

When I Was on the STREET

In the comfort of our homes, it's easy to forget the people who are left outside.

This winter in Chicago has been particularly cold. For several weeks, snow piled up, and evening temperatures hovered around zero. The wind chill at night reached thirty below.

The weather has had deadly consequences. In January, a forty-seven-year-old man died when the space heater he had rigged in his home—a van parked on the city's West Side—caught fire. A few days earlier, a unidentified homeless man was found dead, curled up under a bridge just a block from Covenant Offices and not thirty feet from North Park University's football field. He was frozen so badly that doctors at nearby Swedish Covenant Hospital, where he was taken, could not unbend his corpse. (See the article on page 8.)

The cold weather brings into sharp focus the needs of the homeless in many of our communities. I got a firsthand look at what it's like to be homeless, at least for a few days, and the memories of that time continue to impact my life.

When I was a junior at North Park University, I participated in an "Urban Plunge" weekend. I and five other students dressed down, emptied our pockets, and spent several nights on the streets of downtown Chicago in order to better understand and empathize with the homeless of our city.

We were accompanied on our jour-

ney by Maurice, a forty-two-year-old man, who had once been homeless. He was the director of the organization that sponsored the Urban Plunge, known as HOME (Homeless On the Move for Equality). Following a two-hour introduction and brief training time, the seven of us hit the streets Friday evening, not to return until Sunday afternoon. I was armed with a sleeping bag and a small plastic bag containing a pocket Bible, Chapstick, my asthma inhaler, toilet paper, a city map, an extra pair of socks, \$1.50 (for the train), and a small notebook and pen.

We were nervous when we started our journey. The thought of sleeping on Lower Wacker Drive and going to shelters for food frightened us. To keep safe, Maurice taught us how to be aware of our surroundings and to look for places that were dry for potential sleeping, like heating vents, and places that might have food, like the dumpsters by restaurants and food companies.

When I tell people about this experience, they ask me why I felt I had to try and live like a homeless person for a few days—isn't that a bit extreme?

I tell them that I don't think that you have to live on the street to empathize with the homeless. I don't pretend to understand what it means to be homeless after my experience. But I do know that I am richer for the experience. For a few days I could taste faith.

I watched people, including me, rely on God in a way that we don't normally do. I felt gratitude when the weather for that weekend changed from the forecasted sleet, rain, snow, and 30 degree temperatures to a weekend of dry skies and 40 degree temps. I witnessed the surprising generosity of people—three young men who passed by us when we were sleeping outside brought our group of street dwellers a bag of expensive Italian take-out food—giving us and some other homeless friends so much shrimp, pasta in wine sauce, and mushroom chicken that we could not finish the feast.

For a few days I felt as if I was praying all day long, not because I was frightened or because I had to, but because I didn't want to miss what God was showing me. In the dark underside of the city, along the weed-covered railway tracks, under the strain of my sore arms, my over-worked calf muscles, and a growling stomach, I learned how to follow. I learned how to listen to others and to be broken and worn down. I was transformed and humbled by people like old Stanley who fed the birds with his own food, and grinning Charlie who explained that he couldn't go back home and hurt those he loved. He cried when we sang Christmas carols for him.

I learned that Charlie, Stanley, and the others I met that weekend, and the man who froze in our neighborhood



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this winter lose the hope and comfort that many of us take for granted when the curtain of homelessness drops on their lives.

These people are not usually lazy or dangerous. It's true that some people who are homeless are on the streets due to an addiction to drugs or alcohol, yet many are young runaways, are families who had a fire or an accident and have no friends or family nearby, or are single older people who cannot work any longer. Some are fleeing abuse, have lost their jobs, or are stricken with a debilitating illness.

A 2002 report from the U.S. Conference of Mayors, which surveyed social service officials in twenty-five

cities found that families with children make up 41 percent of the homeless population. The most direct causes of homelessness include the loss of affordable housing and growing poverty so that even those employed full-time at a minimum wage job still can not afford low rent rates. For these people, homelessness is not a weekend experience. It is a way of life that forces them to beg from others, to be ignored and looked down on, and to depend on the charity of passersby or the availability of beds or mats at the shelter. They have few choices, no voice, and few people notice.

The purpose of my weekend trip was to become aware of the issues surrounding homelessness and to become more sensitive to them. Even today, when an icy blast of wind takes away my breath in the parking lot, or the freezing rain pelts my window as I look out from the enclosed warmth of my apartment, I ask God to care for those

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SOME IDEAS ON HOW TO HELP:

- If a homeless person asks you for money and you are not sure what to do, offer to buy them a cup of coffee or a hamburger instead of giving just cash.
- Give of your time and eat with them, instead of just giving money.
- Carry around small lists of what shelters or social services are in the area to give to people who might not know what help is available.
- Volunteer with a group that offers short-term assistance to the homeless.
- Educate your church about the issues that the poor might face in your neighborhood.
- Work for long-term housing and poverty solutions through groups like the National Alliance to End Homelessness (www.naeh.org).

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What led this man to such a lonely, miserable end, trudging in sandals down an icy embankment and crawling up into a graffiti-spattered niche that would become his tomb?

temperatures over the weekend made it impossible to pinpoint the time of death, and he confirmed reports that the man had gray hair and sideburns and was wearing olive cargo pants and a black jacket over three shirts.

Dr. Lauth said it's not uncommon for the homeless in Albany Park to drop by Swedish Covenant's emergency room seeking warmth, food, or attention, but he didn't recognize this man. "It's sad," he said. "Mostly they're not bad people. They've just had a tough life."

What led this man to such a lonely,



The bridge where the homeless man's body was found. Beyond the bridge North Park's athletic field can be seen.

miserable end, trudging in sandals down an icy embankment and crawling up into a graffiti-spattered niche that would become his tomb? Who, if anyone at all, is missing him tonight?

"I know everybody who lives on the streets up here, and I have no idea who died," said an unkempt man in a knit cap who was nursing a small coffee in a McDonald's restaurant three blocks from the bridge. "People keep saying they thought it was me."

He is fifty-seven, lugs all his possessions around the Northwest Side in two duffel bags, and, in an odd coincidence we discovered during our long conversation, was once well acquainted with a close friend of mine.

"Thing is, when you have nothing, you become like a wild dog," he said. "You know only one word: survival."

The life story of this man, who asked that I not use even his first name, is as tangled and tortuous as the life story of every homeless person I've ever interviewed: a combination of bad luck, bad judgment, poisonous family relationships, paranoia, and encounters with the mental-health system.

He said his many problems don't include drug or alcohol abuse, but that most of the men and women he knows who sleep under bridges are addicts of some sort.

Donoghue said Sunday's victim exhibited no obvious signs of drug or alcohol abuse, but toxicology tests aren't back yet.

Guevara also said he found no clues as to what had led the man to kick off his sandals and curl up by a riverbank instead of seeking out one of the many overnight shelter options in the city. "But I can tell you this," he said, "most of them out there do a lot of drinking."

It's a mystery. It's a pity.

Freezing to death may not be such a bad way to go. But dying unknown and unlamented has got to be the worst. □

Eric Zorn is a metro columnist for The Chicago Tribune.

Editor's Note: Eric Zorn reports that the man found under the bridge was Raymond Scheid Greenwald, fifty-four. Homeless for years, he had until recently been at a nursing home, recovering from cancer. This article originally appeared in January 22 Chicago Tribune. Copyright 2004, Chicago Tribune Company. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

without shelter and food, and think of the homeless I was privileged to meet.

But I also have forgotten. I have forgotten the bruise I got from my cramped sleeping position on concrete for two nights. I have forgotten the dirty concrete, the smell of the musty outdoors, the drum of traffic, the awkwardness of sheltering six people under two sleeping bag covers, the uncertainty of the noisy clinks and crashes down the street, and the ache of tired feet. I have forgotten my deep sadness at being in a huge, ornate, cold church on a Sunday morning where only two people spoke to us while 700 or so congregants avoided our scruffy appearance.

Until I read about the man who froze to death just three blocks from my apartment—who is known in the newspaper accounts as "the frozen man"—it was too easy for me to forget. But I still do not want to forget what I experienced; I do not want my sensitivity to people who are homeless to be dulled by lying in a soft bed miles (or perhaps one warm wall) away from those in need.

What then are we required to do in response to people in need? We can start in small ways. Our church visits the homeless at night and brings sandwiches, warm clothes, and a friendly smile to the invisible parts of the city. I sometimes take the time to buy coffee and food for the man holding a cardboard sign by the freeway exit ramp. A friend who recently bought a new coat heard about the man under the bridge and brought her old coat downtown to give to someone who needs the warmth. We financially support several groups that are working to increase affordable housing and lower poverty rates across the country.

And we can pray for sensitivity, pray to not forget, pray to see what God is already doing among the homeless in our communities, and then respond in love, remembering that we follow a Savior, who, like the frozen man, had no place to lay his head. □