

Homelessness – Introducing Hatman

It was the coldest night of the season thus far but that was not putting a damper on a Chatham-Kent event to draw awareness to the issue of homelessness and a fundraiser to draw support to a shelter for homeless men. There had been stories in the local papers about it to draw attention to the Boxes and Blankets event but something was missing, this reporter decided to understand it she had to experience it. And experience it I did and I learned the truth that homelessness is a very complex issue.

I went in with a very judgemental view and came away with a lesson in humility, community and gratitude. At 7:00pm I picked out my box and moved to my chosen space where I would camp out until 7:00am the next day, I picked a place off to myself that gave me a good view and let me see the action and hear the buzz of excitement from the approximately thirty participants. From there I went off to talk to participants and find out what motivated them to come out. Not even five minutes into my conversations I came across two individuals who had experienced real homelessness, and one of them still is homeless. I tried to talk to them but they shied away.

After some chatter and meeting participants I returned to my box and found people adding to it. They were concerned I was going to be too cold. There was a lot of laughter and comradery as they fixed my 'home' and made sure I would be protected from the elements. After that was done I settled in with my friend who had come to keep me company for a while and as we chatted we were approached by one of the experienced homeless gentlemen. He dropped down on the cold cement outside my box and began sharing his story and that was when I found myself rethinking my closed and judgemental perspective.

Hatman, a nickname, had lived on the streets for ten years and he defied my logic. He is intelligent, a father, warm, friendly, and unfortunate. After his marriage broke down he found himself on the street and travelling from community to community. As his story unfolded he explained to me that he suffers from mental health issues (he is bipolar and schizophrenic) he also is addicted to crystal meth. He was open to sharing his story and he was very patient and accepting of questions.

Some of his story confused me and he took the time to explain. He has a family, parents, siblings, which try to help him – he could stay with them but he will not because he feels unworthy and undeserving. He researched about crystal meth and walked into what was going to be a one-time experience just to see what it was like. That first experience impacted him and became an addiction. That one experience taught him that he could numb the emotional pain that he was experiencing and that numbness was what drew him back. Numbing the emotions brings a false sense of peace, but it is a peace at a personally devastating cost. “All I want is peace”, he said, “Love, joy, peace.”

As the three of us chatted, Hatman became more and more open and at one point he pulled out his most beloved possession to share with us. At first sight it was a simple book tied with a ribbon but as he gently untied it and opened it I realized it was far more, it was his life. Page after page of notes, gifts, dried flowers that others had given to him. One time encounters and prolonged friendships – lifelines for him, ties to reality. It was an emotional experience for all of us to share it and I sensed the sacredness of that gift.

As our conversation drew on another homeless man came to join us and I watched captivated by their interactions. Rick had found some markers in a dumpster and wanted to get them working and Hatman was happy to provide some paper as the two men worked together the markers all

flowed and then I learned about the bartering system. Hatman loved one of the shiny markers and Rick was hungry so they exchanged items. Hatman got his marker and Rick in return received a banana, you would have thought that they had both received invaluable artifacts and to them they had.

Perhaps what was most amazing to me was how truly caring and generous the homeless I met could be. I have a home, three meals on my table each day, I have a family and I am furthering my education and they have only what they carry and yet they wanted to share their food and their mittens and make sure I was safe and warm. They were willing to sacrifice their little to make sure I was warm and safe. They taught me about humility, sacrifice and community.

This reporter walked away changed and with a new focus. Humbled, grateful and determined to help change this world of mine. I will follow up with the group responsible for this experience, with my new homeless experienced friends and with our local officials to see what they are doing to make changes. In the meantime I wanted to introduce you to Hatman and his story.

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