Homeless Teens Remind Us of What’s Important
Cecilia Martinez-Avila

It is Sunday afternoon in the heart of old East Austin where I live. A couple of blocks away at the corner of 7th Street and IH 35 homeless men and women gather under the highway bridge to eat, enjoy music, and listen to preachers in what is known as the Ministry on the Street Program. But once the services are completed many homeless wander the neighborhood searching for recyclable cans or odd jobs. I have frequently interacted with them. This unique experience I have with the homeless gives me a certain familiarity with them. But while my experience and association with the adult homeless gave me a certain perspective to their lifestyle and mental stability, the challenges and life experiences of homeless youth are significantly different.

Across town on a Thursday afternoon around 4:00 volunteers begin to gather in St. Austin’s Catholic Church across the street from the University of Texas at Austin to serve meals to homeless teens. These volunteers are part of the Outreach to Street Youth (OSY) program which operates under VinCare Services of Austin Foundation, a non-profit organization sponsored by the Austin Catholic Diocese of Central Texas and United Way. VinCare’s mission is to serve homeless women with children and homeless youth and to help them transition into stable housing.

Although the project is sponsored through the Catholic Church, the volunteers are from different denominations. They come from a range of backgrounds, from professional to semi-professional, retired individuals to university students. But all are united by common goals; to serve without judgment and to share their stories. I was most impressed with the cooks; retired military men who cook all of the weekly meals. These men never stop serving. Their dedication goes beyond simply preparing a meal. They arrive at 5:00 in the morning and stay until the clean-up, putting in about a ten-hour day. These ex-military also interact with the youth. I overheard a conversation between a homeless teen and a volunteer who tells a youth not to worry, that “it will all work out.” The man sits in a table with the youth drinking a cup of coffee. The homeless teen sits with him across the table and listens as if receiving fatherly advice.

Other volunteers include a group of elderly women who are in charge of the weekly desserts. There are food servers and a clean-up crew. They have an excellent, sanitized kitchen. They run the project in a cafeteria.

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style set-up. All the servers wear plastic gloves, cover their heads and wear aprons. The clean-up crew rinse and wash everything several times. First all the dishes are given a general rinse, then the pots, pans and eating utensils are washed with soap and Clorox and then all goes into a steaming hot dish washer. The floors are also kept very clean.

But it is the volunteer’s friendliness, acceptance towards others, their warmth and joy that makes the program run smoothly. This is evident in their frequent smiles and the small conversations they share with those they serve and each other. Some volunteers even call participants by their first name. I was a stranger for the most part, but was quickly accepted into their group and I found myself following their lead. Because of how they treated me with respect and kindness, I would probably return a second and third time to serve.

_Homeless Youth_

Based on my observation the teen homeless who came for weekly meals at OSY are very different from the adult homeless I interact with near my home. The most obvious difference is their mental stability and their level of hope. Although some of the teens are obviously involved with drugs, the ravages to their bodies are not noticeable, especially when compared to the adult homeless I see at the street ministry on Sundays. And these youths do not seem to have the same mental disability issues, at least not yet, as the adult homeless. Some seem to be mere runaways. I did not get to know their life stories but it appeared to me that many did not come from Austin. My overall sense was that, as teenagers, these homeless still had a life that was not beyond recovering. The homeless teens were much pickier in what they would accept in terms of help offered to them. For example, the concept that “beggers can’t be choosers” does not apply to this group according to my observations. I witnessed homeless, hungry teenagers turning away food even in their hunger choosing only to eat vegetables. They were not accepting all of the items on the food line, even the desserts I was eagerly serving. I understand that many possible reasons may cause these teens to reject food, but without interacting with them more in depth, I can only speculate as to why. One thing does come to my mind: if the homeless eat the chicken casserole that was being served that day, they would probably get sick or get a stomach ache, as it happens to me when I eat barbeque on Easter Sunday, breaking a meatless forty-day fast. In their homelessness, these teens may not have meat in their daily diets.
or a meal for that matter, and they eat what is best for them. Not eating meat or chicken after a long abstinence will cause the person stomach problems.

Yet, what also comes to mind is the issue of control. This may be the only thing they can control in their lives. They may have no control over what tomorrow may bring, where they will sleep, eat or even go to the bathroom next. This may be the only place where they can control, in whatever small way, a part of their lives.

The level of hygiene for homeless teens was also different than it is for the adult homeless I see frequently on Sundays. The youth appeared to be cleaner than the adults. They did not have the pungent body odor and it appeared as if they bathed regularly. The mood level varied between the groups in that some were receptive to making conversation and others were not. They seemed angry at life.

Personal Reflection

This experience brought a lot of old memories which I had repressed for years. I recalled a time when I was a student at the University of Texas at Austin. I was but a step away from becoming homeless myself. I had no money to pay rent or phone and I was almost evicted. My electricity had been disconnected, it was cold and I had no food in the middle of January of 1984.

I was told by a university counselor at the time when I went to ask for an emergency student loan that if I did not have the money, I had no business in school. I was also too proud to call home for money because I knew that my impoverished parents barely had enough to survive themselves and anything they would have sent to me would have come from their need. During that time my parents lived with my younger brother over 200 miles away in Laredo, Texas in a small trailer in a community that had no potable running water or electricity.

I finally went to a place I had heard about called Caritas to ask for food, but under their rules they could not help students. A caseworker broke the rules, had some compassion towards me, and gave me a bag of groceries and offered to pay my light bill. With a lump in my throat, I accepted the charity.

My choices were slim at the time. I had even contemplated doing things I considered to be immoral in order to survive. But the thought of staining my family name was a major factor that stopped me. Eventually, I opted to drop out of college, worked in the apartment complex for reduced rent, and I took a part-time job in a nearby HEB in hopes of one day returning to school.
Looking back on that episode today, it still hurts. But I know that Divine Providence had a hand in shaping my life. It took me a while to return to school. I even ended up in San Antonio in the early 1990s's, visited Our Lady's campus and prayed by the Main building. Not only did I return to school, I also met my husband, Alex Ávila, in my second round at UT-Austin, where I earned a Master's degree in Human Services Administration. Now I am a second year Ph.D. student in Leadership Studies here at Our Lady of the Lake University. As confirmation that this is where I belong, I was greeted with a great spiritual gift: The Holy Spirit flew over my car in form of a dove when I arrived for my acceptance interview more than a year ago.

Finally, like the caseworker in Austin's Caritas, I felt nothing but compassion for the youth who are homeless. I often found myself praying for them. I related to them even more deeply than I did the adult homeless that wander my neighborhood. I sometimes felt I could have been like them.

*Cecilia Martinez-Avila wrote the original version of this essay in the Summer of 2008 as part of a Heart and Soul assignment in LEAD 3320 taught by Dr. Mark Green.*