Everybody deserves to have a nice Christmas,” Jenkins said.

Ambrose opened the envelope and looked at the amount. Five hundred dollars. Tears filled his eyes. He looked at Jenkins. “Thanks for caring about me, Coach.”

Jenkins gave him a hug. “I care about you. Coach Harrison cares about you. If you ever need something, I’m there for you.”

There’s no happily ever after to this story. Ambrose has cracked his shell wide enough to let in at least one caring adult. He has found a place at the Minneapolis College and Technical College where he can use the computers and do his homework. He believes he is close to lining up an efficiency apartment at Lindquist Apartments, the twenty-four-unit building for homeless youth on West Broadway sponsored by RS Eden and The Link. He looks forward to the track season and his senior year when he’ll have another shot at starting in the Millers’ backfield. He has the smarts and drive to graduate from high school.

But he still has huge obstacles to hurdle and all that pain inside.

His principal would love to hand him his diploma next year. For that to happen, she knows that it’s critical for him to have the community behind him. It won’t take a finger in the face, but it will take an arm around the shoulder.

John Rosengren is the author of the recently released Hammerin’ Hank, George Almighty and the Say Hey Kid: The Season That Changed Baseball Forever.