

2014 Manual



Homeless Challenge Project

Experience Life on the Streets

Sharing Challenges - Changing Lives

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

HISTORY	3
OTHER LITERARY WORKS	4
DEFINITIONS	6
WHY TAKE THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE?	6
PURPOSES OF THE HCP	8
IS THE HCP EXPERIENCE SAFE?	9
HOMELESS CHALLENGE MYTHS	9
FINANCIAL COST OF THE HCP	10
DURATION OF THE HCP	10
WHAT TO EXPECT	11
QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE GOING ON THE HCP	11
GETTING READY FOR THE HCP EXPERIENCE	11
ACTIVITIES TO TAKE PART IN DURING YOUR HCP EXPERIENCE	13
DON'TS WHEN DOING THE HCP	15
WHEN THE HCP IS OVER	15
INCORPORATING FUNDRAISING INTO THE HCP	16
HOMELESS CHALLENGE REFLECTIONS	17



Homeless Challenge Project

HISTORY

The Homeless Challenge Project (HCP) has been an important educational component of the National Coalition for the Homeless for the past three decades. The HCP finds its roots in earlier European and American social movements. One of the earliest written records of an individual taking part in a similar type of homeless challenge was George Orwell, who wrote of his experiences in Down and Out in Paris and London published in 1933. In Michael Shelden's Orwell: The Authorized Biography, the author recounts Orwell's experiences:

"He began this unusual activity not long after moving to London. He wanted to learn about the living conditions of the poorest of the poor, and his plan was to go among them disguised as a tramp. Worried that his educated accent would raise suspicions that he was spying for the police, he planned his first trip with some trepidation. He took great care to make himself look like a real tramp, acquiring a shabby coat, black dungaree trousers, a faded scarf, and a rumpled cap. Walking to a seedy area near the West India Docks, he began his investigations surrounded by rough characters--stevedores, sailors, and unemployed laborers. But much to his surprise, his effort to pass himself off as a tramp worked perfectly, and he was delighted to discover that he was treated no differently from anyone else. Clothes did indeed make the man. He stayed in the district for two or three days, sleeping at a common lodging house in Limehouse Causeway and paying ninepence a day for the privilege. This experience encouraged him to go 'on the road' for a short period. Looking ragged and dirty, he wandered through the outskirts of London, spending his nights in crowded 'spikes'--the casual wards of local workhouses."

"One definite source of inspiration was Jack London's The People of the Abyss, which is based on the American writer's close observation of life in the East End at the beginning of the century. Orwell knew the book and was following its example when he chose to assume a disguise before entering the unfamiliar world of the slums. Jack London began his exploration

of the world by changing into old clothes that he had purchased at a rag shop in Stepney, and in this disguise, he had lived among the poor for most of one summer. "What I wish to do," London declares in his first chapter, "is to go down into the East End and see things for myself. I wish to know how those people are living there, and why they are living there, and what they are living for."

"[Orwell] had a genuine desire to understand how the poor lived and to experience something of their suffering. It was not enough to view such things from a distance or to think about poverty and class as abstract problems. He needed to see the poor at close quarters, talking directly with them about their lives, sharing meals with them, sleeping in the same rooms. Having rejected 'every form of man's dominion over man,' he wanted 'to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against the tyrants.'"

"Pretending to be a tramp was also a quick way of satisfying his urge to fail, without costing him any permanent sacrifice. Simply by changing his clothes and dirtying his face, this former officer of the Indian Imperial Police could sink to the lowest level of society and subject himself to a brief, but intense spell of misery. The misery was certainly real, but when he had experienced enough of it, he could always retreat to his other, more respectable life and resume his struggle to establish a literary career for himself. He was never truly down and out. There was always a way out of the abyss. The truth is that his tramping was something of a game, one that reflected his profound ambivalence toward his background, his ambitions, and his future. But it is important to remember that the game had its serious uses. It was never frivolous, never anything so pointless as slumming. He cared about the destitute people whose sufferings he shared, and he wanted to help them, but he could not ignore the fact that he was not one of them. He had talent, an education, and parents and other relatives who were willing to help him. The best he could do for those who were less fortunate was to speak out for them, to remind the rest of the world that they existed--that they were human beings who deserved better and that their pain was real. And this he did, again and again."

OTHER LITERARY WORKS

- Recent literary references on homeless challenge include:
 1. **Scratch Beginnings: Me, \$25, and The Search for the American Dream**— Adam Shepard

(2008). With a sleeping bag, \$25.00 and the clothes on his back, one man sets out to pursue the American Dream. This story chronicles his year long journey from homelessness to success.

2. **Under the Overpass: A Journey of Faith on the Streets of America**—Mike Yankoski (2005). Two college students lived on the streets for five months in the following cities: Denver, Phoenix, Portland (OR), San Diego, San Francisco, Washington, DC
3. **The Emptiness of Our Hands. A Lent Lived on the Streets**—Phylliss Cole-Dai and James Murray (2004). The authors spent the 40 days of Lent and Holy Week in 1999 living on the streets of Columbus, Ohio, being "present" to the homeless and destitute living there, under the radar of most notice.
4. **Travels with Lizbeth: Three Years on the Road and on the Streets**—Lars Eighner (1993). Engaging and largely unsentimental account of being one of the itinerant homeless, with the added complication of having a dog.

Homeless Challenges were more common in the 1960's, with the advent of the War on Poverty. Many mainstream religious leaders initiated Homeless Challenges in large cities to familiarize themselves and their "parishioners" with the plight of the disadvantaged. And the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), commonly referred to as the domestic Peace Corp, had as part of its training program, a Homeless Challenge experience.

In 1986, John R. Coleman, president of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, took a firsthand approach to understanding homeless people by posing as a homeless person for ten days in New York City. In addition to experiencing the very negative reactions of his fellow citizens and what below freezing weather means on the streets at 6 a.m., Coleman discovered the horrors and humiliations of the shelter system. He writes:

"At 3:30 p.m., with more cold ahead, I sought out the Men's Shelter at 8 East 3rd St. This is the principal entry point for men seeking the city's help. It provides meals for 1,300 or so people every day and beds for some few of those...."

"The air was heavy with the odors of Thunderbird wine, urine, sweat and, above all, nicotine and marijuana. Three or four Human Resources Administration police officers seemed to be keeping the violence down to tolerable levels, but barely so...."

"It was time to get in line to eat. This meant crowding into what I can only compare to a cattle chute in a stockyard. It ran along two walls of the sitting room and was already jammed. A man with a bullhorn kept yelling at us to stand up and stay in line. One very old and drunk man couldn't stay on his feet. He was helped to the chair, from which he promptly fell onto the floor. The bullhorn man had some choice obscenities for him, but they didn't seem to have any affect. The old man just lay there, and we turned our thoughts back to the evening meal."

Several activists (including the late Mitch Snyder of the Community for Creative Non-Violence) lived on the streets for six months during the winter of 1986/87 and lobbying Congress during the daytime resulting in the passage of the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance of 1987. As part of this winter-long vigil, 13 Members of Congress plus several celebrities (e.g. Martin Sheen, Dennis Quaid, Brian Dennehy) spent a night living outside on the streets of Washington, D.C. This event was appropriately dubbed the "Grate American Sleep Out."

All in all, several thousand Americans have done Homeless Challenges from the 1960's to the present time and homeless organizations in a number of U.S. cities sponsor Homeless Challenges throughout the year.

DEFINITIONS

Homeless Challenge: When people from middle and upper incomes or those who are economically independent suspend the advantages of wealth to spend time on the streets as homeless.

REASONS FOR TAKING THE CHALLENGE

In general, it is very difficult for housed Americans to comprehend the realities of daily life for several million homeless Americans who constitute the poorest of the poor. How do we overcome the separation that divides housed from homeless?

Thomas Merton said it best when he wrote in 1949 that "it is easy enough to tell the poor to accept their poverty as God's will when you yourself have warm clothes and plenty of food and medical care and a roof over your head and no worry about the rent. But if you want them to believe you, try to share some of their poverty, and see if you can accept it as God's will yourself."

You have probably never put yourself in the shoes of a homeless person. You might have said, "I can't

imagine living like that" once or twice, but you have never really experienced what it is like. And we hope you never do.

Our answer to breaking down at least some of the barriers between housed and homeless Americans is the Homeless Challenge where the streets become your teacher.

The National Coalition for the Homeless wants you to do this so you will be able to know (even better than you already know) how it feels to be without a home. We think that participants will come away with a better understanding of the scope of the problem, and of how the system currently deals with the hardships of homelessness. We think you will be better able to address solutions at the local level when you have an experiential and emotional knowledge of some parts of a homeless person's situation. We also want to bring more attention to the dire situation of both homeless people and of social services providers (who lack adequate resources to address the problem) - both are worthy of your time and understanding. This Homeless Challenge will be a great way to see the problem from the inside out and from the bottom up.

"Aimless wandering" is what one Challenge participant called it. On the streets you meander aimlessly looking at everything from the street. You notice things you do not usually notice. You talk to people, especially with people you might not normally speak. You ask them how they are doing. You ask them where there is a good place to get food. "Walking everywhere, but arriving nowhere," the Challenge participant concluded.

Back home and in the office, people might suggest you have gone crazy. Even before you take the Homeless Challenge, you might encounter rejection, anger, and indifference from friends and family when you tell them about the Challenge. NCH encourages participants to think seriously about the reasons for taking the Homeless Challenge. You may not have a direct impact on homeless individuals but your personal experiences on the street will have a lasting impact on the way you move through the world.

If you truly take the Homeless Challenge, you will never avoid street people again. They always have been there, but now you are aware of it. While we know the Homeless Challenge experience is not for everyone, it is essential if you want to work with people who are homeless and hungry.

PURPOSES OF THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE:

- To familiarize and sensitize people with the realities and hardships of homelessness
- To see a different and more difficult economic side of life
- To gain firsthand knowledge of the growing crisis of homelessness. You will undoubtedly be struck by how many homeless people look just like you, tearing away at the myth of who constitute the homeless.
- To see the world through the eyes of a homeless person. When people on a Homeless Challenge experimentally dress as homeless people, loneliness is the pain they most often report. You become invisible and as one Challenge participant reported, "Nobody looks at you."

- Stephen Beachy wrote about his experiences in the novel, The Whistling Song:

"I learned how to walk without looking scared, how to be invisible, to look impoverished and insane. How to talk to myself, gesticulating wildly.... How to slide down the streets, steal candy bars, bananas and bran muffins for that extra fiber we needed so bad. We washed up in fountains on hot days, collected the wet change from lovers' wishes. Sometimes we split up. I liked to hang out with tourists by the arch or in bookstores or in malls. I'd follow families around, pretend they were mine, wait for them to leave their table at McDonald's or Wendy's and eat the food they left behind.... I learned to eat and run, find dry corners out of the afternoon rain, search for quarters on laundromat floors. I asked strangers for money but most just ignored me or said, "Afraid Not!" in a tone implying that they were good citizens and I was hardly human at all. Others threw me change so I'd have to chase nickels or dimes ... across the sidewalk. Some suggested various paths to salvation, some offered money if I'd do certain things..."

- To have the world view you as a homeless person
- To make friends with homeless people. You will accomplish this by sitting in the subway stations, watching the trains go by, getting into the rhythm of your homeless friends, talking, sharing a smoke, etc.
- To become aware of community attitudes toward homeless people.

SAFETY AND THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE EXPERIENCE

People who have done the Homeless Challenge themselves have designed this program. In the 25 years of sponsoring Challenges, no one has been hurt.

However, there are no guarantees and the NCH assumes no responsibility or liability for any participants and no liability insurance is provided by NCH for this activity. Participants take the Homeless Challenge at their own risk.

THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE PROJECT EXPLAINED FURTHER

- An educational program; and as such, this program is more for personal awareness and development than helpful to homeless people directly.
- It can be a serious, sobering and very helpful experience. Some past participants have found that it was even a life-changing experience. The only thing we can promise is that "it will be good for you."
- The Homeless Challenge experience gets you closer inside the story of a homeless person. You can go through souplines, and you can be addressed by tourists, receptionists, police, etc. as if you were less than others. That in itself proves instructive and will make you forever a better advocate for homeless people.

HOMELESS CHALLENGE PROJECT MYTHS

- It is not a chance for you to masquerade as a homeless person or be a "tourist" looking at homeless people.
- You cannot really feel like a homeless person as long as you have a home to return to after the Challenge. All of us know that this lasts just 48 hours and that you will return home, exhausted, to a hot shower, hot food, and a warm, clean bed. By having a home to return to after the Challenge, you'll be reminded of the privilege of class in American society. We're talking about the privilege of being able to step in and out of what we perceive to be the homeless experience. If it gets too painful, demanding or inconvenient, we can just simply leave. So do not think that you will actually get the complete experience of a homeless person in only a few days time.
- As a Homeless Challenge participant, you are not doing this for research or journalistic endeavors.
- You are not going "undercover" to find out what it is really going on in the streets of the city. You will

stick out "like a sore thumb" among the homeless population.

FINANCIAL COST OF THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE PROJECT:

On the first night of the Homeless Challenge, participants meet with a guide (a homeless or formerly homeless person) who sleeps outside with the participant for security reasons. On the next night, participants meet with another guide at a different meeting location. These evenings provide participants a chance to speak with someone who is experiencing or has experienced homelessness, as well as share their day's experiences with their guide and the group.

The Homeless Challenge project fee is based on the total number of participants your group has. For groups with 3-5 students the fee is \$150 (this covers the program fee and honorarium for your guide). For groups with 6-10 students the fee is \$300 (this covers the program fee and the honorarium for your two guides). For groups with 11-15 students the fee is \$450 (this covers the program fee and the honorarium for your three guides).

Your project fee is due at the start of the event in a check made out to the National Coalition for the Homeless.

During the Homeless Challenge, participants panhandle, or beg for money. The Challenge participant can do whatever they want with the money they receive (only exception is that they cannot purchase drugs or alcohol). Most participants give it to other homeless people they encounter either during or after the homeless challenge.

When you return to your home/campus, we recommend that you and your organization become dues-paying members of the National Coalition for the Homeless. Memberships for students cost \$15. Fees are waived for homeless students.

DURATION OF THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE PROJECT

Homeless Challenges can be done during the daytime, 24 hours, 48 hours, 72 hours or up to a full week. While we recommend **48 hours**, we are willing to work with you based on your time availability. Whatever length of time you choose to be on the streets, do your best to stick to the commitment. However, if you choose to end your Challenge early, no one will put you down.

Whatever length of time you choose, a person only needs to take the Homeless Challenge experience once in a lifetime to get a limited sense of what it is like to be homeless in America.

EXPECTATION

- After just one day on the streets, people will begin to reject you. When you walk into a restaurant, they will not serve you. When you ask to use the restroom, they are likely to say no. People will walk away from you because they do not like the way you smell or look.
- Expect sleeping outside on the ground or on cold, hard concrete.
- Expect a lot of walking from place to place.
- Expect to spend a lot of time standing in lines for food, clothing, selling your plasma, etc.
- The "great outdoors" is likely to be your restroom facility. So bring along your own roll of toilet paper.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE GOING ON THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE PROJECT

Please take a few moments to write down your perceptions now, before experiencing the Homeless Challenge. We would like you to be able to go back and see the progression of your thoughts.

- What are your current perceptions of homeless people?
- How do you perceive the homeless experience?
- What do you think your experiences will be like on the Homeless Challenge?
- How do you think a Homeless Challenge will impact your view of homelessness?
- What are your fears about doing a Homeless Challenge?

GETTING READY FOR THE EXPERIENCE

- Please fill out the Waiver of Liability Agreement (at the end of this manual).
- Select an empathetic reporter/photographer to cover your Homeless Challenge experience from beginning to end. If it is done right, such documenting will not wreck your cover and will serve to educate a broader audience than just your small group of Challenge participants. Be sure your photographer respects people's rights to privacy by asking before taking a photograph. Be especially discreet if anyone's house (e.g. shack, tent, sleeping space, etc.) is in the picture. Remember that even the simplest dwelling is someone's home.

- NCH will provide a list of local social service agencies. Feel free to bring along an additional city map as it will help you get around but do not rely on this map too much. The homeless population is extremely mobile and often arrives in cities without any knowledge of the landscape so there is no need to be extremely aware of the city's geography.
- NCH will recruit a couple of our homeless friends to serve as your initial guides to the Homeless Challenge experience. Ask the guides what to expect and they will provide many practical suggestions. If no guides are available, you will generally find that other homeless people are more than willing to assist you. Remember to be honest with this select group of homeless friends. Let them know who you really are and why you are taking this Challenge experience. If the guides want to know why you are doing the homeless challenge, tell the truth--that you are social justice activists who want to live on the streets for several days. Again, don't feel obliged to tell every homeless person you meet that you are doing a Homeless Challenge. Relying on these initial guides and other homeless people will help overcome the initial panic that you will no doubt feel upon hitting the streets at the beginning of the Challenge.
- Dress in your worst clothes--not a hard assignment for college students. Clothing should be old and comfortable which you will not mind getting dirty. A warm coat is a really good idea.
- Bring along one piece of ID and bury it in your sock.
- Bring along your medical insurance card.
- Wear no jewelry or watches.
- Refrain from taking a bath for at least 2 days before beginning the Homeless Challenge.
- For men, don't shave for 5 days before starting the Homeless Challenge.
- No cologne, deodorant or use of scented soap.
- Rub unscented baby oil into your hair to make it look like your hair hasn't been washed for sometime.
- Wear extra layers of clothes even if it is warm out. Homeless people wear extra clothes as they have no place to store clothes in the daytime and it keeps them warm at night.
- Wear ruffed up old shoes.
- Bring along a sheet of cardboard for use as a mattress.

- Bring along an old blanket. Sleeping bags are okay, but not the state-of-the-art down sleeping bags. NCH recommends the flannel type of sleeping bags used by Boy and Girl Scouts. A sheet of plastic will also be useful in case of rain or snow.
- Women are encouraged to bring along sanitary napkins, as shelters do not always have such items available for free.
- Bring along a pack of smokes, plus matches, to share with homeless people. Giving someone a smoke is a good way to start a conversation.
- Remember, you will soon be part of the homeless population if only for a short period of time. Don't expect any special privileges due to your status as a student, social worker, etc.

ACTIVITIES TO TAKE PART IN DURING YOUR HCP EXPERIENCE

- Talk with and listen to other homeless people
- Beg for money. This is an absolute requirement. Panhandle rich and poor alike. You are likely to get a better response from the so-called working poor. Split up, but keep your partner in sight. Panhandle for at least 2 hours. Re-group to see who was the most successful and what techniques worked best. Challenge participants are sometimes reluctant to do this. We're taught that nothing in life is for free, that it is better not to ask people for anything. If it reassures you, feel encouraged to donate that money to your guides or other homeless you encounter later.
- Wander the city streets with your blanket wrapped around you.
- Sleep outside. Do not expect to get much sleep as you are likely to be chased off by the police.
- Go into cafeterias, fast food restaurants and look for food scraps left on the tables. Don't ask for permission from the manager. Use a plastic bag. Eat the food and stay in the facility until the manager kicks you out.
- Go to restaurants and ask if you can sweep the sidewalk for a sandwich.
- Go into fancy restaurants, hotels, office buildings and ask if you could use the restroom.
- Eat 3 meals a day at the local soup kitchens or go to parks where groups distribute food. In most cities finding food is a relatively easy endeavor. So do not worry about eating food meant for homeless people as there is plenty of food to be found while on the streets. Even if you are not

hungry, go to the soup kitchens anyway. This will familiarize yourself with other homeless people and the different food programs in the city.

- Shelters/Missions/Day Centers--When talking to your fellow homeless people, you will find out that most shelters and missions are full to capacity and that many homeless people have an aversion to a social services system that either treats homeless adults like children or that all homeless people have some sort of pathology that needs fixing. And in the large shelters in big cities, homeless people are concerned about the theft that occurs inside of some shelters.
- As Challenge participants, you should not stay in shelters as you might be taking away a bed from someone who really needs it. We want you to sleep outside, regardless of the weather, with the unsheltered homeless.
- However, we encourage you to hang out in or in front of shelters, day centers or religious missions to get to know better your fellow homeless people.
- There is a minority of homeless organizations that have conditions for getting a meal or a bed for the night. Examples of such requirements are: getting counseling, taking life-skills classes, taking a breathalyzer test, paying a nightly fee, or attending a religious service. Find out which agencies have such requirements by either talking with other homeless people or checking out the agencies in your community.
- Find a highly visible place to sleep (e.g. park bench, heat grate, bus stop bench). Go to these places late at night to guarantee you are not taking away someone's favorite spot. If this somehow happens, give up your spot and move somewhere else. Have someone stay awake at all times. Do this in two-hour shifts.
- Go dumpster diving looking for food and recycling materials. You will learn from doing the Homeless Challenge of the "abundance from the streets." Watch out for needles. Use a stick instead of your hands. If you must use your hands, borrow a pair of gloves. A male Challenge participant once refused to pick up cardboard and plastic to sleep in or on atop of because these materials were filthy. As he recounted, "it was not his routine way of preparing for bed." After one night without either cardboard or plastic, he decided that cardboard and plastic (no matter how dirty) were necessary, and then he gathered them on his second night with determination and enthusiasm.
- Apply for work at fast food restaurants. Tell them you live in a well-known shelter or on the streets.

Tell them that you lack an address, but are willing to come back daily to find out if there are any job openings.

- Bring along a small notebook to write down some of your thoughts and reflections. Do this writing when you are in a secluded place away from other Challenge participants and homeless people.
- If you are doing a Challenge over a weekend, pick out an affluent downtown synagogue/church and go to the Saturday/Sunday morning worship service. Sit in one of the pews with your blanket wrapped around you.

THINGS TO ALWAYS AVOID

- **Don't ever let your partner out of your sight.**
- Don't argue with people (homeless and non-homeless alike).
- Don't get yourself arrested (e.g. panhandling, camping, loitering, etc.) Talk your way out of it. Blow your cover if necessary to avoid arrest.
- Stay out of the "crime areas" of any city. Hang out where only homeless people and tourists congregate.
- Don't use any drugs or alcohol.
- Don't bring any weapons or mace with you.
- Don't accept anyone's invitation to go back to their apartment or hotel room.
- Don't talk too much. Your "homeless attire" makes you invisible, but your voice will betray you. Listen. Don't ask too many questions. Don't be too friendly or jolly at first. Get your mood low and sort of sullen. Believe it or not, that's how to get a conversation going with somebody who feels different from you. The normal tendency when you are with another person is to be bright and cheerful, signaling how friendly you are, how neat you'd be to talk to! People's natural reaction to this manner is to clamp up as though you were a salesperson. But if you get your mood a little below theirs, they feel more comfortable about talking with you. If you talk low key, not all pumped up with cheer, many...will converse with you at a high level of sophistication.
- Don't bring a camera or a tape recorder. Let your reporter and photographer friends handle this.
- Don't bring a cell phone. Your guide and student group leader will have a cell phone for emergency

use only.

WHEN THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE IS OVER

- As you are likely to be worn out when the Challenge is over, set up a time with your fellow Challenge participants to meet several days later to share experiences and to reflect on the Challenge experience.
- Using your journal entries, write an article for your school or community newspaper.
- Talk about your experience with family, friends and classmates.
- Encourage others to take the Challenge.

How to Incorporate Fundraising for the Homelessness Cause

It is an honorable commitment to dedicate your time and energy to complete the challenge. Very often, you will find that your peers would like to support your efforts by making a donation to an organization working to combat homelessness. For example, in July 2014, Thomas Rebman, a middle school teacher in Orlando, Florida, lived homeless for thirty days with nothing but the clothes on his back, ID, a phone, and charger. This retired naval officer used the challenge as both a method to keep his students reading during the summer and as a fundraiser for the school system in which he works, Second Harvest Food Bank, and the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida. He says his actions may sound extreme, but that was the point. He raised over \$4,000.

We encourage participants to use the Homeless Challenge as a fundraiser for a local coalition/shelter and/or for NCH. We recommend that 60% of the proceeds raised go to a local program and 40% go to NCH. A portion of the fundraiser may be used to replace the honorarium owed to NCH. A fundraiser brings both monetary donations and increased awareness to the issue of homelessness in the United States.

Fundraising online is now easier than has ever been. Check out the following sites and start raising money early!

1. www.indiegogo.com
2. www.crowdrise.com
3. www.fundrazr.com

Homeless Challenge Reflections

Lessons Learned In Becoming Invisible

By Pete Danelski, DeSales University Class of 2015

Pete Danelski is a first-year student at DeSales University majoring in theater and studying acting. He was one of seven students who did the homeless challenge in Washington, DC the weekend of October 10–12, 2010. He can be reached at pd1826@desales.edu.

Following the suggestions of the organizers of the Homeless Challenge, I had gone for five days without a shower before I arrived in Washington. I also had a dull headache brought on by my caked layers of filth and stench. And I was already suffering from self-consciousness. This was all before the 48-hour Homeless Challenge even began. While my fellow students and I tried to make light of the situation, there was nervous tension about what would come.

The introduction we received when arriving at the National Coalition for the Homeless headquarters further intimidated me, not by anything the formerly homeless guides told us, but more by what they didn't tell us. We were provided only with a meeting time and place before we were paired up and relinquished to Washington, D.C.'s streets. Standing there on the corner of some strangely lettered and numbered intersection, an overwhelming powerlessness washed over me. I began to realize how little I really knew. Attending a Philadelphia public high school provided me with a basic knowledge of a standard city grid, but the nation's capital city layout all at once rendered me helpless. This apparent abandonment marked the beginning of my 48-hour journey into homelessness.

Already feeling detached, my partner and I headed toward the Georgetown area, in hopes of finding college students, to whom we could relate, at least in age. We also set out to try our hands at panhandling during this time. The two hours we spent asking around for change hurt in a way I never before felt. People ignored us when we asked them directly. One woman very literally ran indoors as we approached. The reactions I received from men, women, boys and girls of all ages, skin colors and ethnicities instilled in me a feeling of degradation I never knew could exist within a human being. Rejection and blatant rudeness from my own generation stung particularly hard. On any other day I could very well be flirting with these girls or joking around with the guys we encountered, but now not one fellow college student would acknowledge our existence. These were my peers, and their behaviors forced me to question and analyze my own. Being brushed off in this manner all at once left me feeling hurt and unworthy.

When a few generous souls finally allotted us some pocket change, I felt rich and grateful, as if I owed some lifelong debt.

By afternoon, fed up and finding the thought of another rejection unbearable, stopped outwardly asking for money. Instead, I set up a sign that said, "HOMELESS SINCE AUGUST 2009, PLEASE GIVE, ANYTHING HELPS," sat down and let others come to me. Although the looks of pity I received still stung, I kept my outward pleas from being shut down and ignored. At the time, this breakthrough felt like an extraordinary accomplishment. I salvaged some of my pride, however little.

By the evening, the day's relentless panhandling left us with an approximate sum of \$25. I could not wrap my head around this fortune. Finally we could provide for ourselves by purchasing our own food. Although prepared to spend our hard-earned cash, it took hours to find dinner, for no food court would let us in. We were not allowed to spend our own money, simply due to our looks. Finally finding a CVS, we bought a jar of peanut butter and crackers. We gorged ourselves. I doubt I will ever forget the appreciation and the enjoyment I received from that meal. (editor's note: Homeless Challenge participants are encouraged to donate any leftover panhandling change to other homeless people or to programs that help them.)

As night fell, we slept by a subway entrance, on top of the flattened cardboard we collected throughout the day. Our guides warned us to distance ourselves from any food in order to avoid waking up to rats crawling over us.

For breakfast, we traveled to a shelter. The shelter dining hall's similarities to that of my college cafeteria took me back. I heard the same arguments over sports, the same mocking banter. For the first time, I saw, under the hurt and agony of homelessness, playful, enjoyable people.

My second day contrasted greatly with the first day's emotional whirlwind. I spent it mostly in Franklin Square, a park covering roughly one city block and seemingly inhabited solely by the homeless. This is the point where the boredom finally, and quite harshly, set in. For hours, I watched non-homeless men and women pass by and through the square as if they could not see the colony of homeless surrounding them. As the day's hours dwindled, time inside the park stood still, and we remained out of sight to the world. The previous day's resentment, pain and insecurity, without question, remained inside me, but my lack of physical and mental movement overwhelmed any thoughts of action left I possessed, leaving me to accept my new societal role. My goal shifted exclusively to surviving while sacrificing as little of my remaining humanity as possible.

My journey in D.C. taught me what it means to be invisible, an experience that the majority of our nation will never understand. I came out of the challenge with no groundbreaking theories on homelessness and no key to ending this social epidemic. What my time in D.C. did provide me with is unfathomable gratitude for the blessings I receive on a daily basis and an earnest understanding of the weight placed on homeless men and women.

I must admit we all took part in an experiment while still having a safety net. If any of us got sick, we could very easily contact the coalition and arrange a pickup. In addition, for all 48 hours, somewhere deep in my soul, I know I remembered that outside the challenge's self-imposed circumstances, my life waited for me. That safety net is not real for anyone on the streets.

There were transcendent moments, too, when someone found the decency to look me in the eye. Between food trucks and shelter, my hunger became surmountable. Those who gave spare change humbled me, but what left me awestruck was the sheer power within a smile and glance flashed in passing by a stranger. If challenged to advise how to help a homeless man or woman you may encounter on the street, I would say to smile and ask about how their day is going so far. Human interaction is more valuable than any amount of money and holds the potential to bring the invisible into sight.

Homeless Challenge

By Philip Ruzycki, Davidson College, NC Class of 2008

Ruzycki took the Homeless Challenge in Washington, DC in Oct 06' and June 07'

The Homeless Challenge is not meant to bring participants to a full understanding of the homeless situation, but to offer experiences that may help to address the problem at hand. Having begun your experience you will feel yourself absorbed into the homeless culture of the DC area. With your duffel or trash bag containing all of your current material possessions slung on your back you will feel yourself inadvertently drop your shoulders and gaze towards the very ground on which you will be spending the next two nights. This first natural response to the way in which others perceive you will be your first hint that being homeless is not only a physical affliction but mental and emotional as well. Other experiences of panhandling, sleeping in plain view, and even just walking through a crowded intersection will only help to further this realization.

Through the program you are not only placed in a position to view the circumstances of others as you will be actually experiencing the hardships, humiliations, joys, and friendships firsthand. While participants will spend the day in small groups as to draw the least amount of unnecessary attention, homeless guides will be assigned for the evening. These guides all have very close relationships with the National Coalition for the Homeless and are more than willing to talk for hours with participants. Both times I have taken the Challenge I have had John Harrison as my guide. Reclined on beds of astroturf, concrete, and cardboard I have heard John recount the past four years of his life in vivid detail without hesitation. He is not ashamed of his situation and he has a very positive outlook on his future. His story lacks drugs or alcohol but includes unfortunate circumstances that I have realized are no different from things that could befall anyone's future. John's story is not the outlier.

Personally, the Challenge has offered countless new experiences, friendships, and perspectives. Most of the homeless individuals I have encountered while on a Challenge have been more than helpful and have insisted upon

sharing their stories and experiences. "Challenge participants" are readily apparent to the homeless community and most of them want to make the experience as eye-opening as possible. They know that the Homeless Challenge works to their advantage as it teaches those willing to learn how they can best help the problem.

Forty eight hours cannot begin to explain to anyone the complete experience of homelessness. However, the Homeless Challenge can bring the problems of homelessness to a very personal level through an otherwise impossible viewpoint of the growing problem of homelessness, societal treatment of these individuals, and the social services that are available to help them survive. The Challenge will hopefully leave participants with open eyes, open hearts, and a world of new experiences to enhance their ability to help.

HOMELESS CHALLENGE

TESS ALLMAN, CENTRAL MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY, MO CLASS OF 2009

Allman took the Homeless Challenge in Washington, DC in March 07'

10am-ish March 5, 2007:

"Been homeless almost 24 hours. Sick of it. Humbled by the kindness of some—rejected a lot. There's barely any place to just...be. Finally here in the library – warm and sitting down, but that took 2 hours of waiting and a metal detector. Want out of these clothes, my feet hurt, I want a shower and a bed..."

An hour later:

"The thing I want most right now is a nap. I don't think we can nap in here, though. I started to doze off, then some police officers came through doing their rounds. I love police, but NOT when I'm homeless! Last night we went to a park in the mall to sleep. We set up our cardboard on the grass, tried hard to get warm and cozy (though not successful at all), I played us some harmonica...and about 45 minutes later, there were bright headlights from a cop car shining on us. "Ev'ning, folks." Long story short, he ran us out of the park..."

...Kyle and I look good together as a homeless couple. People are more sympathetic to us...As hard as this 48-hour Challenge is, it is nothing because I know I have a place to stay at the hostel later, and then a home back in Kansas City."

I would definitely recommend the Challenge to others. You really get to know the core of yourself, and how much you can or can't handle. You're raw.

If I could give advice to other Challenge participants, it would be "Don't cross a really big bridge over a river. You'll end up in Virginia." As for serious advice, keep your cool. Be mellow. I really almost lost it after the cop kicked us out of the park, and it was not good for anyone. Stay calm, and be cool.

For more information about the Homeless Challenge program contact:

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