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Challenging Homelessness

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Challenging Homelessness

Abstract

I had been homeless for about 28 hours. I sat on a sidewalk in Georgetown with a friend holding a cardboard sign that read, “Put a Smile on Our Faces” with a Dunkin Donuts cup at our feet. In the two and a half hours we sat there, hundreds of people passed, hundreds of people avoided eye contact, hundreds of people detoured around the lamppost on the street side of the sidewalk. A few people glanced at our sign. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, homeless, homelessness, poverty

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Community-Based Learning | Community-Based Research | Inequality and Stratification | Place and Environment | Politics and Social Change | Service Learning | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology

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Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths. [*excerpt*]

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

CHALLENGING HOMELESSNESS

November 20, 2013

I had been homeless for about 28 hours. I sat on a sidewalk in Georgetown with a friend holding a cardboard sign that read, "Put a Smile on Our Faces" with a Dunkin Donuts cup at our feet. In the two and a half hours we sat there, hundreds of people passed, hundreds of people avoided eye contact, hundreds of people detoured around the lamppost on the street side of the sidewalk. A few people glanced at our sign.



My homelessness was very temporary. This August, seven Gettysburg students and I went to DC for the Ascent Homelessness and Public Policy trip. As part of the trip, we participated in the 48-hour Homelessness Challenge run by the National Coalition for the Homeless. The challenge is designed to give participants insight into what it feels like to be homeless. We were given a list of things to do during those 48 hours: panhandle; ask for leftover food from restaurants; go to soup kitchens; stay within vision of your partner at all times. And don't blow your cover unless the cops are trying to arrest you.

I was experiencing invisibility—people walking by without acknowledging my existence. This was the quickest lesson I learned while I was panhandling, that it is painful to be so actively ignored. Yet how many times had I done the exact thing that was making me feel so terrible now? Spotting a homeless-looking man out of the corner of my eye, my blinders would go on like a reflex, walking past quickly with just a slight pang of guilt. The fear that they might be mentally ill or have a substance abuse issue always prevented me from helping. We judge that the homeless are lazy or aren't trying.

During the time I spent panhandling, only two people stopped to say something. The first was a man who appeared to be homeless. He told us, "I would help you girls, but unfortunately I only have 46 cents today. Be careful out here and God bless."

The second was a woman who had her husband drop her off so that she could cross the road to talk to us. She was extremely concerned about us and said she would take us to a shelter if we would let her. When we declined, she gave us a few dollars and returned to her husband's car with a worried look painted across her face.

Never in my life have I felt so humbled simply by a person stopping to talk to me. Yet, afterwards, I realized how odd this feeling was. Think about it: how many people do you interact with and have conversations with on a typical day? At Gettysburg College, we're surrounded by people we know—roommates, professors, classmates, friends, the wonderful Servo Staff, and the list goes on. Can you imagine what it would be like to be passed by hundreds or thousands of people everyday without one of them stopping to talk to you?

That evening, we were hungry and decided that because we had made very little while panhandling, we would ask restaurants for any leftover food that they were going to throw out. We tried Starbucks and Pain Quotidien and had no luck. However, we hit Domino's just as they were about to close. My partner went inside as I stood outside the window looking too embarrassed to enter. My partner asked the Domino's employee if they were going to throw any food away and he replied asking if it was to feed me. When she said yes, he handed her a whole pizza.

Later, we did the same thing at Dunkin' Donuts and just as they were locking their doors, they brought us a full paper bag of donuts and bagels, which we were able to share with homeless friends in the park.

I was thankful for all of the help that I received during my 48 hours, but I realized afterward that this was more help than the average homeless person would be offered in a span of two days. Despite wearing grungy clothes and not showering for a few days prior to the challenge, we still looked relatively clean which, to a lot of people, meant that we didn't look like we should be homeless. As young white females, people saw me and my partner and were immediately concerned about our safety. I continue to wonder if we would have been treated the same if we were dirtier, or older, or black.

There are assumptions about who should be homeless and who should not. The general stereotype is of a middle aged man, either white or black, who is jobless and is likely abusing drugs or alcohol. But this is [not an accurate picture of homelessness in America](#), where 39% of homeless are children, 33% are women, and where only 26% are struggling with substance abuse. Our long-standing assumptions about what homelessness looks like that we've learned from the media and our parents turn out to be untrue. Homelessness doesn't only entail living on the street; it can take place in shelters, living out of a car, squatting in a vacant apartment, or staying with a friend. It can be spurred by job loss, expensive health problems, coming out, or a host of other events.

Our society makes the homeless invisible in many ways, such as when we fail to acknowledge the full picture of who is homeless in America (for example, that 23% are families with children). This makes the goal of ending homelessness impossible, as we cannot respond to groups that we do not see and understand.

As I learned during my Homeless Challenge, we also treat those who are on the streets as invisible when we pretend not to notice them. But, I can stop pretending that my gaze is naturally set straight ahead when there's a homeless person to my side. Instead, I can look the person in the eyes and say "Good morning" and "I hope you have a blessed day." I can buy someone a sandwich or a cup of coffee. And perhaps most importantly, I can stop shaming and blaming the homeless for their situation and instead help others understand the scope of the problem and be a constructive force for change.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/11/20/challenging-homelessness/>