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his then Fremont office, he started this page. Now it's grown into a full-time nonprofit called Facing Homelessness, which has a $150,000 budget and manages a number of projects aimed at connecting housed people with homeless people, creating cross-class relationships.

The Homeless in Seattle page is still running, but Hohlbein and his staff now host conversations on homelessness at coffee shops; the Feel Good Project, which provides haircuts and massages to people living outside; and "Street Heart," a portrait project in which artists paint pictures based on Hohlbein's photography. The art is displayed outdoors and then auctioned to raise money for Facing Homelessness.

Around the country, the organization has spawned similar programs and matching Facebook pages: Homeless in Sacramento, Homeless in Boulder and Homeless in Dallas, to name a few. They all bear the same Facing Homelessness catchphrase that is at the heart of Hohlbein's work: Just say hello.

Aaron Burkhalter: *How did Facing Homelessness begin?*

Rex Holbein: I'm an architect, and I moved my office to Fremont. And when I did, I was suddenly getting to know a lot of people that were living in Fremont that were specifically down on the bench below my office on the canal. Two things happened to me that really got me to start a Facebook site called Homeless in Seattle: The people I was meeting were in contrast to the negative stereotype that I had learned growing up, and so it was really challenging my view of what homelessness was because it wasn't matching the people that I was meeting, the character of those people.

I would go home to my wife and say, "Wow, I feel like I'm meeting people from different planets, to be honest, everything they say, I'm hanging on every word because it's really also interesting to me." But these were conversations with people who had nothing to their name and then, maybe two hours later, I would be in my office having conversations with clients who were spending millions of dollars on a house.

And those two very separate worlds also created some conflict within me about what is this issue of homelessness. And specifically, what triggered the change for me was that I met an individual by the name of Chiaka, and he was sleeping out in front of my office one morning. Because of his beauty and his compelling quality of person, I offered for him to be able to sleep and store his art supplies in my shed that was outside of my office.

The first night that he slept in the shed, that next day, I came to my office, there was no sign of him in the shed so I just went to work. About noon, he comes out and knocks on my door and says, "Hey Rex, I want you to come outside." And he has this [painting] taped up against the building and he goes, "I want to give this to you for letting me stay last night inside." And that really was the first point that I realized that he's this really incredible artist, and I started a Facebook page for him just showing his art.

His family in Pittsburgh found him and contacted me on the site and said, "Oh my God, Chiaka. We love you. Please come home." I read this to Chiaka when he came in that morning, and he was bawling and says, "I have to go home." His sister bought him a plane ticket and in the morning, I took him to the airport, and it was coming home from the airport that I realized that I needed to start another Facebook site called "Homeless in Seattle." I wanted to do the same thing for other people that happened for Chiaka. A community formed and people started asking, "What can I do to help?" "Can I donate something?" "Does that person need a sleeping bag?" It was that response from the community that really pushed me forward.

A.B.: *What interests me about it is that connection you made with Chiaka and with his family. And you made all these other connections with people and between people in a variety of different ways through the Facebook page. Can you tell me what stands out for you from that experience?*

R.H.: I think the profound stories are the ones where something is shared on the site that connects with a person in a home. It can be something as simple as when Garland quit drinking. I asked him, "What would you like most," and he said, "I haven't played my guitar for 20 years, I used to be pretty good at it." And a guy in Bellevue said, "I can get him a guitar and went and bought it." Then his friend works at the guitar tuning place that does Pearl Jam's equipment and big-end stuff, and they reworked it and then we went to Swedish Hospital where Garland had just had his big toe amputated. A lot of people on the street have foot problems. [We] gave him this guitar and these two people bonded like no other. They suddenly were comparing the music that they both listened to that was the same, they had favorite bands that they both were nuts about. Stories like that basically created within me this idea that we are not going to end homelessness unless all of the community gets involved.

A.B.: *A lot of this boils down to that catch phrase that you have, "Just say hello." Could you tell me a little bit more about that?*

R.H.: It has two sides to it. So the first side is that most people that are living on the street feel invisible. And you can imagine it yourself, if you just try to visualize one week of everybody turning away from you, nobody's saying, "Hey, good to you see you, buddy." You go to a park and you sit down and the three people that are already there on the bench get up and move away from you. Or on the bus, nobody sits down next to you, in fact, everybody else has found a seat and the rest of the people are standing and you have a seat next to you open. Imagine that for one week and then if you, obviously, can imagine that week turning into a month and then to years, you can see how people that are homeless do feel invisible. They feel exiled from our community and the problem with that, you may have heard me describe this as a Plexiglas barrier. That's something that Darwin [friend of Facing Homelessness] had told me a while back that it may appear that the homeless are mingling with everyone else outside. But, he said, in fact, you're separated out by this large Plexiglas divider and that the only people that you are able to talk with are those who are also on that side of the Plexiglas living non-normal lives. So that when someone comes through that Plexiglas and offers some normalcy, it's a really big deal.

And the reason it's a big deal is because if you feel invisible on many fronts, but just on the self-esteem front, if nobody wants to pay attention to you and validate you, I can't imagine how one's self-esteem can hold up. And if you don't have a good feeling of self-esteem, you are really handicapped in trying to navigate this complex system of services that are provided for you to help you get out of homelessness. So being able to go in knowing that people love you and see you has a profound effect on the success of people navigating the available systems, and that's borne out a little bit by the statistics that say the longer you are in homelessness, the more difficult it is to get out. That's why it's critical that the minute someone slips into homelessness to quickly get them back into housing, get them the services needed before their self-esteem is absolutely destroyed, quite honestly. The reason "Just say hello" is so important is that it's validating that that person is there.

The people I was meeting were in contrast to the negative stereotype that I had learned growing up, and so it was really challenging my view of what homelessness was because it wasn't matching the people that I was meeting — the character of those people.

On the flip side of it is that all the people living in homes have made a practice of walking past people and the bottom line is that this is a complex issue. So you're running to a meeting and you have 10 minutes to get to your meeting and there's someone there homeless, suffering, and your brain's scanning the situation and you're saying to yourself, "Criminy, what can I do, God, I can't do anything, I've got 10 minutes to get to my meeting and this is such a big issue, I'm not gonna do anything."

And that plays over and over and over again to the point that we are all now conditioned to just walk past people that are suffering, which is kind of a crazy, ludicrous thought, right? But we've made it normal, so "Just say hello" provides an answer to addressing the issue. It says, "I don't have to fix this person, I don't have to do anything at this point in time, but I do need to show dignity, I do need to show connection, respect and awareness that you are suffering."

So by saying "hello," you're saying, "I see you, I can't do anything and I'm sorry, man," 'cause you can hear it in the way I said hello. And this is the little secret part to it and that is: If you walk past that same person 10 times on the way to work and you say hello, somewhere in that 10 times you are gonna say, "What's your name?" And then it's John, and then it's, "Hey, John, how you doing today?"

And then maybe two weeks down the road, you're walking past and you've only finished half your lunch and it's like, "You know, I didn't finish my lunch, do you want half my lunch?"

You're off to the races. You started it and it may never go any further than that, or you may have found your best friend for life. So you don't know until you say hello.

A.B.: *Now that you have Facing Homelessness, you have the nonprofit, what is the scope of your work beyond what was happening with the Homeless in Seattle Facebook page?*

R.H.: What the Facebook page was doing was messaging as a means to overturn the negative stereotype. It was doing it through images and through storytelling. Basically, the nonprofit was set up to facilitate this idea that we need to get everyone involved. And so what we really decided is that we want to empower people. We don't want to be a nonprofit that is doing the work projects of setting up ways to fix this issue. We're saying we want to just message, we want to keep showing beauty, we want to keep telling stories. When people come to us - which happens all the time - I want to volunteer, how can I get involved, we ask them two things: What is it about this issue, really deep down, about this issue that matters to you, that got you here, that got you in your car or made you pick up your phone and call us? Try to tell us what that is. And the other is: What are you really good at, what's your talent, are you a writer, are you a photographer, are you really good at sewing, it doesn't matter, it could be anything. Then we want to see if we can cross those two and find your project, your place in this issue of homelessness right at that intersection.

A.B.: *Art seems to be central to so much of what you do; why is art such an important part of all this?*

R.H.: So, the very first thought for launching Homeless in Seattle was to overturn the negative stereotype and if you took 100 people off the street that were living in homes, what would you say the negative stereotype is? It would vary from person to person but predominantly they would all be negative thoughts: criminal record, taking advantage of the system, lazy, dirty, scary, you could go down the list, we could all fill that in pretty easily. And so we decided that if we wanted everyone to get involved, they're not gonna get involved if they hold that thought in their head and so we need to replace it. And so the idea was to replace the negative with beauty. We have basically also termed it in a way, you know, "rebranding homelessness."

And why art then? Because art is really good at putting beauty in the world and [artists'] talent is to see that beauty that we miss, I think. The artist's role in this world is to show us the world in a way that we're not seeing it to help move us forward. And often that's a message of some sort and it can be beauty through darkness or beauty through light, but it's still seeing beauty in that of what it is. And so the projects are important that we get involved in, they're important that they involve art. That's not to say that we're not going to support projects that we can't find the art in it, but that's what we're seeking out.

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