

# Prescription costs put day laborer in tight spot

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**LEFT BEHIND:** Raymond Parker, 51, shouted at a friend he spied across the room at Roanoke Area Ministries' day shelter. The man was leaving for a job as a day laborer.

"I'm not mad at you," Parker explained to him. "I'm just mad because I'm not going, too."

**FINDING HIS WAY:** Parker dropped out of high school in the ninth grade and later earned his General Educational Development diploma. After a short stint in the military, Parker went to work doing odd jobs, mostly in construction. He worked as a laborer, a bricklayer and as a stonemason.

Of all the trades, the stone cutting interested him the most.

"I'm an outdoorsman," he said. "I like rough work." Nothing else compares to the feeling of going to a river, picking out just the right stones and then creating something from them, he said. "I get a lot of personal satisfaction out of that."

Parker managed to support himself fairly well for the next 30 years. There was never a lot of money -- buying clothes was a luxury even when times were good. When times were bad, he simply economized. Two years ago, he was forced to move into a rented room in one of Roanoke's most crime-ridden neighborhoods, but he still was able to keep a roof over his head.

"I've been pretty fortunate," he said.

**HIS INJURY:** Sometime in May, Parker said, he bumped his leg against something -- he doesn't know what. He ignored the injury, just as he ignored the scoliosis that has pained him for years.

"You work through it," he said. "You've got to keep going."

But by November, Parker couldn't take it anymore. He went to the emergency room, where he was told he had arthritis.

With no insurance, Parker scraped up every penny he had to pay for the prescription he was given. When the medication didn't help, he went back to the emergency room, where doctors told him the leg was infected. They immediately admitted him to the hospital and operated on him.

Parker was discharged three days later with two prescriptions he couldn't afford and a hospital bill he estimates at about \$30,000. The hospital has written off part of the debt, he said, but he is responsible for the rest. "I'll have to do what I can," he said.

Parker also couldn't afford a home health nurse to change his dressings. Instead, he performs the painful procedure on himself every day. "It's pretty dad-burned rough," he said.

**WHY HE CAME TO RAM:** Parker was no stranger to RAM before his injury. He often signed up for the agency's day labor program, and when work was slow, he stopped by for the shelter's daily free lunch. "Sometimes I come in just to say 'hi' to the fellas."

Earlier this year, when someone stole his identification, caseworkers for RAM's employment program helped replace it, and assisted him in getting copies of his birth certificate and his military records.

Parker knew about RAM's Emergency Financial Assistance Program, which is supported by The Roanoke Times' Good Neighbors Fund, but had never used it.

"I didn't need it then," he said. "It wouldn't be right to go and get something you don't need."

But in November, he applied for and received a grant toward his prescriptions. "I don't know how I would have gotten them filled. RAM has helped me tremendously."

**HIS PROGNOSIS:** So far, Parker's doctors have not been able to tell him if he will be able to return to work. If the infection recurs, he said, "I could lose my leg."

In the meantime, he has applied for aid from the city's general relief fund and for Social Security disability payments, but it may be months before he knows if he is eligible.

Given a choice, Parker would rather work.

"This not working is killing me. This is taking more out of me than working."

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