

Homeless for 48 Hours: Taking the Urban Plunge
My experience on the streets of Albuquerque

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This past weekend, I took an "Urban Plunge". What is an Urban Plunge, you ask. The National Coalition for the Homeless defines it as "when economically-privileged people dress down, empty their wallets, and spend time on the streets as 'poor' people". Why would someone do that, is your next question. Well, I decided to do it because I wanted to see for myself some of the reality of living on the streets. I had many questions like: are people starving on the street, are there enough beds, why don't homeless people work, how can people help, why doesn't the problem of homelessness get solved? I also wanted to do an Urban Plunge because when I graduate from college I want to work on social justice issues and right now one of my concerns is the fact that people—your neighbor, your friend, your mother or father, or your kids—are forced to live on the streets like animals. Homeless people are required to spend their day just surviving—finding food, shelter, and a place to go to the bathroom. I did the Urban Plunge because I feel that too often and too many people in our society are blind to the fact that homelessness is such a big problem and just here in New Mexico there is up to 13,000 people who experience homelessness each year and that, in the year 2005, people have to go to the bathroom in the bushes because there are no toilettes available to them.

I had a great guide for my Urban Plunge, Maurice, who was formally homeless, but is now experiencing homelessness again. He kept me safe and showed me many of the services that were offered in the Albuquerque area. Maurice was an amazing person who has survived a lot and, amazingly enough, still has faith in the compassion of people. He taught me a lot not just about homelessness but also about life, love, and people. I also met many interesting characters during my Plunge—I especially want to thank the couple that Maurice and I met who shared their story and left me with a beautiful gift made at one of the many fabulous homeless services, Art Street. I also want to thank all the people who shared with me the highlights of their homeless service programs and their work and thank them for their determined effort to make homelessness a problem of the past.

"...many times I was just overlooked..."

While I was out sitting on the streets, I received a lot of stares and backward glances. But many times I was just overlooked. The most powerful experiences came as I stood in lines to receive food. Often the people serving were timid and reserved and it made me reflect on my experiences on the other side of the line serving instead of being served. I remember that I felt scared and often didn't know how to interact with the people I was serving. Now, having the experience of being served, I realize that I just wanted someone to talk to me about random stuff. To hold a conversation with me as a human being—to ask about my day, to remark about the food, to talk about the weather, to comment on something that is happening in the city, anything. Not to come over and hand me their pamphlet. For example, during breakfast on morning, this guy came over to me and as friendly as he was he wasn't talking to me—his purpose was to hand me his pamphlet about Christianity and leave so that he could hand out more to other people. Or, at another meal, when I was sitting and eating and the servers came around and handed out some of the extra homemade bread (delicious!) but didn't stop to talk to me. As grateful as I am to those individuals who generously served and prepared the food for me I found that food was just as important as someone coming and just relaxing and talking to me taking an interest not just in my body being taken care of but also in my psyche being taken care of. Not just serving and cleaning up and putting me out.

"Finding a safe place..."

I also realized how lucky I was to have a guide because Maurice already knew some people, and more importantly he was outgoing. Many people that we talked to were very secretive. Homeless people don't want others to know too much about who they are and where their secret campsite is located so that they can maintain some safety and security. For example, I was talking to a group of people in one of the parks during breakfast. They talked about how one of the girls (who they pointed out) had been dating one of the guys that slept at their campsite, and when they had relationship troubles, she called the cops on their campsite. This was a huge deal to have someone rat you out to the cops and have your campsite busted because often it is your safe-area. Once your campsite is busted by the cops, it is on their radar and is no longer "safe". I also found out that the cops wouldn't even deal with the homeless face-to-face, they explained, the cops just parked and set the dogs on them instead of asking them to leave. This dehumanizes the situation by not even allowing these people who are experiencing homelessness to receive the decency of a person-to-person interaction. Instead the cops treat them like animals and set the dogs on them.

I found out how campsites are considered "home" and good ones are hard to find. Maurice and I started talking to a guy named Steve, a mountain looking man who was traveling with all of his belongings on his back, and was on his way out of town to sleep because he explained it was just safer than sleeping within the city limits. Steve shared with us some stories on how this area that we were standing by had been a pretty safe area for people to squat in but the police came and raided it leaving people to find a new safe place to sleep. The police cut-up the IDs of the homeless people they found so that they couldn't receive any benefits as a punishment (a completely illegal act) and if they took them to jail they would throw away all of their belongings instead of having to go through all the paperwork of claiming them. This left the homeless with even less. He shared other awful stories about how police and people treated the homeless that they find sleeping and it made it very clear to me that fear for my, and others experiencing homeless, safety is a very real issue. Finding a safe place that no one will find me and harass me as I slept is extremely important to stay safe.

"...using every contact available to stay off the streets..."

Luckily, Maurice, my guide, knew a man in town who was working on renovating a building into a community center for homeless men who are dealing with issues of alcoholism. We were able to work and help lay flooring and paint in order to have permission to sleep on their couches. This is really fortunate that Maurice had contacts so that we had a dry place to stay (especially because it down-poured on one of the nights of the plunge). He explained that couch-hopping is a part of being homeless and using every contact available to stay off the streets is part of being resourceful as a homeless person because "no one wants to be on the streets if they don't have to". There was also the issue of "camping" that Maurice explained to me was not something that he was eager to do if he didn't have to because of his history as a veteran. Camping, he explained, reminded him of the hard times he experienced in the military—another thing that many may not always realize—the psychological impact of homelessness on veterans.

Another very important issue, along with food and shelter, are toilettes. I learned during my 48 hours that you never turn down the opportunity to use a toilette because you don't know if or when you will find another one. Day shelters help by being open during the day so that people can use the toilettes, and there was a movement, that Maurice was involved in, to get port-a-potties in the park where they serve breakfast—but still many have only the bushes or the hard pavement to take care of their business. This is often something that people don't realize is such a problem—but it is! And it is something that can be easily fixed if money can be provided for more public restrooms that are available for the use of the homeless population.

"...some of the answers to my questions..."

During my 48-hour plunge I learned first-hand some of the answers to my questions and I learned a lot of important and sometimes disappointing things about the services that are out there to "help" people who are experiencing homelessness. First, the answers:

No, people are not starving on the streets, thanks to all the hard workers and volunteers plus all the generous donations to the shelters in the Albuquerque area. However, there are some major problems that if you were not homeless you might not see. For example, sometimes there is only one place you can find food and you will need to walk for miles-and-miles to be able to eat (because Albuquerque is very spread out). This is just an inconvenience for many, but for those who are elderly or disabled these walks are a burden that is often not worth the effort and many have to go without food.

No, there are not enough beds—not even close. There are approximately 400 beds in the shelters in Albuquerque to serve the more than 3,000 people who are homeless. This is such a small amount that many homeless-service agencies are forced to put limits on how long people can stay in the shelters. In some shelters residents can only stay a week and in others up to a month. This circulation of people is important because it gives people a rest from the streets but circulation in shelters does not help people get or maintain a job because as soon as the week or the month is over then they are back on the streets where their only concern can be food and shelter. There is however some great organizations that were trying to change this—like the AOC (Albuquerque Opportunity Center) that will let its residents get extensions to stay longer than a month if they show proof of that they are working.

We stopped by Joy Junction, the only family shelter in Albuquerque, and found out that they generously offered "classroom" style shelter on cold and rainy days because there is such a need. We were told that they only had a certain amount of beds and once they were all filled they would offer to allow people to spend the night at the shelter but they would have to sit in a chair around a table and sleep with their heads on the table. This, as horrible as it is (for all you who remember falling asleep in school and waking up with a massive neck-ache) is better than being out in the cold.

"...much of the work that is available to the homeless is day labor..."

A very important fact, that many people don't realize is that almost 1/3 of homeless people work. The problem is that they still can't afford an apartments or other housing. Also, much of the work that is available to the homeless is day labor and this is the worst kind of work—not because it is hard work, which it is, but because it is insecure work. For example, day laborers work all-day and then at the end of a long day the boss drives off and doesn't pay them—this happens 1/3 of the time! Would you take a job where you had one-out-of-three chances of not getting paid...No! Well, many homeless people feel the same way. Also, if they work day labor they face extra charges, like payment for a ride to work or are forced to buy work gloves, which brings their wages below minimum wage. Fortunately, the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness won a huge win with the Day Laborer Bill, which helps to hold employers responsible for paying their day labor workers for their work and making sure that they are receiving minimum wage.

The last two questions are the hardest: how do people help and why isn't the problem being solved. You can help by volunteering at any number of the shelters and the food programs but the best thing that you can do is call your senator and representative and make sure that services are being adequately funded. Why people are homeless is because there are not enough houses. We need to make sure that there are affordable low-income houses for people to live. This will significantly cut down on the thousands-and-thousands of dollars that are pouring into the homeless programs every year. If people have a house they don't need a shelter and they can possibly cook their own food and won't be so dependent on soup kitchens. There are other important parts to this—we can't just provide houses—we need to increase services that educate people on how to keep apartments, how to deal with landlords, and other services like education and job training to get people a good and steady jobs.

It was a scary experience but thanks to my guide—Maurice—I always felt safe. I interacted with many new and interesting people during my time and heard a lot of different stories. The most important thing I learned is that homelessness affects your average person—these people were someone's neighbor, employee, son, or daughter who had some bad twists of fate or more-often-than-not were just not cared for in a way that prevented them from ending up on the streets. Some people were dealing with issues of mental illness and some with drug problems—but are problems that can be dealt with, with a little love and care. They are people who just need a little more help and love. If we would just love them, really care for the person and not to disempower them, but to let them grow under a caring touch many problems could be fixed. Unfortunately, there is too much need and too few workers who don't have the time to really care for and help the homeless population.

"Answers, Disappointments, Anger, and Love"

I witnessed a lot of bad tactics during my time on the street. For example, I witnessed the very long sermons before meals where the preacher would condemn people to Hell that homeless people have to bear in order to be fed. As I stood there I was surrounded by people who were hungry after a long cold night—because I was—and who probably would have responded more to someone who showed compassion and "walked like Jesus" instead of standing their preaching and condemning people to Hell. Also, I was angered by all the people who were out there "serving" the homeless because it really seemed like they were doing it to feel good about themselves. For example, I stood in a prayer circle before on of the meals were served at one of the kitchens and the woman thanked all the people who had prepared the food and who had come out to serve but not a word was mentioned about the hundreds of people waiting outside—no word of "may this food nourish their bodies as they face a long night out in the cold", no word of "bless these poor people and give them strength"—nothing. The last thing that really angered me is that often there are simple things that should be better coordinated between organizations. If people really wanted to help the homeless, then make sure there is always a shelter that is open for them to go to if they need to go to the bathroom. Small things like I found out that one shelter kicked everyone out in the morning at 7:00am but breakfast wasn't served anywhere until 8:00am. An hour doesn't seem like that long of a time unless you are actually the person standing out there in freezing weather with no place to go.

During my time on the street I fell in love with all the people who are out there surviving. Everyday they fight to find food and a safe place to sleep. I write this as I sit comfortably as a student in college with three meals a day and a dorm to sleep in every night. I think it is the duty of all people to make sure that those who are less fortunate, who have hit a hard time, who just need a little extra attention and love, get it.

In 48-hours you cannot really understand what it is like to be homeless because at the end of the 48-hours you know that you will be able to leave, take a shower and sleep in your own bed. But what little that can be experienced in those 48 hours is invaluable and life changing. I learned a lot from my experience and I know that my knowledge and first hand experiences will drive me to do what I can to stop the inhumane position of those unfortunate people who by bad luck and bad circumstances have found themselves on the streets all over our country. I believe you can change the world with love, compassion and a vision of hope. And this Plunge showed me that there is a need for people who will do just that.