

There was a lot of apprehension felt when registering for this Service Learning project. The idea of meeting women who are homeless, confronting all the illness and hardship that they must endure every day was not easy for me. I was well aware that not dealing with such issues did not mean they would disappear, but I was unsure if I could handle the distress I might witness. At our first meeting I was advised the women did not like to be touched or have their possessions touched and there was a lot of PTSD, it was a little terrifying. Then came that ray of sunshine, when all I imagined was much worse than the reality. For the women I picture their reality does not look so bright, but there is a warmth that radiates from them. On my first morning a visit to the restroom brought me into contact with Ellen. The lights had gone out on her and she was a little distraught and needed help. She is so wonderful and unthreatening, the compassion I felt for her overwhelmed any fears I had and we travelled to the project room together. She introduced me to others on our way and by the time I was in the room, I already knew some of the women. From that first morning my learning experience with this project has been a delight.

Elliot Liebow covers the lives of homeless women living in shelters primarily during the years of 1984-88. In his book, "Tell Then Who I Am", he notes that support alone is not enough to stave off the despair and devastation of being homeless. For that the women have to look within - "to their native optimism, their sense of humor, their modest wants, and their faith in God" (Liebow, 1993, p. 16). By the time you become homeless all personal resources tend to be used up and these personal qualities appear to help the women "remain human in a unremittingly dehumanizing environment" (Liebow, 1993, p. 222). Elliot notes in his book that "the fear of negativism was strong and steady" (Liebow, 1993, p. 184). He does criticize the "Power of Positive Thinking" as being a little too popular, often enabling women to close their eyes to real-life difficulties. He sees their requirement for so little stemming from avoidance of high

expectations, and worried it "could lead to chronically low expectations, pessimism, and perpetual discontent" (Liebow, 1993, p. 183). From my own experience, and one Elliot talks about, there is an openness and willingness to talk about a Spiritual connection many of the women feel. Elliot notes religion had become central to a social life as it helped find a common ground and that "conversations with strangers often began with that subject as a way of feeling the other person out and perhaps starting a relationship" (Liebow, 1993, p. 171). Many of the women have turned to their faith to see them through, trusting all will be OK. Many take "one day at a time", which according to Elliot can lead to problems with forward planning. While I understand Elliot's concerns, the resource these women have found within themselves makes me believe they have found the treasure that has got buried underneath all our materialism.

Elliot mentions a lot in his book about the "powerlessness" of homeless women and along with this class I also took Liberal Arts II: Diversity, Power & Privilege which was a good compliment. "Sexism" has oppressed many of these women, the state of homelessness oppresses them, and there is a whole social system that keeps them oppressed and homeless. Approx 40 years ago mass homelessness was unheard of, now it has become the fabric of American culture, "a social class phenomenon". Women and families have become the "victims of the same system of free enterprise that has been so extraordinarily productive and generous to others" (Liebow, 1993, p. 233). Since the Reagan years neo-liberal policies have seen major system failures; a dramatic cut in federal funding, along with lack of decent paying jobs and affordable housing for poor people. Enquiring early on in the class as to how many of these women ended up homeless, the fact that many of them were there because of marriage breakup scared me. There was so much I found in common with these women and if my husband decided to leave me tomorrow, I realized their life could be mine. Elliot mentions in his book

"the importance of housing in the hierarchy of wants" (Liebow, 1993, p. 180). He says, even though there are mental and physical health problems that often go hand in hand with being homeless, a chicken and egg situation, there is "no necessary connection between these conditions and homelessness. Homeless people are homeless because they do not have a place to live" (Liebow, 1993, p. 224). The one thing that separates these women from me is they do not have a "home", often due to unfortunate medical or economic circumstances. It is also the thing that brings most solidarity between them, "the most powerful force for group cohesion and solidarity grew out of the realization that "we're all in this together," (Liebow, 1993, p. 210). This unfortunately also sets up a sense of the non-homeless world against them. If we are to end the oppression these women experience we need to see we are all connected to each other.

I have really enjoyed meeting the homeless women and getting to know them personally. As an artist who has done a lot of soul searching, meeting these women has been comforting and inspiring. It seems many of them are on similar journeys to mine and have come to realize what is important in life. Some of them are attractively "non-conformist", and many of them are wonderful artists who can see the beauty in the world even through their hardship. They are spiritually enlightening; their needs are basic, their wants minimal and their gratitude for so little overwhelmingly humbling. The project is structured very well. The wholesome breakfast gives the women nutrition, the check-in brings us all together into a community and then they have the choice of an art project or computer time, I very much enjoyed the craft projects. All the women appear to appreciate the food, relaxed atmosphere and space that Antioch offers and I have appreciated the opportunity to meet them and learn about their lives.