his story isn’t sexy. It’s simple, like the man’s name: Naed Smith. And if you think there’s going to be some “revelation” — a word Naed likes to use frequently — at the end, then you will be disappointed. It’s much more than a revelation: it’s reality, and Allison Hill is like any other underserved neighborhood in America. And the Naeds of the world only make it slightly more tolerable. I hope you’ll get that.

“My first feeling of vocation was to the priesthood. But as I got older, the celibacy didn’t appeal to me.”

Naed leans back in his rocker and lets out a deep, but brief chuckle. The setting belies this truth: he doesn’t look like a conventional man of the cloth at all. He is Hagrid-like, in looks more suited to bear hunting than reciting liturgy. Barrel-chested, deep-toned, and solemn with a great laugh, he is like an enormous bearded Viking, albeit, one who gardens and drinks green tea. There’s something about his first impression that excites, frightens, and confuses you all at once. Maybe it’s his linebacker size or his summer attire (women’s sunglasses with overalls). Maybe it’s his fenced-in flower garden where he gruffly points out where the zinnias and sunflowers grow. Or maybe it’s the memory of that one fall when he carried around a giant wooden staff that he called his “persuading stick.” He’s a walking, modern-day St. Peter costume: equal parts Woodstock, lumberjack, and impoverished evangelist.

I’m again taken aback when he mentions that his first gig in South Allison Hill — the largest and, simultaneously, the poorest neighborhood in Harrisburg — was as a massage therapist. “That didn’t quite take. Would you want a massage from me?”

A lot of things don’t quite suit Naed, an uncompromising man whose day-to-day is living out the teachings of Jesus Christ and upholding his vow of poverty as decreed by the “Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker.”

Naed is a “Catholic Worker” — an unofficial job title that he keeps referring to as “providential” (if one can imagine operating on a budget of $12,000 a year in perpetuity). The Catholic Worker House Movement spawned out of the works and inspiration of Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, prominent social activists during the Great Depression.

Maurin, a French immigrant turned vagrant of New York, approached Day after she wrote an article for the Commonwealth regarding “The Hunger March of 1932.

The newspaper, The Catholic Worker, kicked off the collaboration between Maurin and Day on May 1, 1933 with a small print run of 2,500 copies. Within four years, they were printing 150,000. As managed by Day, the paper started off as a rallying call for Catholics to fight against the social injustices of that day, primarily poverty, which is still where its editorial roots lie, along with its price (one penny). Day’s contribution as the founder and publisher of The Catholic Worker is her legacy, but it’s her long-suffering work as the movement’s champion that has created discussion among Bishops to grant her sainthood, more than 30 years after her death.

Naed hands me the organization’s manifesto, written by Day and Maurin, which outlines the true-blooded mission of a Catholic worker: the alleviation of poverty through works of mercy and teaching employable skills to the unemployed. These missions were to be conducted by “Houses of Hospitality” connected to every Catholic parish. Additionally, each House was to have an associated farming commune, where scholars and those receiving employable skills would reside—an early “take back the land” movement.

There are 232 Houses of Hospitality listed worldwide. While job-ready training programs and farming communes are not directly connected with more social service-oriented Houses of Hospitality like Naed’s, all aim to carry out the vision of Maurin and Day.

Naed’s beginnings in Wilkes Barre, Pa., were about an hour away from The Catholic Worker’s first farming commune in Easton, Pa., the same place where Maurin died in 1949.

Naed reflects that he’d had a pretty normal growing up, calling the ‘70s one of the most equitable times to live in America. “My childhood was relatively peaceful. I spent thousands of hours at the park across the street. My grade school was a block up the hill. My high school was three blocks up. But I did have an attraction to the Gospels, more of an affinity to it than most kids,” he says, fondly reminiscing as if he were talking about some old, not-quite forgotten friend.

As the ‘80s brought the breakdown of unions and work disappearing overseas, the Smith family hit a rough patch when Naed’s dad lost his job at The Bendex Corporation. He took up work in a junkyard during the day and in the evening served as the maintenance person for Naed’s home parish. Naed loved to go to the parish while his dad worked, so he could take in the liturgy and participate in confession.

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His radical coming-of-age narrative was a slow evolution for him, although given his draw to the church and “being amongst the people,” not altogether unexpected. While at King’s College in Wilkes Barre, he started reading The Catholic Worker, and during a service-oriented spring break trip to NYC his junior year he volunteered with an actual Catholic Worker organization, serving in their soup kitchen by day.
He speaks of the events following the arrest as if the judge extradited him from his homeland. While that couldn’t be legally true, the wake-up call turned into fortuitous timing, because a Catholic Worker House was sprouting in Harrisburg.

“In 1996, I was giving this lady rides. She couldn’t drive anymore. I was so determined to get down here [to the South Allison Hill neighborhood], I borrowed her car and told her I was going Christmas shopping and came down here through a blizzard…. However, by crook or by hook or whatever, I thought I gotta be there.”

A lie and a casual grand theft auto worked out for him.

There’s been a revolving door of Catholic Workers in this house, according to Naed. Nearly 200 guys have come and gone, but he’s the lone wolf now, 17 years after coming to Harrisburg, his House of Hospitality – and his quirky presence on Market Street – is a staple of the neighborhood. When I ask Naed to show me what a typical day looks like, he shrugs his shoulders, muttering something about his day-to-day being pretty fluid.

As soon as we leave his three-story brick townhouse, marked by pots of old flowers and a bench for passersby to lounge on, a middle-aged woman a few doors down shyly asks if they’re “still on for today.”

“Sure,” Naed says.

After we leave her stoop, he asks if I can help him move Georgia out of her apartment that afternoon. We walk to the end of the block and enter The Shared Ministry, an ecumenical community space serving as a soup kitchen and hangout spot for the in-need and homeless; he’s practically swarmed upon with entrance with people wanting to wish him hello.

He’s very nonchalant about this attention. After spending 30 minutes there, we make a pit stop at another soup kitchen at St. Francis Church across the street, where he “likes to hang out.”

After about an hour of Naed talking with others and lunching, we help Georgia move out of her house. We pile all of her belongings into Naed’s pink pick-up truck and my gray Corolla, dropping them off at a storage space. Before we get back to his house, Rosie, a stooped lady who appears to be in her 60s, asks Naed if he could run some groceries to her later in the evening. I get the feeling that he knows everyone on this block, so I ask him about it.

“I’ve been here for 16 years. I know my neighbors,” he says matter-of-factly. He’s really “working,” but not for a paycheck or lifetime achievement award, or even for a put-on-the-back. It’s a vow, and for many in our culture, where transience is common in the workforce and résumés need padding with honors and accomplishments, a vow is something relegated to wedding ceremonies.

After about three hours of talking with people, praying for them, and delivering and dishing out food, it’s clear that many people in this neighborhood are in need of someone like Naed, someone with a commitment to help.

In the half square mile where Naed resides there are approximately 6,000 people, 32 percent of whom live on less than $10,000 annually, according to a Weed & Seed Report gathered in 2008. According to that same report, 41 percent of neighborhood residents knew someone who had been mugged within the last six months, and 65 percent reported wanting to leave the neighborhood within three years or less.

There were 17 homicides in 2013, and the litter, while being addressed by a number of organizations, is still overwhelming relative to other neighborhoods in the city. Naed says it’s not surprising to have whole bags of trash thrown into his garden on a weekly basis. His home on Market Street sits on a thoroughfare that people consistently speed through, treating it more like a highway than a neighborhood street.

Nevertheless, the community has tried to step in. The House of Hospitality is on a block that hosts two soup kitchens, an at-risk youth mentoring program called the Joshua Group, three urban gardens, and a halfway house for women.

It’s amazing how much food, blankets, and personal hygiene products flow through here. It’s in-kind stuff. The voluntary poverty is trusting that what we need will be provided. It’s believing that money gets in the way of the other ‘profits.’ You’re trusting in God for things. Is that making sense? Am I talking crazy?”

Applying the term “crazy” to Naed in its traditional form seems like a problematic designation. But there’s evidence that “the dominant society,” as he calls it, would categorize him as such due to his radical actions. In 2003, he spent 30 days in jail for pouring human blood on a sidewalk in front of the Pentagon to protest the war in Iraq. In 2007, he served a six-month sentence stemming from a protest against the Army’s Latin American School at Fort Benning, Ga. He shaved his head, covered it in ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and ducked under the fence onto the base. While this doesn’t appear like an egregious move on Naed’s part, federal law prohibits a citizen from trespassing on military bases. Since he had been slapped with warnings for other civil disobedience actions in the past, he was given the full sentence for this escapade.
“There’s no job opportunities for these kids. There’s no buy-in from them to want a neighborhood. They’ve been disinherited, disinvested: they’ve been dissed.”

“The economy that they’re given is the drug economy, and all the things that come with it. They’ve embraced it and they even celebrate it now. It’s the dominant society that has given them that role to play. There aren’t educational opportunities for them. There aren’t jobs for them to better themselves. This is what they operate in. It’s an underclass system.”

Hours earlier, the newly elected Mayor Eric Papenfuse made a courtesy call for an MLK breakfast at The Shared Ministry.

“I don’t want to make too many statements about the new mayor. [But] if he’s not able to talk to the common people, then it’s not going to be effective,” perhaps a veiled criticism regarding his speech from earlier. I can’t tell.

“All that money that came into his campaign was close to $400,000. Those folks are going to want something back for it. And I don’t think their interests are in line with this neighborhood,” referring to Papenfuse’s donor base.

I ask him directly what this neighborhood needs.

“We need affordable houses, we need clean streets, we need police that are on-duty and engaged, and none of those things are happening.”

This is about as close to hard strategy as Naed gets without acting on it. For him, it’s either an educated critique of the system or distinct action. In-betweens just fuel false hope.

“Listen, there’s so many beautiful people here just trying to live their lives and go about their affairs. I say my prayers. I believe in a living God. We’re just sojourners. We should be living in a much better way. So how’s that?”

Then he laughs that deep chuckle.

Naed firmly believes that the U.S. government had a hand in that coup. In fact, the FRAPH’s leader was on CIA payroll from ’92-’94. I ask him why the U.S. would support a planned rebellion.

“The threat of a bad example. That a country would actually devote its resources to taking care of the poor instead of supporting a wealthy elite.”

His unfavorable view of the military-industrial complex, however, is held in a peaceful, yet bold manner. And to label him crazy would be unfair; in fact, his countercultural approach to promoting justice is carried out in a rational, if not thought-provoking manner. His eccentric and perhaps impolite gestures and actions to those in charge would certainly cause his opponents to call him “crazy.” Yet, in my opinion, Naed is only questioning and challenging harder than most might.

We schedule our next meeting at the Unitarian Church, a block from his house. When I get there, I see him walking away from the building toward the front yard of a home.

As I catch up, I notice Naed with another middle-aged man, who I later find out is a church member, standing around a memorial on the ground. A black cowboy bandana is weighted down with a few rap CDs, Swisher Sweets cigars, a yellow BIC lighter, and a note that says “RIP Choppy Boi.” A few bears and religious candles surround the makeshift remembrance.

I learn that the night before, an 18-year-old named Hauson Keeron Baltimore-Greene Jr. was shot and killed; it’s Harrisburg’s first homicide of the year on January 18, 2014.

Keith Kirby, the first responder to the scene, joins us a few minutes later. He says, “drugs move up and down this street all day. No one is doing anything about it.”

Naed looks down wordlessly, whether indifferent or saddened by this latest death, I can’t tell. Later, I ask him about the incident.