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Our National Shame

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Our National Shame

Abstract
I spend a lot of time with my students working at soup kitchen and homeless shelters, and each winter, when it gets really cold and dark, my thoughts more often turn back to Dick. Dick died on Jan. 31, 1988. He was a veteran who served in Germany in the 1950s and was a graduate of St. John's University in New York, where his father has been an English professor.

Dick had completed most of the work for his MBA during a career which included positions at Procter & Gamble, Federated Department Stores, and National Cash Register. At the time of his death, Dick had been bunking with friends, and he seldom had to sleep rough on the streets. [excerpt]

Keywords
homelessness, soup kitchen, homeless shelter, National Coalition for the Homeless, National Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day

Disciplines
Civic and Community Engagement | Community-Based Research | English Language and Literature | Inequality and Stratification

Comments
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I spend a lot of time with my students working at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, and each winter, when it gets really cold and dark, my thoughts more often turn back to Dick. Dick died on Jan. 31, 1988. He was a veteran who served in Germany in the 1940s as a graduate of St. John’s University in New York, where his father had been an English professor.

Dick had completed most of the work for his MBA during a career which included positions at Procter & Gamble, Federated Department Stores, and National Cash Register. It was a drop in his overall death, Dick died of a stroke, and he seldom had to sleep rough on the streets.

Still, the fall from this quintessentially middle-class man — charming, smart, educated, and popular — provides a cautionary tale for us all. Dick is an example of the world much like that depicted in “Mad Men,” and like many of his peers, he drank far too much. Unlike many of those peers, however, Dick’s life eventually unraveled, and he ended up at the bottom of the heap.

Dec. 21 is National Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day, which is commemorated every year on or around the longest, coldest night of the year. The National Coalition for the Homeless and its allies ask us to take some time on the first night of winter to remember and honor those among us who have died homeless.

No matter how they got there, each of these people was special to someone, and the death of each represents both a personal tragedy and a failure of our society to confront some of our most uncomfortable truths. For me, Dick represents the face of those truths.

“Homelessness” is a term that conjures up unsavory images in the popular imagination — flat, generic clichés that owe as much to fear as to fact. The truth is that children account for a shocking proportion of the homeless in America today, as do women fleeing abuse, as do the working poor, many of whom find it impossible to secure affordable housing in many of our cities.

Even as recent federal numbers suggest, in overall numbers, naturally, the number of homeless people continues to surge in cities such as New York, and the death of each represents both a personal tragedy and a failure of our society to confront some of our most uncomfortable truths. For me, Dick represents the face of those truths.

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