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Cowboy, King of the Homeless

Standing at the top of the stairs in the early morning, I watched the line quickly disappearing before me as volunteers were paired up with homeless people and sent into the Ritchie Center. As it got down to four, three, two people in front of me, I began anxiously eyeing the clients coming up the steps. There was a large woman in a bright pink shirt, and a man in a camouflage jacket walking slowly up the stairs. Then a man came around them from behind, taking the steps two at a time in his black cowboy boots. He wore tight dark blue jeans, a red, white, and blue button-down shirt with a gray wool blazer with black leather trim, and to top it all off a great big black cowboy hat. "All I need's a haircut!" he announced loudly when he reached the top, and off we went.

One of my worries about Project Homeless Connect had been what to talk about since I'm not very good at making conversation with people I don't know, but it was never a problem with Cowboy since he always had something to say. I hardly had a chance to introduce myself before he was telling me, "I ain't really homeless, only halfway homeless. Tell you the truth I ain't never really been completely homeless, I always had somewhere to camp out. I ain't like other homeless people." It would be the first of maybe a hundred times he would tell me that that day: "There ain't another person like me in all the homeless people and all the non-homeless people in the world! And I ain't never carried no backpack." He said this with disdain as we passed the coat and belongings check. I asked him what he did with his things then, and he told me he's always had really good hiding places for stashing things and no one ever finds them. I

doubted that he had never lost anything or had something stolen, but I was still struck by the thought that even though I was getting a college education, this man, who I later found out had not graduated from high school, was surely light years ahead of me in street smarts.

Cowboy did not want to introduce himself to me, fill out forms, get acquainted, have some coffee, or do anything else besides get a haircut. So we marched right over to the haircut station to get on the list. When asked for his name he said, "Charles William Weaver Jr., but you can just put Cowboy." Then we began to wait. With all the extra time (it took the haircut lady about two hours to show up), Cowboy figured we might as well get a cup of coffee, fill out those forms, and get acquainted. As we did this, I began to realize that while Cowboy may have been a bit full of himself, he was probably right. I've never met anyone like him before, nor do I expect to meet anyone like him in the future. "I'm country," he told me. "I was born country, I was raised country, and I'm gonna die country."

As we walked around, Cowboy pointed out other homeless people he knew. He said he knew them all, and they all knew him although they left each other alone mostly. He said all the other homeless people would look at him and how well dressed and put together he was and wonder how he did it and wish they could be like him. For a homeless man of fifty-two, he did look pretty good. Of all the people he pointed out, he only talked briefly to a couple of them. He said he simply was not a people person. He knew how to take care of himself and had applied for various types of aid on his own. He told me that, when he was applying for SSI, he was asked if he had any disabilities. He had responded, "Well, I don't like people." Cowboy had had a few good jobs doing

manual labor out in the fields, building, and even digging graves. The companies where he had had steady work, though, had gone out of business, often due to the introduction of technology, which Cowboy despised. He been offered some jobs such as bus driving, but hadn't taken them because he hates people. Cowboy was a true loner. He hadn't been able to keep a family together because he hates people, and he was still paying some form of child support to two children who were both over the age of twenty-seven. He particularly disliked men because as he saw it men were far too obsessed with sports and he just didn't see the point. When we started talking about this, I got angry. I was angry that so many tax dollars were put into building stadiums, and professional athletes were paid millions of dollars to play sports, while someone else could work for years doing backbreaking labor and end up penniless on the streets. There is something very wrong with that.

Cowboy had one vice; he smoked. Partway through the morning, he went over to another homeless man he knew to ask for a cigarette. Cowboy tried to pay the man twenty-five cents for it, but the man gave back the quarter saying Cowboy needed it more than he did. I'm not sure who needed the quarter more, but seeing each of the men trying to give the other the quarter made me realize that they were two men who cared about the well being of another, even though they were both homeless and a quarter could have been a big deal to them. I think it really is true that the ones who give the most are those who have the least. It makes me wonder does poverty lead to generosity, or does generosity lead to poverty? Cowboy looked like he'd come straight from an old Marlboro ad as he smoked that cigarette. While we were watching other clients and volunteers pass by, Cowboy pointed out to me which of the homeless people were alcoholics. Cowboy

hated alcoholics. He said they were unruly, uncontrollable, and he'd gotten in trouble a number of times just as a result of being in the vicinity of drunk people. According to Cowboy, he had never been an alcoholic and hadn't even drunk alcohol in years because he just doesn't like it. I believed him. Cowboy was not an irresponsible man. While waiting for the haircut, he pulled an old electronic gambling card game out of his pocket and began playing while telling me the story of his brief gambling history. He once went into a casino with twenty dollars and walked out with sixty, so the next week he went in with fifty and walked out with one hundred fifty. The following week he went back with fifty and came out with one hundred twenty. He had been very lucky at the slots, so the next week he went back with a hundred dollars. This time though he walked out with thirty dollars. That was the end of it. "I always knew gambling wasn't a good idea, but I figured I'd try it at least once, and then I got lucky, and I figured as long as I was having some luck I'd go again, but as soon as I started to lose money I thought, this is stupid, and I dropped it right then and there. I ain't gambled at all except on this video game ever since." I'm not sure how much of this story was true, but I did believe that Cowboy was smart enough not to waste his money on a gambling habit. Being homeless doesn't mean you're too dumb or irresponsible to hold on to your money. Sometimes it just means that life has dealt you a bad hand.

The haircut lady finally arrived. The waiting list was tossed since so many people had given up and left. Cowboy had definitely been waiting the longest, but he wanted to make sure that everything was fair. He let three other people go before him, and he only went after another client said, "Oh no, you've been here the longest – you should go." No one was pushing or arguing or running up to snag the barber chair as soon as it was free.

Instead it was done by, “Oh, you go ahead. No, please, I insist.” No one was in a hurry and everyone worried about everyone else.

After Cowboy finally got the haircut, he wanted to get out of there. No, he did not want to fill out the check-out form. He did not want the gift bag. He did not want lunch. He did not want any other services, and he did not want to wait for a bus. “I’ll go get on the Light Rail,” he said, “I’m better on my own anyway,” and thus, as abruptly as he had arrived, he departed. Cowboy was a remarkable person, and not at all what I had expected a homeless person to be like.

When I got back to the dorms, one of my floormates asked me how it went. I told her it was great. She said she hadn’t wanted to do it because she hates homeless people. “Did they stink?” she asked me. Well, yes, if truth be told a lot of them, including Cowboy, didn’t smell that great. “Were they stupid?” she asked. Cowboy said a few things that didn’t make him sound too smart, but in many respects he was a very clever man. “Well, I’m glad I didn’t go,” she said; but hearing her say that only made me more glad that I did go. Maybe she got to sleep in that day and stay shut in her dorm room without having to deal with anything unpleasant, but I spent a day meeting amazing individuals and learning so much about the homeless and myself.