

She could buy the three-hours-of-bread-making jacket, but the six-hours-of-bread-making jacket was warmer, softer. It would last so much longer, and if she did two hours of bussing tables, then she'd have enough to get a full tank of gas. Art teacher Melissa Manning was homeless. No way around it, no way to soften it. She was out on her own. But, despite being alone, she wasn't ever...really... alone. "I had a good support system when I was at school," Manning said. "Without that - it would have probably been bad." Manning had people to lean on, but the only person she could depend on - herself. From the age of 15, she was out on her own. Days where she worked from 5 pm to 1 am at JOB #1, then from 4am to 8 am at job #2 — not uncommon. Manning falling asleep in a booth at job #2 before waking up to work once again — very common. But the booth was there, and the restaurant was safe, and she could cram in three hours of sleep. That was all she needed. From there, the rest of her day was simple. Get to school by eight, go to her classes, do her homework during library aide where she had someone to help her, then go to work, and find somewhere to crash for the night. "The block schedule really helped me because I

could get my homework done in class with help and not have to do it at home," Manning said. "There was nobody at home to help me." She had no time to stop. Because if she stopped, then people would see how she was holding everything together. And Manning didn't want people to know. She was ashamed, despite having nothing to be ashamed of. But being homeless, having no home... To her, that was shameful.

**Staying busy**

Everyone knew the homeless were dirty. They were lazy vagrants, sometimes crazy. And Manning wasn't any of those things. So she had to get creative. She did laundry at friends' houses, little excuses slipping out. "My mom is out of town." "Our washer is broken." "You mind if I do a quick load since I'm here?" Then she would hurry off, off to one of her jobs. Ice girl, hostess, manager, busser, baker, waitress. Dancer. So many things to do. Never enough time. But she always made time for ballet. That was the one thing - the one extra Manning allowed herself. "It was hard to maintain, but I really loved dance

and I didn't want to quit," Manning said. "I didn't have to pay for lessons because I would trade out." She would teach or do book work for them, ordering costumes and working in the office, to sub out for her lesson. Anything over the lesson, they would pay her. Anything over would go towards gas. Or food. Or rent. Or bills. Sometimes, she could scavenge from one of the restaurants, getting a meal for her shift or a discount on the already inexpensive food. But a discount was a discount and a meal was a meal. And she had earned it. Earned it herself. There was no shelter to go to, no food pantry to collect from. Not that Manning knew of. Or could bring herself to visit. There was no one to bail her out, no one to go crying to. No one else had gotten her into this, so Manning was going to have to be the one to get herself out. Those shelters, those resources, they weren't for people like her. They were for the homeless homeless, for the people who couldn't take care of themselves. And Manning could take care of herself just fine. She was desperate, tired. But she could work. "At shelters, you are with people who have exceptionalities they're dealing with that are beyond their means. I honestly didn't have good information on shelters," Manning said. "When you realize you don't have anywhere to go, you don't want to go there. You just don't." Instead, there were other places for her to go, places

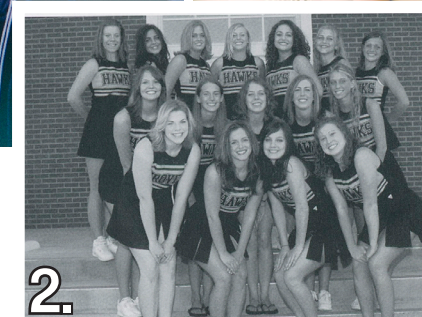
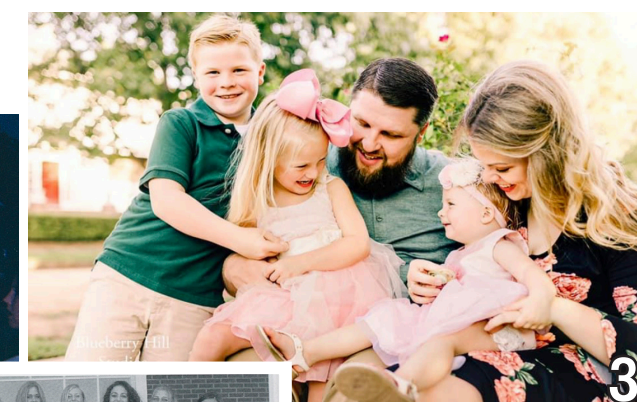
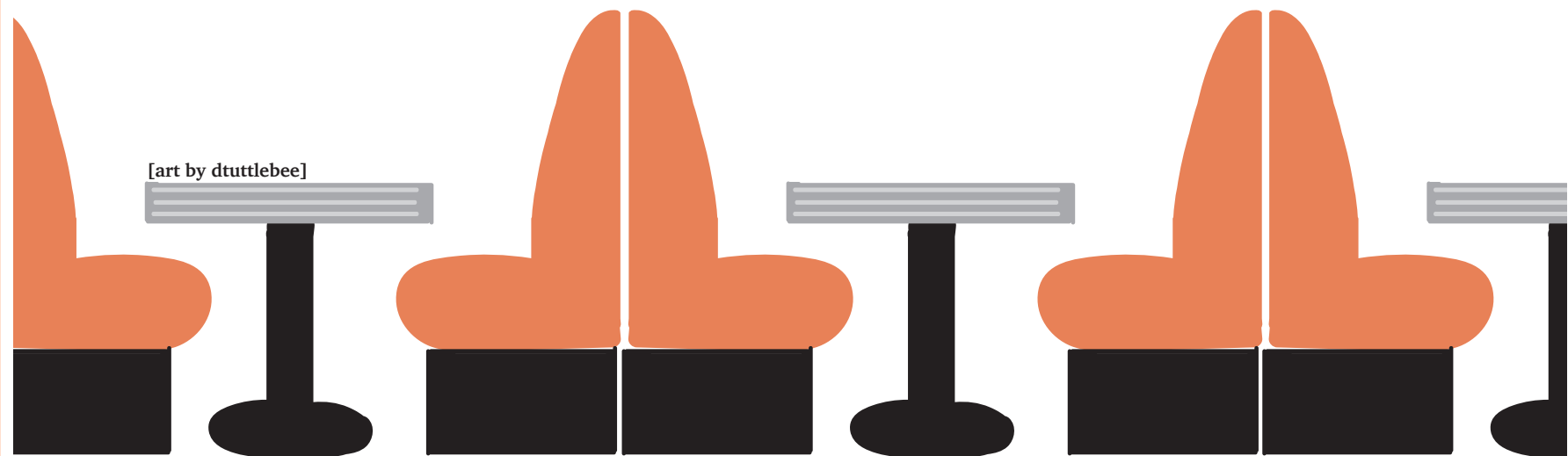
that didn't ask questions, places with free coffee and comfy chairs and warm rooms made for people to sleep in. Places like the hospital. The rooms were made to be sat in, magazines waiting to be read, coffee waiting to be drunk. The nurses were sweet, all tight-lipped smiles and comforting gazes. And when Manning fell asleep, she knew she'd wake up warm. She knew the nurses thought she was waiting for news, playing the part of a doting family member. But that was fine by her. Because it meant she looked like someone with someone to wait on. Sure, her clothes were a bit rumpled, and her eyes had bags, but she looked... clean. Taken care of. Just... not homeless. "A lot of people can be homeless and not look homeless, not look ragged or filthy," Manning said. "There are a lot of homeless people out there who are incapable of taking care of themselves. But there are a lot of homeless people you would never know." People like her. People who could work hard, hard enough so no one asked questions. Hard enough so no one even thought to ask questions. But working hard took a toll. It was tiring and exhausting. Manning had to fight to take up space in the world. Fight to earn a spot on the Earth. Fight to earn anything.

"Everything I've ever owned or had or gotten, I've appreciated 125 percent because it took a lot for me to get it," Manning said. "Now I look back, and I don't think I would have the drive and determination and will to do what I've done." **You don't know this...** Teacher meetings were always tense, usually with teachers on the edge of their seats, ready to be dismissed the same way students did in their own classes. This staff meeting was tense with worry, balancing on eggshells. No one knew what would happen for the school year, not really. Teachers didn't know what they would teach, what would change, what would be allowed, if they'd get to teach in their classrooms. They didn't even know if they'd get to see their students. That's what worried the staff the most. What would happen to their kids. Because, to the teachers, their students were their kids. Watching the kids grow, getting to learn more about them through the year, being able to connect. That was half the fight. But learning that for some of the students, school was their safe place...that was the knock-out blow. There wasn't much teachers could do to protect their kids. They could offer them a warm classroom, even if

just for a few hours, but they couldn't warm the kids over zoom. And they couldn't tell which students needed the warmth, either. Over the camera, you couldn't tell much about a student's life. But Manning knew you couldn't really tell much about a student's life when they came to school. As she looked at the faces of her peers, she saw what they couldn't. A student's life may not be what the teachers perceived, or even what the student portrayed. Manning knew this. But her peers didn't. So, she stood, steadying herself with a deep breath. She had hidden this, her grand secret, for years. She'd grown up here, gone to school here. She lived here. And she'd never had to tell anyone, never had anyone she didn't want to know find out. This was her community, the one that raised her, cared for her, bought her a prom dress. Now, it was her choice. Manning knew this was right. This was her secret to share, her skeleton to dig up, her story to tell. Because maybe, just maybe, by exposing herself just a little bit, a student could, too. A student could reach out for help the way she never did. So Manning took a deep breath. Then another. Then she spoke. "You may not know this about me, but..."

# no place to call home

For art teacher Melissa Manning the challenge of homelessness is personal



1. Manning poses with her aunt on the night of her high school graduation 2. Manning smiles for a yearbook photo with her high school cheer team. She was Grover, the mascot. 3. Manning and her husband, Craig, have three children, Jett, Stella and Willow. 4. Manning and her husband, Craig.

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**on your doorstep**  
it's not always easy to see hunger and homelessness

**86**  
homeless individuals are currently living in Tearkana

**23%**  
of people in Tearkana live below the poverty line

**34%**  
of the district is economically disadvantaged meaning those students qualify for free and reduced lunch

**18%**  
of students in the high school are considered economically disadvantaged