

The emotional roller coaster begins, ends and begins again

One of the biggest obstacles moving forward is getting over my past. One year I went to the Washington State Conference on homelessness. I was asked to go to a workshop on homeless health care. I had already signed up for another workshop, but a woman at the conference insisted that this was a very interesting one. "It was a last minute entry," she said.

When I got to the workshop I looked around. There must have been about 40 people in the room. There were health care providers, homeless service providers, homeless supporters, but no homeless people — only me. I asked the woman why I was the only homeless person there. She said she had been trying to get other homeless people to join.

The workshop started and two doctors introduced themselves. Through a PowerPoint presentation of photos, they then gave a brief description of their area, telling us there were several hospitals close to each other, as well as a nearby park.

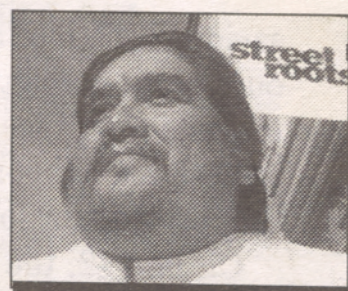
The doctors noticed a problem in that most homeless people never came to the hospital until a cut or spider bite was badly infected, or until they were really, really sick. The doctors were worried and concerned about the homeless, so they got together and discussed what they could do.

Their answer was to seek out the homeless and do a quick assessment of people on the streets. If the person needed hospital care, they referred them to a hospital. If the doctors could take care of the ailments on the spot, they would.

The doctors even filled prescriptions for some of the homeless. Sometimes they misdiagnosed an infection and sent people to the hospital when they didn't need to. To prevent that from happening, the doctors took pictures of the infected area and sent it to the hospital. A specialist would look at it, then send a message back if that person should come in for treatment.

This worked really well, and the doctors were really proud of what they were doing. They wanted to do more, so they pooled money together and got a grant. The doctors got places to stay for the most vulnerable people.

The next picture the doctors showed in their presentation was some of the



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Leo Rhodes is a street activist and homeless advocate. He is also a vendor and board member with Street Roots, and a regular contributor to the newspaper.

homeless people they had helped get inside. Then we saw some of their living rooms and bedrooms. As we were looking at these pictures the doctors explained they had told the individuals they could get them anything they needed for their kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom.

The doctor came across a slide of a man sitting by a window (I'll call him Mr. Smith since I can't remember his name)

The doctor said Mr. Smith sits by this window all the time and doesn't say a word. Always staring out the window. "We can't figure out why he does this. Does anybody know why he does this?" I looked around and some people were shaking their heads, others were shrugging their shoulders. Nobody answered.

The next photo was Mr. Smith's living room. It was empty. The doctor said, "We promised Mr. Smith we could get him anything he needed. Yet his room is still empty. Does anybody know why?" Again, nobody answered.

Next came a photo of Mr. Smith's bedroom. All that was there were some nicely placed blankets and a makeshift pillow. The doctor told us again that they had told Mr. Smith he could have anything he wanted, a bed, a dresser, a nightstand, a lamp. But he chose to sleep like this. Again the doctor asked if anybody knew why. Nobody answered, so the doctor went to the next picture, disappointed.

I quickly raised my hand. The doctor turned around surprised to see my hand up. "Yes?" he asked. I asked him to return to the first picture of Mr. Smith staring out the window.

"He's probably thinking about all his friends out on the streets," I said. "He's thinking about the good times and bad times, what they would be doing at that time. He probably misses them. He might

even feel guilty that he's inside and his friends are still outside. He might even be contemplating going back out to them."

The doctor then went to the living room picture. "He doesn't want any furniture," I said. "Because, like I said before, he might be thinking of going back outside and doesn't want you guys to spend any money on him. You might get mad if you spend money on him and he leaves, and then you won't do it for the next homeless person." People looked at me in disbelief.

"No, really," I said. "I have friends that refuse to go into treatment. The reason they refused is because they said they didn't want to waste taxpayer money. There's not enough housing or shelter, and they figured they would end up back on the streets doing the same thing."

We looked at the last picture of Mr. Smith's bedroom. "This might sound funny," I said. "But some homeless people are scared of beds." Everybody started laughing. "No really," I told the room. "I'm scared of beds. Why are we scared? 'Cause we fall off of them. We're not really used to sleeping on them and we fall off. I've fallen off. Some of my friends have even broken their arms."

The doctor showed a few more pictures, which was followed by a quick question and answer period. When the workshop was over, the doctor came to me. We talked a little more and then exchanged e-mails. The doctor was very excited about my input. Somebody tapped the doctor on the shoulder. It was Bill Block, the director of the Committee to End Homelessness in King County. I heard Bill say, "Those were cute stories Leo told, but here's the real story." He started quoting statistics, starting

with the mentally ill and homeless. I just shook my head and walked away. I tried to get in touch with the doctor a few times. But he never answered my emails.

Now I am inside. I have my own place. Just like most homeless people, I'm having my problems.

When I first announced that I was getting a place, everyone was happy for me. They would ask me how I felt; I would just look at them, sometimes with a sad look on my face. Then I started getting angry and went into a shell. The reason for this anger was people kept telling me how happy I should be. How I should be thinking about myself and how everybody loved me. I talked to formerly homeless people, and they told me how happy they were to get inside. I would listen to them talk about how hard it was for them on the streets.

When they finished I would tell them I was a homeless advocate. So it wasn't just about me, it was about my hundreds, maybe thousands of homeless friends. I mean, I shared the good times and bad times, their accomplishments, their losses, and a safe, secure place. We shared a bond. We were family. I took these stories to the decision makers only to be trumped by statistics. When I got inside my heart was empty. There was a big black hole.

The easiest thing for me to do would be to give up, forget the past and move on thinking only of myself. But I've been through too much. Hell, I've seen too many miracles. I've watched what others said, "couldn't be done" happen.

Like I tell my friends, there are no words to express the accomplishments of healing among the less fortunate.

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Fallen Off the Edge

A new book by Art Garcia

"Fallen Off the Edge" is a chronicle of one man's experiences after returning from the Vietnam War. Told through the eyes of Street Roots columnist Art Garcia, this book celebrates the major victories born from a series of questionable choices. Art's jocular storytelling takes the reader along with him in and out of the California prison system over the course of 10 years until he found the strength and courage to pull himself up from the fall.

The book is available online at www.blurb.com under searchword Art Garcia.

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