

TACOMA

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## *A Voice From the Winthrop*

*After 15 years at downtown's  
most notorious address,  
Glenn Grigsby has seen it all*

**Article and Photos by Todd Matthews,  
Editor**

If you visit Glenn Grigsby in his room at the Winthrop Hotel downtown, the first thing you will notice is the enormous American flag. It is tacked to the south wall, spread above the couch like a giant mural. It is so big that you can catch a glimpse of it through his window while standing on the sidewalk outside on Commerce Street.

The flag was an old gift from a homeless friend named Rafael. "When Rafael slept on the streets, he would wrap himself in this flag," Grigsby explains. He goes on to tell how Rafael gave up the flag when he gave up life on the street. "It's kind of an interesting little story."

After living for the past 15 years in the Winthrop, Grigsby, 51, has a lot of in-

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**CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1** teresting stories. He's seen big-time drug dealers move into the building only to be hauled out in handcuffs during periodic raids by Tacoma police. He's seen the sad and graphic results of desperate people who climb out of high windows and jump to their deaths.

But he's also seen some good things.

Like the young people who move in, get their lives in order, find decent jobs, and move on to bigger and better things. Or the small pocket of residents who dutifully attends neighborhood meetings to discuss public safety in and around the Winthrop.

Still, the Winthrop has earned a mostly notorious reputation in the community. In 2006, the Tacoma Police Department (TPD) reported that the Winthrop is the number one location downtown for emergency service providers responding to calls for assistance. Also in 2006, the Business Improvement Area (BIA) reported that approximately 21 percent of downtown incident reports compiled by BIA bike patrols occurred near the Winthrop (an updated report is expected later this year, according to BIA spokesperson Chelsea Levy). The same year, TPD served two narcotics search warrants on Winthrop residents, resulting in the arrests of five people on a variety of charges tied to alleged illegal drug activity. In 2005, City Manager Eric Anderson ordered the Tacoma Fire

Grigsby -- tall and stocky with short, wavy hair parted down the middle, wire-frame glasses, and a distinctive baritone voice -- who supported the development plan but also wanted to make sure he and his neighbors wouldn't be kicked out onto the street.

"When I got involved in all those meetings, I feel like I took on being the ambassador of the Winthrop," Grigsby explains. "It was very important that I conducted myself in a proper manner."

Since then, Grigsby has become more involved with community activism.

"Glenn is great," says Anders Ibsen, a community mobilization specialist with Safe Streets. "He's the block captain for the Safe Streets group. He's a real doer. He helped organize a regular downtown monthly clean-up." Ibsen says that, with Grigsby's help, Safe Streets has tried to let people know "the Winthrop is not just this nest of troublemakers."

"He's one of those people in the Winthrop who wants to see things better and seems to be involved," says BIA bike patrol officer and supervisor John Leitheiser, who has patrolled downtown for as long as Grigsby has lived in the Winthrop.

Grigsby became a regular presence at community meetings about the Winthrop, especially when several different developers circled the building trying to do what Quigg and Trabucco

coverage is the residents' story. What do some of the people living in the Winthrop think of all the focus on their building? What is it like to live in the Winthrop? What are the residents' perspectives related to the building's safety and future development?

Grigsby is one person who can tell that story.

His relationship to the building is complicated. Like everyone, he wants a safe and comfortable place to live. To that end, he has involved himself in Safe Streets and community meetings. But he also can't deny that the Winthrop's negative reputation is deserved. For every upstanding neighbor he knows, he also understands a police car is parked outside the lobby most days of the week for a reason.

As much as he has tried to improve conditions at the Winthrop, he is much older than he was when he first moved in. He is running out of energy and patience -- Grigsby is on a waiting list at a quieter, safer low-income residential building in the North End.

"It's frustrating," he explains. "I see why people give up. I know other people down here have tried their hand at doing something [positive] here. After awhile, it's easy to say, 'Enough is enough.'"

Grigsby recently spoke to the *Index* about his life and experience living in the Winthrop.

***"There was a time when I thought that was, you know, corny. But today it's cool."***

My mother came up here and got clean up here. My parents, when I was growing up, had problems with drugs and alcohol. I was born and raised in the Bay Area. I bounced around for a few years -- Oregon, Washington, back to California -- and I've been up here now for about 25 years. I'm the oldest of six kids. I moved up here in my mid-twenties. I'm kind of the only one out of all my brothers and sisters who is in this situation. The rest of them are doing well. One of my sisters is a Link operator. Another sister works down at the Wells Fargo Building. My other sister works down here at 13th and Broadway where the U.S. Bank Building is. I have a brother in California who is doing okay. And my youngest brother is getting ready to retire from the Air Force. He put his 20 years in.

Off and on, I lived with family. I was involved in a lot of drug and alcohol activity. I was in and out of jail all the time. I've been to several different treatment centers. My family would put me up until they got tired of my crap and I had to go. That was pretty much the life I led for a very long time. I was distant from my family for a long period of time because of my behavior.

Meth used to be a big problem. I was so addicted to that stuff, I was totally insane, I was psychotic. I lived off that stuff for a long time. I dabbled in sales and stuff like that. There have been a lot of ups and downs. I used to be involved in a lot of negative stuff. I've done some positive stuff. Today I've grown up a little bit.

I started getting straightened out and my life started improving when I started regaining my trust with my family. I have little nieces and nephews now who are really cool. I've been recently attending one little nephew's Little League baseball games. One of my nieces had a recital at Baker Middle School, and I attended. This is cool stuff today. There was a time when I thought that was, you know, corny. But today, it's cool. Those types of things have really helped me to grow up a little bit. There was a long period of time

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***"I think we have to start dealing in reality. Donald Trump is not going to show up here and turn the Winthrop into a five-star hotel. If Tacoma Housing Authority can do something with this building, we need to support that."***

Department to inspect the building. According to a city report, fire inspectors found 41 corrections over a two-day period.

But the Winthrop is more than a magnet for crime.

It's also Grigsby's home.

"When I first moved in here, I was a young person," says Grigsby, whose apartment overlooks the intersection of Ninth and Commerce (he has lived in the same apartment since he moved in 15 years ago). Sweet, heady smoke from a street-level teriyaki shop wafts into his room; the Link light rail rattles past, the operator honking a horn and ringing a bell as the train navigates through the intersection; and an argument in nearby Frost Park briefly grows louder and more heated before trickling away into silence. "There were very few young people like me. It slowly drifted in the other direction over time. Not too many seniors want to move down here. The bottom line is they have to fill up these apartments. Over time, they just started filling up the building and letting people in."

Three years ago, Grigsby was one of a few Winthrop residents who started waking up extra early to attend a regular 5:00 a.m. meeting at the Tully's coffee shop across the street from the building. At the time, two developers -- Tim Quigg and Chester Trabucco -- were holding the meetings to discuss their desire to purchase the 12-story, 85-year-old building and restore it as an historic hotel. The usual people were there -- historic preservationists, developers, City Hall staff, reporters, and bloggers. But there was also

ultimately could not: turn it into an historic hotel.

When the Quigg-Trabucco development plan fell through in 2006, another developer, AF Evans, stepped forward with a plan to spend as much as \$21 million to purchase and renovate the building by restoring its grand ballroom, improving the commercial storefronts, and transforming 26 units into market-rate apartments. The remaining 168 units would continue to serve as federally subsidized apartments.

By the year's end, however, AF Evans backed out of the project and Prium Companies stepped forward, showing interest. In February 2007, AF Evans announced it had transferred ownership and management of the Winthrop to Prium. Later that year, Tacoma City Council authorized a \$2 million loan to assist Prium's goal of renovating it into a historic hotel. As part of that agreement, the city directed Prium to create replacement housing for tenants who would be displaced by the development.

In the latest chapter, Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) announced last month that it was asked by Prium, still the current building owner, if it wanted to purchase the building. THA is expected to make a decision on it this summer.

The Winthrop's on-again, off-again development plans are well covered, and many people have quick opinions on what to do with the building: restore it as an historic hotel; shut it down; or find other housing so residents aren't concentrated in one location.

What has not been told through local media

**CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2** when my relationship with my family was really rocky. Now I have that back and I don't want to lose that. That helps me keep on the straight and narrow.

**"It was low-income. I didn't have a place of my own, and they let me in."**

[I moved into the Winthrop a]bout 15 years ago. It was housing, it was low-income. I didn't have a place of my own and they let me in. It was a little different back then. I was in my mid-thirties, but it was more elderly people living here. Over time, it kind of switched. We have a diverse community now -- young and old, some kids. There are probably more kids here than we've ever had.

We used to have a Tenants' Association here, but people lost interest. We had a little thrift store for the building. If we made a little profit, we would throw parties up in the ballroom for Christmas or Thanksgiving. But people slowly started to lose interest. It died away about five or six years ago.

**"It's a very toxic building."**

The perception is mostly negative. I understand that. We do have some fools in here. There was a time I was a fool. I was probably the biggest fool in the building. What was that one article I read? We're just a 'frat house for scum-bags.' We do have negative behavior. I'm not denying that one bit. But many of the people here are good people. We have some success stories that have come through here. We've had people from AmeriCorps living here who went on to get their degrees and are now teachers and home-owners. We have some bright spots here. We have a young kid in the building who works down at the shop down the street here and he's going to school. He's a bright spot. He'll go on to a better life. [But some people here, they are coping with mental illness, struggling with drug addiction, alcoholism. It's a very toxic building.

Every once in a while we'll get a mid-level drug dealer in the building. They just threw out this heroin dealer, he was pretty big stuff. We've had a few of those come along in the building. But mostly it's been little nickel-and-dime stuff. The drugs have kind of dropped a little bit, but it's still here. Alcohol is flowing heavy down here and on the street. I lived that lifestyle for so long.

**"The best you can hope for is keep it to a low roar."**

I thought I would get involved with Safe Streets because I felt I was better able to deal with it than some of the other people here.

I try to be reasonable. I understand that you're never going to be able to get rid of this stuff. People think we're going to get Safe Streets down

here and we're going to get rid of all these misfits hanging out here on the street. That's not going to happen. We have Tacoma Police Officer Jim Pincham down in the lobby three or four days a week. But law enforcement is pretty stretched, too. There's only so much they can do. It's not what you know, it's what you can prove.

We get new managers in here. They usually come in, they're the new sheriff in town. They clean up a little bit, in time it goes back to the



way it was before, and these people just overrun it. It's just too overwhelming. We have 200 units in here and, in my opinion, it's too hard for anybody to manage. You're never going to get rid of all of it. The best you can hope for is keep it to a low roar.

**"One guy was in my apartment 15 minutes before he jumped out a window."**

Whenever I see a new person show up and I see them hanging out [on the corner], I just know that in time they will get into drugs, prostitution. It's sad. I've made friends. I've watched them drink and drug their life away and their body just shut down. I've seen people, after they've jumped out windows, laying in the gutter, dead or dying.

One guy was in my apartment 15 minutes before he jumped out a window. I was going to head up to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting at the Rialto. I asked if he would like to come along. He said no. I went up to the meeting. Some guy came into the meeting just after I got there and said, 'Some guy just jumped off the top of your building.' I thought they were talking about the Rialto. I said, 'I don't live at the Rialto.' He said, 'No. Down there.' I went out and there he was laying in the gutter. He didn't jump off the top floor. He

jumped from the fifth floor. That wasn't the first time he tried.

Another lady jumped out and landed on that awning right out here in front of the building. People were screaming. I looked out and there she was. She died a couple days after.

Later, somebody else did the same thing.

That's over a 15-year period. But those three people I'm talking about happened within a year or two of each other. That was at the height of the madness going on in this building.

**"This was home to me for awhile. Now I would like to leave. I've kind of grown up a little bit."**

People say, 'Well, if you don't like it here, move.' It's not that easy if you are low-income and trying to find other low-income housing. It's not as easy as people think. I've tried. I've got my name in at a place in the North End, in a really nice area, and I've had my name on that list for a year and a half. I call every three or four months to see if my name is still on that list. This was home to me for awhile. Now, I would like to leave. I've kind of grown up a little bit. I'd rather just have a nice, quiet little place and settle in, and keep to myself.

I'm on Supplemental Security Income. I also get a small amount of food stamps. My housing is subsidized. I don't have a lot, but I've learned to live within my means. I try to be reasonably happy with what I have. I'm fortunate that I do have housing and a place to live. I see people on a daily basis out here who don't. So I'm very grateful for low-income housing. If it wasn't there, I would really be hurting.

**"Donald Trump is not going to show up here and turn the Winthrop into a five-star hotel. That's not going to happen."**

If Tacoma Housing Authority were to purchase the building, I'm hoping cooler heads will prevail. I think it's a good idea for downtown. It won't alleviate all the problems right here in this area, but it will help.

This building really needs help. The elevator, every other day one of them is broken down. We've been lucky for about three weeks now since they repaired it. The building physically needs a lot of help. Whoever comes in and does it, it would be a good thing for downtown. I hope Tacoma Housing Authority finds a way to do it. I hope the City and City Council support it. AF Evans had a plan. They were going to sink \$30 million into this building, but we would have stayed here. They had a grander plan to restore it to its original glory. Great. Good plan. I have no problems.

But before the bubble burst on the economy, there wasn't a long list of people to come and change this into a hotel. [Tim] Quigg was talking about it, but he didn't have the money to do it and build us new housing. I don't wish people bad. I want to see the merchants down here do well. But I think we have to start dealing in reality. Donald Trump is not going to show up here and turn the Winthrop into a five-star hotel and put a helicopter pad on the top of this building. That's not going to happen. If Tacoma Housing Authority can do something with this building, we need to support that. There are some people who love it here and want to live here the rest of their lives. For some people, moving scares them to death. That's why a lot of them say, 'I want to live here forever.' They don't have the family, friends, or first, last, and utility deposit.