

There are Humans Behind the Homelessness

By: Tim Mercer

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My heart is heavy. “Vagrants’, ‘derelicts’, ‘filth’, and ‘vermin’” is what Austinites are calling individuals experiencing homelessness, according to the Statesman’s analysis of communications sent to Gov. Gregg Abbott in support of his recent actions to address homelessness. These human beings who are referred to as “vermin” are my patients. Myself and others who work in this field choose our words very carefully when we say “individuals experiencing homelessness.”

Because “homeless” does not define them, and is not their identity. And it certainly does not reduce them to the status of dirt or insects. They are human beings first and always. Human beings going through an experience of not having a home, something awful and tragic and traumatic. Human beings who have human stories and connections. Let me tell you a few.

Doug never misses his middle school son’s football games. Without fail, every week he attends and cheers him on in the stands. After the game, when other families load up their cars and drive home, Doug gives his son a hug, waves goodbye to him and his mother, and then he gets on the

bus to head back downtown to stay at the ARCH. He wishes it could be different. But he still beams with pride. His son's team won.

Ruth is 80 and stooped and everything you could imagine a sweet, little old lady to be. She has a master's degree and worked her entire life as a teacher. After retirement, with little savings, she moved in with her son. He abused her. Strong-willed, she gathered her things and left, finding herself homeless. She moved into the Salvation Army shelter downtown and then after a few months, she was able to obtain assistance to get into a senior living center.

But now years later, she still comes to our clinic at the ARCH for her medical care. And the "derelicts" on the corner outside, with gentlemanly grace, rush to help her with her bag and extend an arm to help walk her up the steps to the door.

John worked his entire life as a carpenter, building many of the homes we live in and the porches we sit on, right here in Austin. Then one night, he was assaulted, suffering a broken arm and a severed nerve. It was his dominant arm, and he could never swing a hammer or saw a board again. No income, no rent, no home. He spiraled into deep depression and alcoholism and has been homeless ever since. Doubly ironic and painful, as he lost the very thing he used to build.

Mike served his country with honor in the military, but witnessed more trauma than he could bear. Mary fled an abusive husband. Carl was a chef, and can talk barbecue with you for hours. Veronica sat on a roof for 6 days during Hurricane Katrina, losing everything. Victor did the same during Hurricane Harvey. Betty has read the better part of the historical non-fiction section at the library. Brian was abandoned as a child and never did learn to read, but he can play the guitar and croon to folk and blues with the best of any Austin musician.

They all came from different places for different reasons. And they all came via a series of human stories, full of complexity and struggle, good choices and bad, stacked odds and missed opportunities. But they now share a common highway for a roof and a common set of streets they call home.

I could go on and on, because these are my patients and these are the very human stories I hear day after day. And they are true. As a doctor, I have the unbelievably sacred privilege of hearing these stories and sometimes the best I can do, better than any medicine or cure I can offer, is just to sit in solidarity with them. And perhaps share them, hoping you, like me, can recognize their humanness, and the human behind them.

While we consider how to end homelessness, let us have a healthy debate about public policy and budget priorities and program effectiveness. But let's start with recognizing we're talking about human beings with hopes and dreams, demons and fears, friends and children, hobbies and professions, just like you and I.

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