

# Homelessness isn't normal

Standing in line waiting for dinner after a long day, a day after returning from vacation, I checked my email. It was a hospital social worker. Simon was in the emergency room again. The fourth time this week.

It was at least the seventh time Simon had been admitted to the emergency room in the past six weeks after having a heart attack on the streets.

The list was long. Possible stroke. Severe seizures related to alcohol withdrawal. Head trauma. Now, Simon was hardly responsive, laying in the E.R. with what they were calling altered mental status.

Simon, whose real name I'm not using for this story,

has a special place in my heart.

After reading the email, I considered jumping in a cab and heading to the hospital. I had visited him on multiple occasions at the emergency room, like I do with many vendors. I've sat with him, holding his hand. Trying to make sense of what was going on and what we could do to help. I have debated with nurses and doctors on his behalf, requesting that he remain in the hospital. I had pleaded with them to refer Simon into a housing program for outgoing patients. There were no beds available. Street Roots has provided Simon with money for a hotel when the funds allowed.

Staring at my dinner that night, after spending a week in the wilderness and coming back to work, I realized in that moment just how traumatized I had become from the years of working on the streets. The despair. The suffering. The survival. The death. The endless stories, one after another, came rushing into my mind. There they stood, like ghosts, seeking refuge in a world gone wrong, an illogical world. It hit me like a ton of bricks.

Regardless of whether you're someone experience homelessness, a police officer, an E.R. nurse or a social worker, you try to never let yourself get trapped by the trauma, by these thoughts. You dust it off. You bury it. You let it go. You move on. You seek self-care where you can find it. You cry. You hope for the best and work your ass off. You try to be smart about the work

that's in front of you. You try to be present. You try to be strategic.

Of course, very rarely, does anyone actually verbalize these kinds of thoughts in a public manner. As the executive director of Street Roots and community leader, I'm not allowed to appear vulnerable. But it's exactly what I was, vulnerable.

I chose not to go to the E.R. that night to see Simon, but Simon's story and, more importantly, his rapidly declining health and lack of housing continues to gnaw at me.

Simon has been homeless for more than a decade. His life has been a living hell. Drinking most nights to chase away whatever demons had led him to the streets—Simon was a chronic alcoholic. He was in his 50s, but starting to look as though he was 70. Simon needed both housing and a supportive recovery network. Unfortunately, Simon's insurance had lapsed. Finding a recovery program with no insurance is almost impossible. There is still no housing immediately available.

The reality is that beyond the efforts of the dedicated handful of homeless outreach workers, a couple of staff at Street Roots and a hospital social worker—Simon didn't have a chance in hell in making it much longer.

"How was this story going to end," I think to myself.

Would Simon end up like so many others who had died long before their time? Would he eventually recover, only to be a shell of himself and we would find him housing? Would the system find time and resources to prioritize Simon, among the thousands of people in dire situations? I sure hope so.

Simon story isn't an isolated incident. The lack of housing and skyrocketing rents has created a perfect storm. The public has grown angry and intolerant in some cases, staging protests against the homeless. Politicians are scrambling and frustrated. The media ponders on a daily basis about the right way to cover the issue. The landscape seems to be changing by the day.

One thing remains constant through it all. Homelessness is not normal. It's not normal for you. It's not normal for me. It's not normal for the millions of Americans seeking a safe place to call home. Simon's story simply isn't normal.

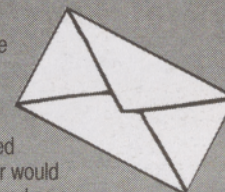
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## DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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