

Ashton Luhrs

Project Homeless Connect

It has always been a harsh realization in my life that it is easy to volunteer and to serve, the hard part is to truly love the people you are serving. Last Friday during Project Homeless Connect I got a chance to serve and love some really extraordinary people that I otherwise would never have met.

During Project Homeless Connect I volunteered for Client Support Services for the full day (6hours). In this role I was paired with a homeless person (or a family) in order to personally identify the needs of the individual and guide them to the appropriate areas. I waited in the line of the other volunteers as the homeless individuals came in the door and were paired up with the next volunteer in line. From there we would take them to get breakfast or lunch, then sit down and go through the paperwork that was designed to identify their situation and their priority needs. Once their needs were identified, we would guide them to the appropriate stations around the room to try and get the individual help. In the role of client support services I had the chance to personally interact with the people that the project is helping and see first hand how the different systems are benefiting or not benefiting the homeless of Denver.

I have to admit that I was nervous and ^{that} I had my reservations about volunteering to assist a homeless individual. Before this project, I had never interacted on a personal basis with the homeless of Denver outside of a small soup kitchen. I wasn't sure how they would respond to me or how I would respond to them. Luckily, I had a very positive experience that enabled me to now have a more compassionate spirit for the homeless in light of their situations and of their spirits.

Upon entering the Field House I immediately hoped in line to be matched up with an individual. I was nervous, quickly reviewing my notes and comparing the map to the tables around me. I was at the front of the line when an African-American woman about my height approached me and shook my hand. We introduced ourselves, got breakfast and sat down to go over the paperwork. Her name was V~~██████~~ and she was living with her mother in Arvada. From the get-go she was positive, polite and understanding. As we began to talk I began to let go of my nerves and when I messed up on something she kindly helped me out. She was so easy to talk to, and I noticed that we had a natural chemistry between us that I have rarely had with many people. As we walked to the different stations we continued talking constantly about her life and mine. I found that I could relate to her on many levels because of my mother's past and because she was involved in many of the things that I am interested in; we both mentioned how great it was that we got matched up out of all people.

V~~██████~~ worked in non-profits for twenty years but now ^{she} struggles in the work force due to her bi-polar condition. Because she worked in non-profits for most of her career, she not only had a loving spirit, ^{but also} she knew half the people in the room. I very much enjoyed walking around to the different tables just so she could give out hugs and catch up with old friends; she was very popular. We talked a lot about her work and the areas that I wanted to go into. V~~██████~~ gave me a lot of helpful and very encouraging advice as she opened up to me about her life.

V~~██████~~ visited several different stations to find information. We first went to housing, which I have to say I was disappointed in. The woman talked to us for less than

~~minutes and handed V~~██████~~ a list of transitional houses and shelters, something she~~

could get anywhere else. The medical area (where we stopped to find information or connections for her mental illness) was very much the same because they sent her through line and hardly addressed her real issues. The main issue that she wanted to address was her mental illness, and they didn't even have any kind of station or professionals where she could find help. I found it odd that there wasn't more help in this area because such a large percentage of the homeless is mentally ill and I thought that in order to directly address the issue of homelessness they should address the cause. The only really helpful stop was social security (which was a little disappointing also because they couldn't even submit her application there) and a station where she could apply for a med9 which she needed. I was disappointed that she didn't get some more helpful information but V█████, being in this line of work before, was understanding and quick to point out that it was a good resource fair, not a place where people were going to get their problems solved.

V█████ was amazing and I was very thankful that we were paired together. I

learned a lot about non-profits and about the pure kindness of strangers. V█████ taught

talked to the couple about their morning and they began to quickly open up about their circumstances. The two were dressed like typical hippies and were open about their lives. ~~Reuben~~ was recovering from testicular cancer that had spread to his lungs and was still going through what they hoped to be his last round of Kimo. ~~Reuben~~ couldn't work because he was sick and ~~Diana~~, his wife, couldn't work because she was taking care of her husband twenty-four hours a day. They were currently living in a hotel with Volunteer of America and had to be out by Monday, so housing was the most important stop for them that day. I was shocked to hear about the circumstances of these people who were so loving, high-spirited and who cared so much about each other. I couldn't believe that they were going through such a hard time and still remained so kind and optimistic. ~~Reuben~~ took off his hat to show me the brightly colored temporary tattoos on his head that they put there as a celebration that he was well enough to go out and work a Rockies game, they took joy in that. As we sat waiting for the housing number, ~~Diana~~ told me about how she went to Woodstock when she was nine with her seventeen year old brother who was home between his services in Vietnam. ~~Reuben~~ told me about his time with the Dead Heads and about how much his mother-in-law liked him. They were hands down two of the most interesting people I have ever met and I loved hearing about their lives. Once their number was called, they held their breaths and patiently talked to the people about their living situation. Within a matter of minuets they were handed a green paper telling them that they qualified for this organization to pay for their deposit for an apartment off the list they were given. ~~Diana~~ began to cry and they held hands and I couldn't help but put my arms around them and share this moment with these amazing people that I had met only a few hours beforehand. I said good-bye to ~~Reuben~~ and ~~Diana~~

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Good

minutes

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feeling like we were old friends. ~~Re~~ gave me a flower, ~~D~~ gave me a long hug, and I watched them walk away praying that everything worked out for them.

Participating in Project Homeless Connect was one of the most meaningful opportunities I have ever had. Even though I was disappointed with the lack of opportunities to directly solve problems for the homeless, I had the opportunity to invest in the lives of people that made a huge impact on my life. I learned so much about the systems in Denver, about why people are homeless, what kind of people are homeless, about I shouldn't judge anyone before I know them, and a lot about loving and investing in people.

*A heartfelt paper!
Thank you!*

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