



Ken McNickle

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Survival instincts

After drawing the spotlight on the TV show "Survivor," Ken McNickle returned home to help break barriers between the housed and the homeless

BY SARAH HARVEY
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A popular character on the TV show "Survivor: Millennials vs. Gen X," Ken McNickle is also the founder of Humane Kind Project in Denver. For the past six months the nonprofit has been breaking down barriers between homeless and non-homeless residents. He told Street Roots' sister paper Denver Voice his hopes for this Christmas and beyond. "Make compassion a habit," he said, "not a holiday."

Sarah Harvey: What inspired you to create the Humane Kind Project?

Ken McNickle: When I lived in Hawaii, one of the most beautiful things about the culture was that everyone treats everyone like family. They refer, literally, in speech to everyone as auntie, uncle or cousin, whether you're actually blood related or not. There's this constant feeling of belonging and family and support.

When I moved back to the mainland after almost six years there, I was really amazed at how many people seemed to have no support. I realized that we don't have that family connection, we don't have that desire to open ourselves to strangers, and it's a cultural thing. It's a cultural shift that's been getting worse and worse.

I realized that (people on the streets) more than anything needed support, to be seen, to be acknowledged – a human being worthy of conversation, friendship, love, connection, all of that.

S.H.: Had you worked with people experiencing homelessness before?

K.M.: No. I've spent a good deal of my adolescence and adult years working with nonprofits of various sorts, but never specifically with the homeless. I was actually working at a restaurant in Denver and riding along the Cherry Creek bike path almost every night and was constantly seeing the homeless underneath the bridges. I usually

had food in my backpack from the restaurant. They were in worse shape than me so I'd end up giving them my food.

Then I started taking every scrap of food I could get from the restaurant every night. I'd end up with an entire backpack or crate on the back of my bike, and I started handing it out.

From there a couple guys got pretty familiar with me. One night one of them was like, "Hey man, I love food, but I could really use a jacket, can you help me out?" So I went to Goodwill and got a jacket for him. Then a couple other people started asking me for things.

The people at Goodwill noticed I (kept) coming in and one of the managers actually asked me what I was doing. When she went to ring me up, she rang up a number (price) that was much less than what it should have been. She was like, "I appreciate what you're doing. It's not much, but I hope it can help out." That was the beginning of the relationship I developed with Goodwill.

Since then, it went from dropping off a couple to-go boxes of food and a case full of stocking caps to a weekly event where for three or four hours we give away dozens of jackets and shoes and hats and clothes. We bring music, we bring down games, chessboards, Jenga, all kinds of stuff. And we create a hangout.

The whole concept behind the block party is feed the belly, feed the soul. We treat them as friends, which I really, truly feel like they are all friends of mine.

S.H.: What days do you have the block parties?

K.M.: It's every Saturday morning. The energy and atmosphere is a little bit lighter, you get some guys at the beginning of the day who are a little optimistic and, what's better than a couple of really good LaMar's donuts and a cup of Starbucks coffee to start your day?

One of the things beneficial about that is some of the groups come out and do these big, grand events once or twice a year. It's great – but the whole premise of what we're doing is connecting the community through compassion, breaking down those social barriers.

So by showing up every single week, every Saturday morning, we feel like it's been really impactful. The level of trust and the level of connection and type of friendship we've been able to develop have been really profound because they don't see us once every six months, they see us every week.

S.H.: If someone wants to volunteer, should they just show up?

K.M.: Absolutely. Just show up, every Saturday morning you know where to find us. Rain or shine, doesn't matter, we're there every time. If you want to come connect with us, I also make it very clear that it's not about you and your friends coming down to take a couple selfies. I've had fans come down and want to talk and engage with me, and I tell them it's not the time. The purpose of being down here as volunteers is not to hang out with one another and just be present, it's to engage and connect. It's about connecting with these people and really offering (your) ears and hearts and time.

S.H.: So that engagement and connection,

is that mostly happening in the form of conversations?

K.M.: Yeah, definitely. You feed someone's soul and that lingers much, much longer than a sandwich. If you can do both, if you can feed the belly with a sandwich and feed the soul by truly listening to someone and being present with them and making them feel as though their feelings or thoughts are validated and that they are seen as a human being, that carries with them, that sticks.

S.H.: How do both the volunteers and the people you serve react afterward?

K.M.: One of my friends came down when we were first doing this. He grew up in a very conservative family, he came from wealthy schools, wealthy family, wealthy neighborhood – not really familiar with the homeless, so all he had was a number of assumptions and judgements.

Finally he comes down and afterwards I go up to him just to kind of get an idea of how he was feeling, what was going on, and he was in tears. He's choked up. I'm asking him how he's doing and he's like, "I will never see a homeless person the same again."

He said, "I've done soup kitchens before, I've gone with my church and given food to the homeless, but this method, this way, it's not me behind a table putting a spoon full of soup in someone's bowl and they move on, you don't have a second or two seconds of interaction and they're gone. I sat and talked to someone for half an hour and they poured their heart out to me."

S.H.: Does Humane Kind have any special projects or events coming up?

K.M.: We've got an event coming up in February, which is our Valentine's Day event. It's our carnation day. Last year we had 500 single-stem carnations with our cards attached to them and the men actually went out with those on Valentine's Day and handed out the flowers for us all throughout downtown Denver. This year we're hoping to get 2,500-5,000 flowers to really amp it up.

One of the most beautiful interactions I saw was a gentleman who walked up to a woman to give her a flower, and her first assumption was, OK, here comes a homeless man, he's got a handful of flowers, it's Valentine's Day, he's probably trying to sell me something.

Then he explains what the organization is and why we're doing what we're doing. And then the boundaries between them, you could just see them slowly break down and disappear and ten minutes later she's talking to him. A single flower was the catalyst.

S.H.: So that breaking down of barriers goes both ways?

K.M.: Exactly. Just like breaking down barriers between my volunteers and the homeless people we're working with, we're breaking down barriers on both sides. We're all humans, we all deserve respect, we all deserve love, and we all deserve to be seen.

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