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Project Homeless Connect Reflection

“You have to allow yourself to joke. Smiles are the essence of life. Why do you think I’m here? It’s because I wanted to see your smile, before I even met you. I see you smile and I am happy. Houses don’t make me happy...people do.”

- SEJ

I have seen homeless people before, or at least glanced at them out of sheer curiosity, on the occasional street corner or pushing their shopping carts full of aluminum cans, each time never really taking a moment to see what was truly going on underneath the bedraggled clothes and worn-out eyes, behind their squinting at the harshness of the world. For the longest time, they were something of a spectacle in my middle-class world of suburban comfort. It is safe to say that my parents are compassionate people, more so than many, but like any other parents that had made their own way in the world, they raised me to react to the derelict members of society with nothing short of mild callousness. As a young boy, seeing each person in the world as a story waiting to be told or rewritten, I often noticed that many of my parents’ friends held similar attitudes on the subject of homelessness: “Yes, it is a sad situation to see a person in; however, they require far more help than a few dollar bills would give them.” This was the mantra I heard every time I took a trip to the downtown portion of a city. Avoid, avoid, avoid. I never bought it. Despite the constant repetition of this idea that the

homeless were beyond help, I could never rid myself of the guilt I felt whenever I ignored a man holding out a plastic cup with a meager amount of coins within as if it were the holy grail itself. I didn't think it was right then, and I certainly don't think it is right now. No matter if their being homeless is their own fault or the result of a cruel twist of fate, not a single person deserves to be forced to sleep in a gutter. Last Friday was the first time I had truly interacted with someone who has next to nothing in terms of material possessions. It was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

SEJ.. Born in Kenya, son of a Lieutenant in the United States armed forces. Moved to Tennessee at age four. Had a fairly typical childhood, but was diagnosed with severe depression in his early twenties. Then the downward spiral came. I heard all of this within the first ten minutes I was with him. An entire novel could be written about this man who spends his nights behind a dumpster near the "Nine-Mile" Light Rail stop. I didn't know what to expect when I met my charge, but it certainly wasn't having to hold back tears after only a short time with SEJ. Here was a man who, by no fault of his own, had drifted away from his loved ones, emotionally and eventually physically, until he was living out of an athletic bag. Depression. A chemical imbalance in the brain that engenders feelings of overwhelming sadness. It does not know race nor creed and it most certainly does not know a person's economic class. As I wrote "D-e-p-r-e-s-s-i-o-n" on SEJ's paper work, under the section asking about handicaps or diseases, my pen shook, causing an untidy rendering of the word. I was amazed to find that I felt a kindred spirit manifest itself in the form of this 48-year-old man with a bad limp and a kind smile. I, too, struggle with feelings of constant depression, but at this moment in my life, "me" became "we," and I was determined to help SEJ in as many ways as I possibly could.

Any feelings of trepidation I had concerning my first intimate interactions with a homeless person disappeared the moment a big grin split his whiskered face. He was no alien that was out to steal my own livelihood, merely a man who had lived a different journey than me; and ultimately he possessed a much deeper understanding for how valuable life is. No one would ever know that he suffered from a life-altering disease, because he refused to give in to the sadness that surrounded him.

As we went from station to station, I saw SEJ interacting with people and functioning like any other well-mannered human being. I realized that many people living on the streets could pass for an average well-to-do American, given the chance to clean themselves up appropriately. The only things that kept me from being in SEJ's shoes at that moment were a few years and a little bit of luck. I wished that I could take all of the money I spend on a college education and give it to him, because the results would be spectacular. SEJ could then receive the medical attention he needs for his neurological disorder as well as his limp. He would be able to put his clever mind to good use, perhaps coming up with a comic strip to be published in *The Denver Post*. All he needs is compassion and some help financially to put him back on his feet. I'm not a religious person, but SEJ made me want to pray, to pray for a guide to lift him up and carry him over all obstacles that kept him rooted to the unforgiving concrete. From time to time, he would shout a jolly "Hello!" to one of his friends that also happened to come to the festival of sorts. Each interaction I witnessed held a different story, and it only served to emphasize my epiphany that a person's values don't disappear the instant their home does. People aren't defined by what they own – something I often forget in my own life and that is evident with so many other people, blinded by perceptions of

success. Success isn't about money; rather it is about human connections and relationships. SEJ taught me that, just by living his life with me as an audience member for a few hours.

What astounded me more than any other surprise I received that day was how much this man reminded me of my own father. Not only were they similar in their physical appearance, they would be considered almost identical twins on paper. They were the same age, separated by exactly 30 days. I felt an urge to hug SEJ, to feel his rounded abdomen against my own, just like my father's stomach. When I asked SEJ what his weight was, he responded with an exact quote I had heard my father utter when talking about his belly, "I'm built for comfort, not speed." I had to hide my astonishment for fear of blurting out, "Are you for real?" It was as if my father was sitting only a few feet from me, his small, loving eyes concentrated on my face. Yet another connection I had with someone whom I would have never met if it weren't for Project Homeless Connect. It seemed to really live up to its name. It scared me to think that my father could potentially end up in the same situation that SEJ finds himself in, but reassurance quickly followed when I considered what my father had that SEJ had lost, a family that still cared. I wanted to be SEJ's family so that he could rise above this lack of love.

As we said our goodbyes, I extended my hand toward SEJ, his large muscular grip enveloped my own petite fingers. Our first physical contact was also our last. His hand told the story of his struggle, palms rough and stained with the filth of street-life. What I found most intriguing, however, was the fact that when SEJ took my outstretched hand, he held it for what seemed like an eternity, all the while looking me straight in the

eye, saying, without words, just how important our time together had been to him too. An intense shiver shook my body. How could someone I had only met three hours earlier have this big of an effect on me? Before I could answer my own question, he released my hand, smiled, and then laughed, thunder rumbling through his chest. He said, "Well...I guess I'm off. Going to go exchange plasma for money! Forty dollars is a lot you know. Who would have thought I could give away gross bodily fluids for cash? It's like giving someone poop and getting gold! All hail the golden poop! See you around Cody." And with that, SEJ left my life as quickly as he had come into it like a shining star in a baggy sweatshirt, whistling as he faded away.