

Finding life and goodness in the shadow of death on the streets

BY GRACE BADIK

CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

On the Monday before Easter, a young woman walked through our door. She was on the verge of tears. Visibly falling apart in front of me, she asked for resources. She had slept on the streets the past few nights because the women's shelter was full. The street, a doorway, outside — these were her only options. I talked with her for about 20 minutes trying to direct her to different resources. I offered her whatever supplies we had—socks, toothbrush and toothpaste, a hygiene kit. Small comforts for a desperate situation. She left the office with a sense of direction and smile on her face.

Two days later, a vendor walked through the door with tears gathering. Realizing something's up, I asked what's going on. "My friend overdosed last night." I asked for a description of her: young, blond hair, fiery, blue eyes. Fits the description of the young woman who came through the door days

earlier. He continues grieving and lamenting her death. "Why couldn't God take some asshole? Why did God take her?"

In those moments, I went through a wave of emotions — confusion, anger, sadness. Confusion at what I had heard and the interaction I had days earlier. Anger at the lack of resources and services, at a broken system, at a society where we allow people to sleep outside. Even some anger at myself for not doing more. And finally sadness for a life lost to drugs and her suffering and the suffering of all those affected by her death.

Her death, unfortunately, is one of many that will happen on the streets. She was not this vendor's first friend lost to an overdose nor will be his last. It would be easy to blame her for her death. Her using could be seen as suicidal; a death sentence just waiting to happen. But blaming her is too easy, and I will not judge for the way she chose to cope with the trauma of living on the streets.

Homelessness is brutal. I've seen it wear people down, break their spirits and minds.

When the young woman walked through the door on that Monday, she was not experiencing her first nervous breakdown. When a guy came in off the street on a Tuesday, desperate to find relief from the rainstorm and resources for his girlfriend whom he left at their camp to go find food, he too was on the verge of collapse. He was frustrated at being sent to this place and then that place. We did what we could for him and his partner. Yet, it still didn't seem like much or nearly enough.

On April 1, at least 99 names were read in remembrance at the annual memorial service for those who have died on the streets with, I'm sure, many other names added. I hope that someone mentioned the young woman's name that day.

I witness the cycle of life, death and resurrection almost daily. Backpacks as heavy and burdensome as crosses. Each hit or drink, each night slept in a doorway like nails in the cross. Literal and metaphorical deaths constantly occurring. It's easy to only stop there in reflection, taking the

analogy no further than the experience of Good Friday. Yet, this week is not only about death, it is about life and resurrection. I see that too. As my supervisor has said, miracles happen. Resurrection happens. Each day clean and sober, the helping hand, the kind word, the spaces to rest and eat, to find help and resources — all moments of resurrection and life.

We would not have resurrection without death and vice versa. We would not know life and goodness without suffering and death. I wish I could have offered more help and comfort to the young woman who walked through our door. I wish I could have gotten her inside somewhere for a night or two. The vendor is right; her death is not fair. She did not deserve to die that way. But, I take some comfort in knowing her suffering has ended. And it only makes me want to work harder so that more people experiencing homelessness can experience the new sense of life found when they finally get inside.

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April 29th, 2015
5:30 - 7:00

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Dancing to the beat of a different drummer

By Leo Rhodes

My words are strong and encouraging
My words have changed minds
My words have saved lives
My words have educated many
My words have been mocked
My words are said to be lies
Most people don't believe my words
Most people don't understand my words
It's a rough road I chose
With its ups, downs, twists, and turns
I call it my "wild roller coaster ride of Life"
Many have tried what I have done
Most have failed
It's not easy doing what I do
I'm always on the brink of insanity
When the dust settles
And my words and others
Have come to light
There are no words to express our feelings
I dance to the beat of a different drummer



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