

Streetwise advice for the novice

Ryan Dowd's 'The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness' offers advice to workers whose job puts them in contact with people experiencing homelessness

BY TOPAZ
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In his book, "The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness," Ryan Dowd provides insight and practical tools for anyone (but especially librarians) who encounter people experiencing homelessness. The levity and clarity of Dowd's writing provides a functional wisdom, which he refers to as the "tools" he uses at Hesed House, the second-largest shelter in Illinois. Dowd began there as a 13-year-old and now serves as executive director.



"The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness" by Ryan Dowd

These balms or alms for the mind are a vast collection of reference materials, though with much cooler names. Praying Ninja, in which you keep your palms together in front of you and use them both to point and gesture, demonstrating an openness and showing you are not threatened while still being able to defend yourself if necessary. Jane's Addiction (not the band), in which visualizing that you are talking to a person trapped in a body hooked on a substance allows you to express empathy more easily than in some situations. There is also The Oprah, The Barack Obama and The Marijuana Plant tool, which it seems a lot of people in Washington use daily.

The 'Psy' alms (the Greek word for "mind"), or psalms, are perhaps not as poetic as the ones belonging to the desert wanderers of the Judeo-Christian tradition, yet the compassion, clarity and wisdom found within demonstrate the calming effect that empathy-guided interactions have on a stressed and emotionally drained patron of the library.

Topaz: What in your experience do librarians not understand about homelessness?

Ryan Dowd: It's less what librarians don't understand and more what people who have lived a middle-class, suburban, semi-privileged life don't understand, which librarians are no better or no worse than anybody else. In our country we do such a great job of what I call "economic apartheid," which is keeping poor people in

certain areas, having middle-class people have their run of the land and having rich people behind walls.

There just aren't many places where people of different socioeconomic backgrounds meet and physically interact. And that's kind of what makes libraries so fascinating and so honestly volatile is that public libraries are one of the last places in our country where all the socioeconomic groups meet in the same building. They're super critical to the future of our democracy.

T.: Your book mentions Oz. It's almost like there is a wizard, an "Ignore the man behind the curtain." By these economic apartheid, we're not allowed to speak or interact with people outside our social economic realms, and therefore no change is actually going to be made.

R.D.: Exactly. Exactly. But libraries go against that trend. Because there's not a rich person's library, a middle-class person's library, a poor person's library. There's one library. And that makes libraries super important to our country, but it also means a lot of ticked-off middle-class people.

T.: I think that's a really excellent observation. I remember when libraries had card catalogues. If I were to look up an Ursula K. Le Guin book, "A Wizard of Earthsea," then I would get the same answer as any other person in the library. These days, we can get different answers than people who have different ages, who have different economics, different search engines. And that's a way economic apartheid is unwittingly being continued.

R.D.: Not only do you get different answers, the more money you have, the better answers you can get. You can pay for better answers basically with a faster phone, a better phone, better subscription services you have. The disadvantage for people who don't have access to resources like that is even greater.

T.: What are some of the ways you believe body language enhances or discourages communication in libraries?

R.D.: It's not just libraries. Body language is so key. My day job, by the way, is I'm the executive director of the second-largest homeless shelter in Illinois. So most of my experience is in the context of a shelter, not the context of libraries. I don't know how

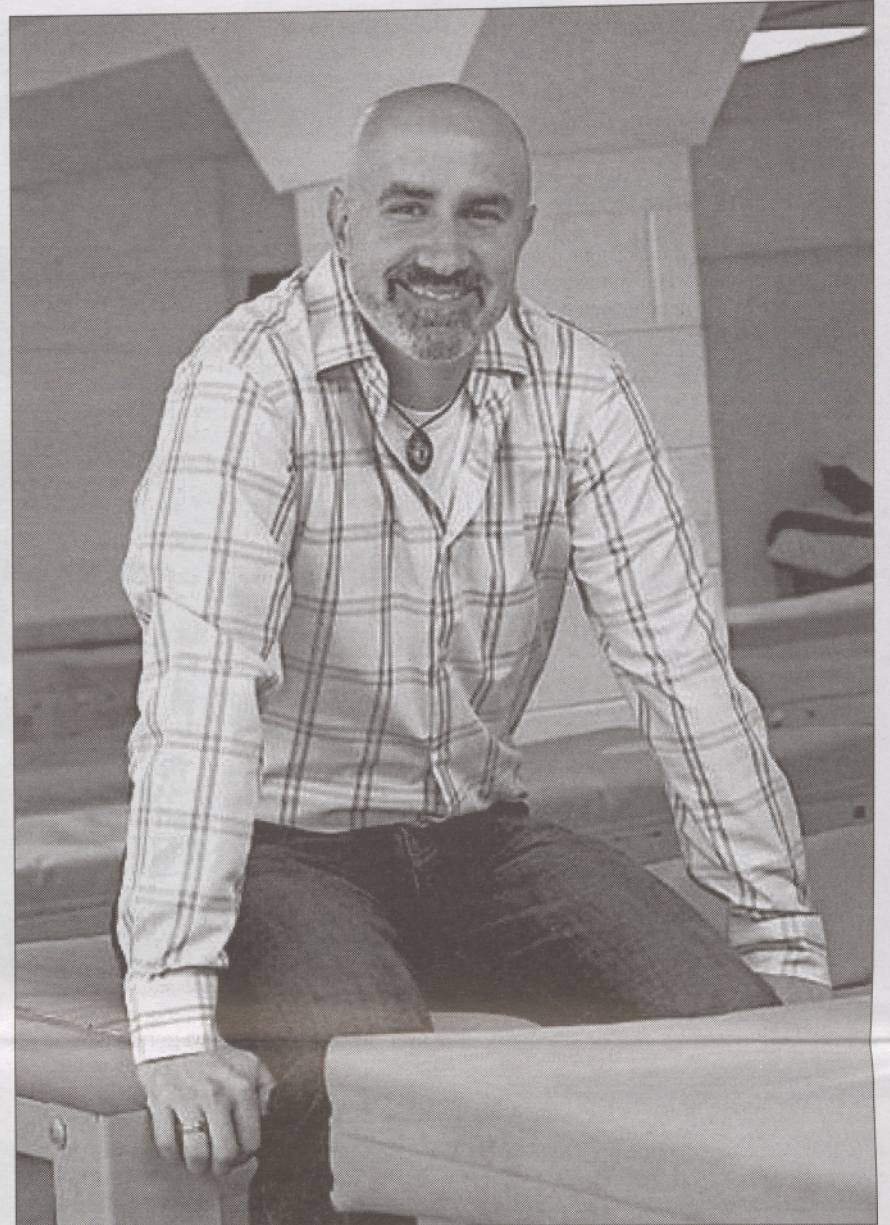


PHOTO COURTESY OF RYAN DOWD

Ryan Dowd is the executive director of Hesed House, the second-largest shelter in Illinois. His book, "The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness," teaches people to find success with nonviolence and human dignity, rather than forced compliance.

many times where there's some kind of blowup. Either a guest yells at a staff or takes a swing at a staff. And I'm debriefing with the staff member afterwards and they tell me what they said, y'know, "I said this, and he said this, and I said this." And then I go pull up the video camera and I say, "Wow, you might have said that, but your body language was aggressive and dismissive all at the same time. So you might have said something nice, but your body language was really nasty." We tend to focus on using the right words. We say nice words, but our body language is just projecting contempt and dismissiveness and aggressiveness and all these nasty things, and then we pretend, "Well I said the right things. I said nice words, therefore I was nice." And we dismiss the fact that we rolled our eyes, that we had our hands on our hips, that we were glaring at the person — all these things that send a message of nastiness.

T.: I'm honestly completely guilty of that.

RD: Oh, everybody is.

T.: It's one of the ways we're taught to be socially nice, but my tone of voice is a chisel or blade.

R.D.: Nonviolence is something I've spent a lot of time studying, and one of the things I've kind of realized here is that nonviolence teaches you how to speak truth to power. If you're the oppressed and someone else has the power, you're the Middle Eastern Jew against the Roman Empire back 2,000 years ago. If you're the Mexican immigrant standing up to the United States government. If someone else has the power and you don't, nonviolence is how you speak truth to that power. What I try to teach is how to speak with power. What do you do when you're the Roman Empire, when you're the United States government, when you're the shelter staff and you have 3,000 times as much power as the person living there? Or you're the library security guard and you have 10,000 times as much power as a patron? How do you ethically deal with someone who has so much bloody less power than you that this is not a contest in any shape or form?

T.: We're not enslaving people any longer, but this economic apartheid is a form of forced servitude and so, when you have the power and a position of authority, you are by definition

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