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### Project Homeless Connect

Project Homeless Connect is supposed to be a life changing day for not only the people it is intending to help, but also the volunteers. It is supposed to be an exchange of knowledge, an exchange of experience, and most importantly an exchange of goods and services for the homeless people who attend. Personally, I thought and hoped that I would walk from the experience feeling like I had helped someone and maybe, not necessarily connected with another person on a deeper level because that is something that is hard to do in one day, but maybe learn something about being homeless and that person's life.

The day did not begin like any other. I woke up an hour or so before my alarm was supposed to go off. This does not sound like much, but I am a very heavy sleeper. I never wake up until my alarm rings, and sometimes not even then. I am sure it had to do with the anticipation of the day. My nervousness forced me to wake up and to get out of bed finally when my alarm went off at the ungodly hour of 6:15. My routine was the same as it always was. I brushed my teeth, ate a little breakfast, got dressed, nothing unusual. I was a little tired from not sleeping as well as I normally do, so as a result I focused my energy on finding coffee to distract myself from how nervous and tired I actually was. Thinking about the day and the task I had ahead of me was just too much for my brain to handle at 6:15 in the morning. Subsequently, I proceeded to walk towards the Ritchie Center, following the swarm of yellow with my roommate on the right and a friend on the left. They were chatting about what they were nervous and excited about

and what they wanted to accomplish. I kept a smile on my face and tuned in every once in a while, but mostly all I could think was coffee. I wanted coffee so I could be awake and alert for my client.

After the walk to the Ritchie Center, we arrived to a sea of yellow. Checking in was not nearly as disorienting or troubling as I thought it would be. All I had to do was follow the line of yellow people to the appropriate stations. It really was simple, but still I had not gotten my coffee. Now I was a little disgruntled. I knew it was there somewhere. I had heard about it in the training session, and I saw people walking around with it. I had to have it, especially now that I was settled, physically speaking, and was finished with all the check-in points. Whether or not it would actually settle my mind and stomach, I was convinced it would. Finally, I decided to walk up the front steps of the Ritchie Center and found euphoria, coffee. It was delicious and it also did wake my brain cells a notch, but it did not untie the knot that was beginning to settle hard in my stomach. The knot just got tighter and tighter and tighter as the time started to approach eight, the time the buses were supposed to arrive with people, homeless people. Homeless people who had been living on the streets, who could have been there without showers, who could have been sick, who could have been mentally ill, who could have...I don't know. There were just so many random, stereotypical thoughts that were running through my head as I was zigzagging through the line, up and down the stairs. Unfortunately, coffee did not help to slow my thoughts down in the least bit.

As I approached the top of the stairs, that knot in my stomach was officially tight. It was so tight I bet a Boy Scout would not have been able to untie it. Then the moment came, the moment where I was going to be introduced and paired with a client. Strangely, that moment took all of two seconds. The person who was running it just directed a person towards me

without getting to know either one of us. I guess, how else would it be done with the amount of time given? I had a right to feel uneasy about the casualness of the pairing because the client I was paired with was not the least bit interested in me. I will admit she was polite at first. She introduced herself and said her day was “fine” when I asked and politely declined the offer for breakfast and a beverage. I thought that was fine. Not everyone would walk in hungry.

As soon as we walked past the breakfast area, her attitude changed immediately. She turned a complete 180 degrees and had a coarse tone in her voice. She wanted nothing to do with me. I know this because she said this to me. She refused to take the survey that I was supposed to do with her. She was an independent, older black woman who seemed like she had been living alone and taking care of herself for quite a while, and there was nothing a young, white girl could do to help her. That is exactly what she told me -- she wanted to explore for herself the place. She wanted to be independent and find a job at the job fair on her own. The only problem with that was that she could not get into the job fair without me being there. It was one of the rules that Project Homeless Connect had established.

I guess you could say I led her to the area where all the services were. I would, however, define it as “I followed while she tried to shoo me away.” There was one point where she was successful at leaving me; subsequently I found a staff member and asked her what I should do because I was feeling confused, hurt, and slightly angry -- angry at myself because I felt like I was not helping her and angry at her because I felt slightly mistreated. But I had to tell myself it was part of the disease of being homeless, and it is quite possible why she was out on the streets in the first place. As a result, I bucked up and found a staff member who told me to follow her and to see where she goes and to know that if she needs my help then I will be there and if she does not, then no harm done. No harm done, except to my fragile ego.

Then I followed her. I followed her around the service area for a while. She stopped at a couple stations like getting a new birth certificate, where actually my presence was needed. I did feel good that my presence there actually was a benefit to her, even if she explicitly did not want me hanging around her. Honestly, I did not know what else to do. I felt like I was aimlessly wandering around as she scoped out the area for herself. There was nothing else to do but follow, and follow I did. After my client was done with the services that she needed or at least could find by herself, she wandered some more through the Ritchie Center and then took off. She left without saying anything to me. I stood at the front steps, watching her walk away in kind of a blur. I did not know what to do with myself. My client had just left. She had only said a few things to me, a few very crude things and I had only said a few things to her. Was that it? Was there more? I felt put off by the experience and by my client. I was left feeling confused and angry, not content and satisfied. I wanted desperately to get back into line to change my feelings. I wanted to leave feeling better about the day and myself. Time was not on my side. It did not allow me to do so because at that point I had very little time to get to class. As a paying student, that was an important priority for me.

As a result, I went to class feeling disgruntled. I wish I did not feel that way about the day and the experience. I wish I had a client who would have at least spoken to me kindly, even if my help was not really necessary. I mostly wish the experience could have turned out more positive. Maybe my expectations were too high because people had told me what a great day it was and also what a life-changing experience it was. Next year I hope to volunteer again, maybe not necessarily with the client support because my experience made me apprehensive about that, but I still do want to help. I want to experience something positive and associate that with the program and with helping charity in general.

Ultimately, I do forgive my client. Even though I have never experienced the hardships of being homeless nor do I ever want to, I can understand how that kind of experience can skew her perception on life and people. I want to end with saying that I do hope that I helped her and I do hope that she was able to accomplish something beneficial that day.