



HOMELESS . . .

FOR A WEEK

Chris Ballard during his week of homelessness in San Francisco

Chris Ballard

SETTING THE SCENE

When the clock struck seven, we stormed the shelter: men, women, and children, different shapes, sizes, and hues. Once inside, I found myself sitting next to an old Vietnam vet, draped in Nam fatigues he wore fifty years ago. At that moment, he represented everything right and wrong with America. His rolled-up sleeves revealed a right arm tattooed with army insignia and a left blistered with track marks. As he slumped in his seat, noticing my stare, he quickly crossed his arms, right over left, as if his pride was covering his shame. Like everyone else in the old St. Vincent De Paul homeless shelter that night, I too was homeless. The only difference was I was there by choice.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Seven years ago, at the age of twenty-two, I went homeless in San Francisco. I panhandled, slept on the streets and in the shelters, and wrote about the plight of those in the struggle in a journal I carried with me. While my stint does not make me an expert, my experience does tell a story.

I grew up in Wasco (Kern County), California. For many minorities from the region, poverty tends to make you or break you. Fortunately, my own circumstances didn't break me, and I was lucky enough to go to college and earn an undergraduate degree. After that, I became a community organizer and an elected planning commissioner

chair for the City of Wasco before entering law school at UC Hastings College of the Law.

As an organizer, I worked for a nonprofit organization called Faith in Action Kern County. We were a multicultural learning organization that invested in people and relationship building. We trained low-income folks how to organize their communities around a vision of safe neighborhoods and great schools. Just as we thought we were making progress, the foreclosure crisis crept up from behind and punched us in the gut.

At the height of the crisis, we found ourselves doing triage; we also found ourselves handing out medical packs to folks who had lost their homes. The problem was, I just couldn't fully relate to their struggle. Sure I grew up poor; sure I knew poverty and all the struggles associated with it. We even came close to foreclosure twice, but we were able to avoid it. And I had never been homeless.

So I decided to take a week long "vacation," packed a tattered backpack, bought some old beat-up clothes, and hopped on a train to San Francisco, dirty and unshaven, without money, food, and backup. As I reflect, telling my mother about this was the hardest part. It is not easy for a mother who spent her life trying to keep her son off of the streets to hear that her son wants to go voluntarily live on the streets.

WHY SAN FRANCISCO?

Well, why not? It is the city of dreams, a trendsetter, a titan of progress and innovation. As the saying goes, "where San Francisco goes, the nation follows." I wanted to get a taste of how San Franciscans treated their homeless population.

ON THE EXPERIENCE

The train ride over was bittersweet. I met a little girl who took a liking to me on this six-hour ride, especially odd because I am a six-foot, two-inch tall African American, and I looked pretty bummy at the time. But children tend to look past the superficial. Her parents, sitting across

from me, didn't seem to mind when she made her way into my backpack, pulled out my journal and pen, and began drawing me a picture. She called it her gift to me, a portrait—of me—on the train. After it came to a halt in Emeryville, we said our goodbyes, and I caught a bus to San Francisco.

DAY ONE: FIGURE PEERING OVER ME

Once I arrived, I headed straight to the old St. Vincent De Paul homeless shelter. Just like Chris Gardner wrote in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, getting into a shelter meant waiting actually to get inside and more waiting before getting a bed. Before I got a bed, a fight broke out between two big guys. I don't remember what it was about, but I saw one guy get body-slammed. Then someone yelled, "You fight, you're out," and the fellow who did the body-slaming was escorted out. That was the policy, no exceptions.

While waiting, I was captivated by the pace with which an addict, suffering from withdrawal, ate a baloney sandwich. Taking slow-motion bites, he took an hour. And there were much more upsetting things, like the little black boy sitting beside me in the shelter that night. He was alone and afraid. His shirt covered his face, and as I watched him, his body fiercely shivered from the cold.

When I finally got a bed on the fourth floor in a gymnasium type room, there were a hundred or so small beds, three feet apart, scattered throughout. I was stuffed in together with a wide range of folks: ex-cons, addicts, mentally unstable, child abusers, and runaways. I couldn't sleep; ghostlike whispers and inaudible murmurs kept me awake.

When I did doze off, I remember waking up in darkness to a figure quietly standing over me. At the time, I thought, what the hell is going on here? The figure didn't speak, or even move—it just stood there peering over me. After looking at it for a bit longer, I realized that it was the fellow who had been body-slammed earlier that day. Remembering the plight of the guy who did the body-slaming, I kept quiet, closed my eyes, and hoped nothing would

happen. Fortunately, when I opened them twenty minutes later, he was gone. I had survived day one.

DAY TWO: PANHANDLING

The next day I decided I would try my hand at panhandling. So I found a piece of cardboard, wrote the typical “anything helps” on it, and enthusiastically headed down to Market Street hoping folks would be sympathetic. That was not the case.

Standing on that corner was one of the most degrading experiences of my life. To this day, I cannot escape that callous feeling of being ignored. For hours on end, people of all shapes and colors, in wing-tipped shoes and sandals, just walked by me. It was as if I were invisible, like the errands of their days were more important than my plea, my call, or my smile—they just walked on by.

That feeling of being ignored is far worse than the most violent and subtle forms of racism. This idea of being non-existent cripples the human soul. The rare attention I did get came from a storeowner who threatened to call the police if I didn't get away from in front of his establishment. I quickly developed a hatred toward people who were unsympathetic to my struggle.

DAY THREE: A BANK IN WICHITA

The next day, a group of UC Hastings College of the Law students with Homeless Legal Services came to the shelter. They seemed honest, eager, and ready to help, but they looked odd and uncomfortable in the process. In their defense, they didn't look through me. So I figured I'd have a little fun. One of the students approached me with a smile. He announced himself as a law student and asked if I needed any help. “Well, I just robbed a bank down in Wichita, Kansas, and I'm wondering if I've got

Chris Ballard (second from right), with Nancy Stuart (right) and (from left) HAP interns David Antonio Hernandez and Kristina Rosales, and Gabriella Rodezno



any warrants out for my arrest,” I said with a straight face. Granted, this was a lie, and I’m sure they didn’t believe me because you rarely find successful bank robbers in homeless shelters, but I took pride in how quickly I was able to make it up. After they called my bluff, we shared a small laugh, and that was over. I wish I had more to add to this story but that was it.

DAY FOUR: THE SYSTEM FOR BREAKFAST

Oddly enough, my time in the shelter seemed to be what prison must be like. Aside from the orange jumpsuits, shanks, and armed guards, I see no difference. You are surrounded by folks who are down on their luck, some at the very lowest points of their lives. And because they sit next to you, their agony engulfs you. But, in spite of all that, the little bit of structure a shelter offers gives them balance.

The time routines and the daily procedures gave people a sense of order. Even waiting in line for breakfast served on elementary-school trays gave them something to look forward to. Yet life in the shelter can be too demanding, with too many rules and not enough compassion. People just want to be free, and a life away from the shelter provides some of that freedom.

DAY FIVE: THE STREETS

On day five I too wanted that freedom, so I spent the night on the streets. I found myself constantly moving throughout the night. Being African American was part of the reason I kept moving, since as soon as the sun went down, I quickly became a target for law enforcement. The color of my skin was a strike against me before I even had a chance to speak a single word. The cops quickly kicked me out of a park for sleeping on the grass; they even threatened to put me in jail if I came back. After that, I tried sleeping in an alley to avoid being spotted, but too many rodents were doing the same thing. Fortunately, I found a bit of rest on the bench of a bus stop.

DAY SIX: COMRADES

After spending my fifth night on the streets, I went back to the shelter the next day. When I arrived, the old army vet who sat next to me on my first day greeted me at the door. I was happy to see him, and he seemed happy to see me. At that moment, I smiled—and felt that I could do this for another week or so. That sense of camaraderie is a beautiful thing.

DAY SEVEN: BEFORE GOING HOME

After seven days, I’d had my fill. Over the course of the week, I had conducted a dozen interviews with homeless people. Some of them were mentally ill, while others suffered from PTSD and addiction. Surprisingly, some were homeless because they wanted to be. They found freedom in detachment from obligation. How we find this freedom is what makes us different, I guess. But for all of them, a shelter is a place of refuge. A place that will open its doors to you, no matter the trajectory of your life. Yet we cannot forget those who are homeless because they were dealt a bad hand like the working people who just didn’t make enough money to pay their rent, or the loving families who were blindsided by adjustable interest rates during the subprime lending crisis. But there is hope.

Today, San Francisco faces a housing crisis like no other. Not only is the lower class getting pushed out, so too is the middle class. Fortunately, our city is a titan of innovation, and undoubtedly, if we all strive together, we can learn that homelessness is part of the greater feeling that society marginalizes those folks, and that we, more advantaged, better educated, and with better mental health, can work to help those in our midst who need that help the most.

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