These Are the People in Your Neighborhood

An Honors Journal (HNRS 499)

by

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Purpose

The reason we did the project involved a need to know. I needed to know whether or not there were any "real" homeless in Indianapolis and if they did exist how they lived. In addition I had been unable for many months to find published research on the condition of the homeless in the greater Indianapolis area. Therefore this video and the journals are my small contribution to a small body of knowledge.

Special Thanks

First of all, the homeless themselves. They took the time to tell us, total strangers, about their lives. I would also like to thank the staff of both Dayspring Center and the Horizon House. The Honors College gave us the opportunity to do this project and Jim Needham, our faculty advisor, helped us question our motivations, and justify our reasonings. Most of all I would like to thank my partner Julee Kleffman. I asked her three years ago to help me in this project and her honesty and persistence has helped make a fuzzy sort of dream into a reality.
traipsing down to Indy just yet. I have several commitments in the theatre (actually I was cast in Neil Simon's "Rumors" so I'm going to be doing that actress thing.) But I have been reading up on our topic and there is one especially helpful book What you can do to help the homeless: by the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

It is full of all sorts of nifty addresses and ideas by and for different organizations throughout the country that are working on homelessness in their area. Funny...none of them are from Indianapolis. Will there be any homeless people at all when we get there?

Oct. 1994

I was going back over some of my research notes and I found some of my reactions to a speaker on the Provost Lecture series in the Library. She had spoken on her dealings with the homeless in Washington D.C. (that's where I want to go to graduate school!)

Jeanelle Goetcheus is not a very large woman. I'm pretty sure that she's over 50 but then it's not polite to talk about a woman's age. She described healthcare for a homeless person:

- shelter -- can only come in at night and must leave in the morning. One restroom to 150 people.
- scabies -- condition where an insect has burrowed under the skin, leaves open running sores.
- healthcare -- No regular healthcare
Given prescriptions they have no $ to pay to fill.

asthma -- seen people die from it.

(pollution?)

6 month wait in public hospital for neurology appointment

Different doctor every time they go

Using the poor to teach young doctors

She also spoke about a little thing called MDR TB, this form of TB is completely drug resistant, and it is beginning to reach epidemic proportions in the D.C. area. How long until INDY becomes more like other urban centers?

Oct. 1994

"The hungry need more than handouts. They need nurturing and support -- they need involvement." -Marcia Ruth, Director of the dinner program for homeless women in D.C.

I am beginning to wonder about what sort of people I will actually run into on the streets. What is a homeless person in INDY: black, white, male, female, veteran, mentally ill, middle-aged, young, intelligent? I am digging and digging and I simply cannot find published information on the Indiana homeless beyond boring little census reports -- they only have a guesstimated number in them anyway.

GRRRRRR! One of the first rules of the documentary is that you do research, but I am hitting a wall of nothingness.
Do they have AIDS, just HIV, will any of them ever consent to being on camera? Will I find children or have they been taken under wing by the gangs? I am a middle-class white female and I don't think running around the gang territory with a camera is a good idea. (especially since at least one Indianapolis gang now has backing from one of the L.A. gangs)

Where do I have the right to just walk up with a camera, where do I have to get permission, are the rules any different because I'm not really a member of the "press?" Am I being rhetorical enough?!

Nov 1994

Well........we were going to do some filming before winter arrived but guess what -- Julee and I are both sucessfully overcommitted to the point that this thesis thing (like the alliteration?) is just not making it to the top of the list. Ah well, c'est la vie! I spoke with Bob Pappar (TCOM PROF) about the project and he brought up several points I was trying to avoid. A documentary is never an entirely objective beast. Everytime the choice is made to use or not to use a sound or video byte there will be a message that is sent and that message is chosen by the creator of the program. Should I leave in profanity, illicit activities -- current and/or past, sexual references. And how will I ever know that I made the right choice? What is a right choice?
The world may never know. (It's always more fun to end a journal entry with a trite cliché don't you think?)

Dec. 1994

I must be thinking about my thesis more than I thought, it has now decided to pop into my sub and pre-conscious states. I had a dream about my fears, perspectives, i.e. my paradigm of homelessness. My dreams of ignorance prompted me to write this short story. (Don't hold your breath, it won't be worth a pulitzer or anything.)

December is perhaps the merriest month of the twelve. Two separate religions celebrate holidays, and the commercialization of Christmas has made the season joyful for all. Christmastide was also the first time I looked a homeless person in the eyes. Staggering is the only word that comes to mind. About ten years ago my girl scout troop took a field trip to go caroling in downtown Indianapolis. We were fully dressed in our forest green knee-length jumpers, starched white shirts and our regulation blue bows were snapped smartly about our lean pre-pubescent necks. The weather did not match our high spirits. The sun was completely covered with clouds, and a darker front loomed on the horizon. At fifteen degrees above zero, our young minds and bodies could have been focused on the cold, but we were invulnerable ten year olds. We had thick gloves and scarves, down jackets and knee-high wool socks.
While walking down Meridian Street towards the circle we passed an alley. After being indoctrinated for five years by my school's "Officer Friendly" program, I automatically glanced to my left, then to my right...and froze. I looked, stopped, stared, and was afraid. What I saw in what was meant as a cursory glance was at that point in my life the antithesis of human existence.

She wore no hat, gloves, or scarf. On her feet were Salvation Army issue black, old-lady shoes; her socks were mismatched and stained. Those socks did not quite reach to the ragged hem of her skirt, a skirt that was stiff with dirt and frozen street scum. Her arms and legs were pulled up into a fetal position in a feeble attempt to conserve warmth. The rusted sewage grate she was sitting on was not steaming, but she remained with the faint hope that some measure of heat might be released from the pipes. The bricks she rested her back against were rough and chipped with age.

I will never forget her eyes. They were grey. Not gray like the sea tossing in a storm, but grey like the clouds on the not-so-distant horizon. Sad, cold, heavy eyes, she hadn't seen the sun for a long time. Any happy days she may have once had were covered in a fog of faded memory. Her darkened soul could no longer absorb the light of simple pleasures, such as my proffered, jittery smile.

When I, as a child, locked eyes with that destitute woman I felt some of her coldness pass into me. I took a
step away from childhood and from innocence. The homeless were no longer a statistic mentioned on the six o'clock news, or the topic of a presidential debate. The homeless, was an old woman in a ragged skirt with no hat or gloves. The homeless was cold, unkempt, and alone. Most importantly, the homeless was a person, just like me. The sanctuary of my suburban life was shattered. I met the first person who didn't have a home, a bed, or even a warm meal waiting for them and the day's end. What is most shocking about my reaction is that I was not filled with a great compassion. The thought never occurred to offer my hat, or my gloves. What I felt was fear, fear of the unknown, a child's fear of the darker side of modern society.

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This Dicksonian type tale leads me to believe that I am not as far removed from the stereotypes of homelessness as I would like to be. I guess we will see how my stereotypes hold up once we find some homeless people to interview.

Dec 1994

So, I am angry at myself but it is for no particularly good reason. I am walking through the mall, doing my best to ignore the Salvation Army bell ringers, feeling pretty
annoyed with all the other consumers in the mall and my intellect kicks in and gives me a swift trip on the guilt trail. When there are thousands of people in America that are improperly educated, poorly housed, and generally ignored, what right do I have as an upper-middle class white female to revel in the excesses of the season and buy non-essential gifts for my family and friends? Self-pity can be fun. Where does it fit in the grand scheme of life to have such a polar society? Do they deserve it? are some people just meant to be uneducated and poor, or perhaps there will always be a low end in the cycle. By the time I finish this video I hope I can stop this whining!

Jan 1995

Happy New Year!

And the score is 0 for 2. I called two different missions in Indianapolis, and they were more than willing to have me come down and visit, and even interview some of their clients -- and then I mentioned the video camera. Whooops! I had no idea the word "video" would turn people off so quickly. Ah, well perhaps it will be more beneficial to contact the shelters. But I guess the good news is that if the missions don't want us to interview people on camera there must be homeless people to interview! Of course good is a relative term here, good for the thesis, bad for the
I called Susan and she is still willing to let us come down but she would like a meeting with us before we actually tape. And to be perfectly honest I would like to see the inside of a shelter before I tape too. Over the summer I did quite a bit of book-type research on the homeless, though very unsuccessful in the area of Indiana homeless. But I did not get a chance to jaunt on down to INDY and volunteer in any of the missions, soup kitchens, shelters, etc. to actually make contact with the homeless. I guess working three jobs will just make that little thesis thing slip your mind. I'm starting to get a little nervous about the project. How will a homeless person respond to me? I feel so far removed from this problem sometimes it's not even funny. I know that in any capitalist society there will be an economical skew that supports an elite 1-5% leaves about 40% pretty well off and puts the other 55% in varying degrees of economic crunch. I will not accept that there is a single reason a person becomes homeless. There must be many factors to consider and those factors change with each individual. But will it be possible on camera to represent a broad condition without pointing up certain factors as more important than others? Oh bother, I just don't know.

Feb 1995

Well I found out about these little Internal Research Grants
that the university has an open competition for. I just finished the ELEVEN page application and turned in EIGHT copies to the office. Bureaucracy can be fun!!!! Oh well, the grant is for up to $200 which would help quite a bit on deferring the costs of SVHS tapes and travels to INDY. On the same good note, Julee and I will be going down in about a week or so to visit with Susan Skilrud the Dayspring Director. I hope it will be a fruitful experience. (My that sounded a bit cheesy now, didn't it Dana?)

Julee and I have been working on the questions we want to ask the homeless. The standard past, present life, and future, but we want to go beyond these. Do homeless people have goals, dreams, political opinions (they can still vote), are many veterans, ex-Central State inhabitants, or just somebody that ended up on the wrong end of a check? Well, I guess we'll find out. Stay tuned next week, same BAT time same BAT channel.

Mar. 1995

I have just been going back over my research (again!) and I am wondering when it became an acceptable lifestyle choice in this country to be homeless. There have been wanderers and vagrants since the beginning of time -- but most of the time they were poor, lower-class individuals they could not advance in society due to fixed creeds within that society. And the only image I have not been able to get out of my
head is a taller than average bronze statue that stands at the mouth of a harbour.

  Give me your tired, your poor
  Your huddled masses yearning to be free
  The wretched refuse of your teeming shores
  Send these, the homeless, the tempest tossed
  To Me
  I lift my lamp beside the Golden door

I may have missed a word or two since that came from my usually befuddled memory, but the point remains. We are still the land of opportunity!!! (or are we?) We have a public education system that will take a child from age 5 until the completion of a high school degree. We offer alternative degrees, scholarships, (thousands of dollars of which are left unclaimed each year) and even social services like unemployment checks, and social security. Why do we as a country have the lowest literacy rate of any industrialized, service-oriented country? I can remember many non-politically correct references from my youth concerning the intelligence of citizen of other countries. We just knew we were all smarter because we were "Americans?" Rome fell because they had an army so large the government couldn't pay to feed them, and hungry soldiers are more apt to keep the last city they take over as payment instead of just turning it over to the state. Will the downfall of the U.S. be an entire class of
undereducated, underpaid, undermotivated individuals that
cannot be forced into being a useful part of the economy?

For all it's inhumanity, slaves and indentured servants
can fill vital roles in an economy. And please, I am not
suggesting that we bring back slaves, I just feel it is
important to point up what history has taught us. If you
take a lower class and force them to work without proper
compensation, eventually they will rise up and crush those
above them. But what will a lower class do that is sitting
in a safety net of government support. Yes there are people
that starve to death in the U.S. but that number is
relatively low. Our society makes it possible for entire
families to hover on the edges of existence not for one or
two years, but for generations. No one in my family has
ever been on welfare. I have met people whose grandmothers
were on welfare. Have we made it possible for poverty to be
learned as a way of life in this country to the point that
it has become a viable lifestyle choice? If this is true,
it will not be an army of soldiers that bankrupt this
country; it will be an army of the "disadvantaged."

May 1995.

I waited until we finished our video portion of our project
before I wrote this final entry, I wanted to be able to have
some sense of perspective on my experiences. But I fear
that even now, I may be too close to see clearly. But I
will share how I feel now, because that is the best I can
I had never been in a homeless shelter until this project and personally speaking I never need to go back. Though I will and hopefully it will be to volunteer, and not to be admitted as a resident. It is because for me a shelter is a shameful place. It says to me, "I failed, I could not make a place for myself in this world." I'm not sure I could survive that kind of shame. I understand that people make mistakes, that disability checks don't always come in on time. But why can't we have halfway places, places where you can come and work and live until the doors open again. I fear the reason we can't is that people would come and never leave. One of our homeless suggested that the American dream has become too expensive. I can't bring myself to agree. There are still people trying to bust into this country because our streets are paved with gold. I have had at least one job at a time since I turned sixteen. At times I have worked three jobs. But my parents would have been able to support me had I not worked at all.....but I worked, I do work, and I will work.

One of the women we interviewed became homeless because she could not budget and did not have a job. This is unacceptable. Budgeting should be taught, in schools if not in homes. I don't remember being told to always pay the rent first, outstanding bills second, food/fixed costs next and them play with what is left over. And if nothing is left, you don't play. But these are things I know and practice in my life, why doesn't everyone know?
Another woman chose to become homeless because her mother in law moved in one day and would not leave. Therefore she takes to the streets?! Part of me (so help me God) toys with the possibility that by living in a shelter she could get free pre-natal care and the state will cover the hospital bill. She was 7 months pregnant at the time of the video, she already had a son and was 19 years old. She did not say these things, and I will never know -- but I wonder. For the homeless man whose disability checks did not come, what about unemployment? I know you hurt your back, but there is very little lifting in something like telemarketing. You see, in my world, if the company owes you then by all means they should pay, but to sit back and still not make your own way in the world? Does he expect to become rich from a workman's comp check? I would think he could if he had a good lawyer but how many homeless people have good lawyers?

Yes, I did identify with some aspects of the homeless I interviewed, and yes I do know in a very real way that it could happen to me. But I will fight with every ounce of my being to never be on a state supported income! Nobody owes me anything. I don't have the right to $50,000+ in income a year, but I do have the right to earn that money. For all the causes, and different paths to homelessness, I cannot get beyond my belief that at some point or another these people just stopped trying. I know that children can be a BIG factor in whether or not the ends meet each month, but if so many other people manage to make it, why not these?
It is a harsh judgement that I come close to reaching. There is a small pragmatist in me. But for me it all seems to go back to education, and who is ultimately responsible for a child's education? The parents? The School? The Government? No, I accept none of them. A child is ultimately responsible for it's own education. If it chooses to drop out of school, to get pregnant or help get someone else pregnant, to not work, to strive for mediocrity; if it chose thusly let it live with it's consequences. It may be time to take the safety nets away, and force an entire class of people to rediscover what it means to be competitive. Mother nature has ruled for centuries under the simple axiom of "survival of the fittest." In this country we have tried to circumvent this with aid programs and subsidies, but has it worked? I know it is not feasible to remove all social services. But what if the government provided free child-care instead of welfare checks? What if the government provided low interest loans to get people on their feet, instead of low-income housing that helps them stay at the bottom?

I do not want to make the impression that I and preaching that these solutions will solve the problem...they won't. But what I am saying is that the system as it is in place, is extremely dysfunctional. I have felt some measure of compassion and empathy for the homeless and poor people that I met during this project. But I know that it is not my fault that they are poor, and it is not my fault that
they are undereducated. Where, exactly, does that seem to leave me? As an outside observer trying to report "just the facts", or am I supposed to campaign in Washington to revamp social service, should I open my house to these people and give them a new start?

I am left in a gray world of ambiguity. I know there is a problem, I know some of the factors that cause the problem. And no matter how hard I think, I cannot resolve the problem. I live my life by the Socratic Method -- I question everything, all of the time. But from time to time......I want some answers.

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