



## Community for Creative Non-Violence

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August 9, 1989

Igbal Mohamed  
Durban Central Residents' Association  
1113-4 Tower B  
Salisbury Centre  
349 West Street  
Durban, 4001  
South Africa

Dear Igbal,

Thanks, my brother. I appreciate your kind and generous words.

We feel a sense of solidarity and commonality with all who struggle, as you do, with injustice and violence, wherever they are. We feel especially close to those who struggle in Southern Africa.

Perhaps if you are in DC again you can visit the shelter. I'd be happy to show you around.


Peace to you.

God bless,

Mitch Snyder

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425 Second Street, NW Washington, D.C. 20001 202-393-1900

A blue rectangular plaque is mounted on a light-colored wall with four screws. The plaque contains a quote in white, serif font. The quote is: "The next time you see someone out on the street, don't pass them by. Say hello, ask how they're doing, get them something to eat. Just tell them that you care. Tell them that they are human beings. And I think that's what I would ask of anyone." Below the quote, the name and dates "Mitch Snyder, 1943-1990" are inscribed in a smaller, italicized white font.

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*Mitch Snyder, 1943-1990*

**Mitch Snyder 1943-1990**

# AWOL

American Way of Life Magazine

## Mitch Snyder's Ghost

By Chris Lewis



Over 1,000 homeless Washingtonians inhabit a haunted building. Some say that the spirit of a prominent 1980s homeless activist roams the hallways of the homeless shelter at 2nd and D Streets at night. Mitch Snyder was a fiercely-devoted member of the Community for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV), the group that has operated the now-troubled shelter since its opening. Snyder's life and death characterizes the inspiring rise and troubling fall of one of the most transformative efforts to combat homelessness in the District.

CCNV, founded as an antiwar group in the 1970s, scored a victory for D.C. homeless in 1984. The idealistic organization convinced Ronald Reagan to let homeless people occupy an abandoned federal building for the winter of 1984.

And when the winter season formally ended on April 1, CCNV and shelter residents conducted takeovers of federal offices, disrupted Congress, and fasted for 51 days. Two days before the 1984 elections, Reagan turned over the building for good.

CCNV's battle against homelessness was multifaceted. Activists collected 35,000 signatures in order to put a proposal on all District ballots. In 1984, "Initiative 17" passed with an unprecedented 85% approval, creating a legally-binding mandate that D.C. government must provide emergency shelter to any and all of its residents.

In response, then-Mayor Marion Barry's administration scrambled to find shelter for hundreds of men and women living on the streets, gathering them in vans and rushing them to makeshift converted shelters.

Next, CCNV brought suit against the Barry administration for its inadequate maintenance of the emergency shelters. A judge fined the government \$5,000 for every violation—leaking roofs, broken windows, lack of bathrooms, hot water, clean sheets, or resident storage space. Between 1985 and 1987, the Barry regime was forced to fork over \$4 million in fines. The money paid for massive increases in the services provided to the homeless.

At the heart of CCNV's movement was Mitch Snyder. Born in Brooklyn, Snyder struggled to find direction as a child, and fell into petty crime. When he was in his mid-twenties, he was arrested for stealing a car. In jail, he met Philip and Daniel Berrigan, radical Catholic priests imprisoned for their civil disobedience against the Vietnam War. Snyder adopted their religious philosophy and radical dedication, joining them in fasts against the war and the mistreatment of fellow prisoners.

Snyder's passion became clear when his family grew concerned about his fasting. In a note to his mother from prison, Snyder wrote: "I would like you to be proud that your son believes strongly enough in justice, to oppose injustice with all the strength at his disposal." After being released, Snyder moved to D.C. and immersed himself in a community of committed activists.

"Mitch was one of the most dedicated people, the most creative, thoughtful, confrontational, manically insane human beings I have ever met. He had an uncanny ability to understand that when things were wrong, you need to stand up and say what needs to be said to correct the injustice," said Brian Anders, a former member of CCNV who worked with Snyder at CCNV in the 1980s.

"He was willing to as far, if not further, than anyone else, so that injustice could be stopped." Snyder often fasted in support of his causes. For weeks, he stood up in congregation at the Holy Trinity Parish in Georgetown to protest their expensive renovations while homeless people lacked basic services. He organized public funerals for people who froze to death on the street. His acts often attracted national media attention—he was the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary as well as Martin Sheen's lead role in a 1986 movie.

Snyder and CCNV's crown jewel was the Federal City Shelter. By wresting the building away from Reagan, the group tackled Goliath. They were able to go further, transforming the abandoned building into an inspiring, cooperative community of homeless people and activists.

Anders portrays CCNV in the 1980s as "a multiglot of people learning from each other, living together." CCNV prided itself on its communal meals of staff and residents, its twice-weekly spiritual meetings, and its system of internal governance that gave its homeless residents an active role.

He describes a community where people who had never left D.C. were able to meet people from all over the world. "We were able to learn from each others' experiences, living together in a harmonious way," he says. "We had a common enemy—the system that disenfranchised us, kept us poor, kept us impoverished."

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"The spirit of that died after Mitch killed himself," Anders said.

Snyder was found dead in his room at CCNV on July 6, 1990. According to a note found by police, he hung himself out of frustration with his romance with partner Carol Fennelly.

Shortly after, the atmosphere at CCNV began to change. The list of rules grew longer. Time limits were placed on resident stays. "The spirit of the community fell apart, and core people left. CCNV and the shelter became an institution," says Anders. The staff began to pursue their own power, and grow corrupt with it, he said. The atmosphere at CCNV became oppressive. "The shelter has deteriorated to a cruel, unhealthy environment."

Mitch Snyder and the core CCNV activists of his time created a true communion with the homeless people they were advocating for. At CCNV today, this cooperative, compassionate approach is missing.

An AU graduate who volunteered at the shelter tells the story of one former CCNV resident she remembers meeting. "[The woman] was blind and in a wheelchair, and the staff didn't like her because she was always asking questions of them and demanding better treatment."

One night, CCNV had a fire drill. “When the fire alarm went off, she was left upstairs in her wheelchair, and when other residents tried to help her down, the staff chastised them and told others not to help her.” Left alone in the building as the alarms blared, and uninformed that there was no actual fire, she tried to escape on her own. She stumbled, fell down the stairs, and couldn’t get up. She simply laid there, assuming her fiery death was imminent, until a shelter staffer found her when the drill was over.

“CCNV today lacks compassion,” says Anders.

Residents say that they hear the ghost of Mitch Snyder wandering the halls at night.

Since 1990, the city has closed several shelters, booting homeless men and women into the street—despite fierce opposition from activists and advocates. Initiative 17 has been overturned. And bold efforts to help the homeless—protests, occupations, and pleas—have attracted little media attention.

Today, the District is being overrun by gentrification. The city is giving away public property (including former homeless shelters) to real estate developers, public housing projects are being demolished, poor people are being forced out by rising rents, and rich people are moving in. The homeless and their allies often feel overpowered, seeing the tide of rich white newcomers flow into the city.

Anders issues a challenge to those who doubt the ability for ordinary people to enact extraordinary change. “People always say that we need another Mitch Snyder to come and save us,” he said. “We don’t need another Mitch because all of us can be Mitch Snyder. We need to quit looking outside of ourselves for the hero.”

Mitch Snyder was an selfless, spirited, and laudable individual, but CCNV was able to combat unjust economic practices with their intrepid dedicated activists. “I think Mitch would be embarrassed if he knew people were still talking about him twenty years after his suicide, because he knew he was nothing without the community,” Anders said.

“We need everyday, regular people, not another Mitch Snyder. We all need to be Gandhi, be Malcolm X, be Mitch Snyder. If we could do that, it wouldn’t be perfect or Utopian, but it would be better than doing nothing.”

[Chris Lewis](#) is a senior studying economics. He is editor-in-chief of AWOL.

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## **Mitch Snyder**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Mitch Snyder** (1946 – July 6, 1990) was an [American advocate](#) for the [homeless](#). He was the subject of a made-for-television [1986 biopic](#), *Samaritan: The Mitch Snyder Story*, starring [Martin Sheen](#).

Snyder grew up in [Flatbush](#), [Brooklyn](#), [New York](#), where at age 9 his father abandoned the family. After a stint in a correctional facility for breaking into parking meters, Snyder worked in job counseling on [Madison Avenue](#) in [New York City](#), as well as selling appliances and construction work. In 1969 he left his wife and children and started [hitchhiking](#) west. Police found him in a stolen vehicle, and he was arrested and convicted of grand theft auto. He served two years in federal prison, 1970–1972, for violating the [Dyer Act](#), which outlaws the interstate transportation of a stolen vehicle. Snyder ended up in [Danbury Federal Correctional Institute](#) in [Danbury](#), [Connecticut](#), where he served time with [Philip](#) and [Daniel Berrigan](#). Following meetings with them and prolific reading, especially of the [Bible](#), Snyder started participating in hunger strikes and work stoppages over prison rights issues.

### **Affiliation with CCNV**

Upon being released in 1973 Snyder came home to rejoin his family. Less than one year later he left his family again and joined the [Community for Creative Non Violence](#) (CCNV) in



[Washington, D.C.](#) CCNV was at that time operating a medical clinic, a pretrial house, a soup kitchen, a thrift store and a halfway house. CCNV came out of a discussion group about the [Vietnam War](#) at [George Washington University](#). CCNV was also very active in non-violent [direct action](#) in opposition to the [Vietnam War](#). Snyder became the driving force of CCNV but worked with many deeply committed people including his wife and professional partner, Carol Fennelly; [Mary Ellen Hombs](#), with whom he co authored *Homelessness in America: A Forced March to Nowhere*; and Ed and [Kathleen Guinan](#).

He and CCNV pushed and prodded the District of Columbia, the local churches and temples and mosques, as well as the [federal government](#) to open space at night for homeless people, and worked to staff the space that was made available. Through [demonstrations](#), public funerals for people who had frozen to death on DC streets, breaking into public buildings, and fasting, CCNV forced the creation of shelters in Washington and made homelessness a national and international issue.

In the 1980s Snyder, Fennelly, and other CCNV activists entered and occupied an abandoned federal building at 425 2nd Street N.W. (now Mitch Snyder Place) and housed hundreds overnight while demanding that the government renovate the building. Under intense pressure, the Reagan administration agreed to lease the Federal property to CCNV for \$1 a year. Later the Federal government transferred the property to DC. It remains the largest shelter in Washington to this day. Snyder fasted twice to force the [Reagan administration](#) to renovate the building. The first fast ended on the eve of Reagan's second election when Reagan promised to execute necessary repairs. Reagan failed to follow through on this promise, and litigation ensued. An [Oscar-nominated documentary](#), *Promises to Keep*, narrated by [Martin Sheen](#), follows that story and tells why a second fast was conducted. [Sheen](#) also played Mitch Snyder in the made-for-TV movie, *Samaritan: The Mitch Snyder Story*.

Angered that Holy Trinity Parish in [Georgetown](#) planned an expensive renovation of that historic church, and maintaining that the money involved should be given instead to the poor, Snyder stood in the middle of the congregation throughout the Sunday Mass for many weeks as a protest, while other congregants knelt or sat during the service as was customary.

In 1985, Snyder and CCNV hired sculptor [James Reid](#) to create a display for the annual Christmastime Pageant of Peace in Washington which would dramatize the plight of the homeless. The display, titled "Third World America," featured a nativity scene in which the [Holy Family](#) was represented by contemporary homeless people huddled around a steam grate. The figures were atop a pedestal that stated "And Still There is No Room at the Inn." In 1986, Snyder and CCNV wanted to take "Third World America" on tour, but Reid refused. Snyder and CCNV sued Reid, claiming that "Third World America" was a [work for hire](#) under § 101 of the [United States Copyright Act](#). The [U.S. Supreme Court](#) ruled the sculpture was not a [work for hire](#) because Reid was not an [employee](#) under the general common [law of agency](#) (490 U.S. 730). Thus, the work was not subject to the § 201(b) rule that when a work is made for hire, the employer is considered the author.

### **Controversies**

The ardor of Snyder's beliefs sometimes led to encounters with law enforcement. He once claimed to have the longest arrest record in D.C. On one infamous occasion, after being arrested at the [White House](#), Snyder walked out of his arraignment, went directly to the White House, climbed over the fence and was rearrested.

### **Death**

After setbacks in his personal and public life Snyder hanged himself in his room at the CCNV shelter in July 1990.

He is survived by his former partner Carol Fennelly, his ex-wife and his two sons.