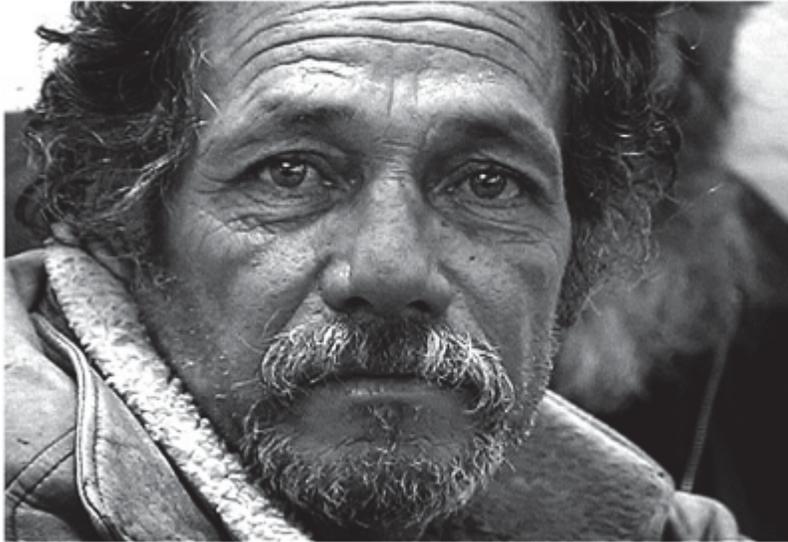


Homeless: Give Them Shelter

The first time I worked at the Shelter I was uncomfortable, uneasy. I was there to conduct interviews for a documentary, which meant getting up close and personal – not the usual, cursory homeless contact of a dollar through the car window.

You look out across the dining room, to the people being served dinner, and for the new comer, what started as uncomfortable becomes more and more curious: a street-weary, leathery faced



man, sitting next to a clean-cut middle management type; an old boy/young man, with broken front teeth, next to someone's grandfather; someone frightened, mumbling to the invisible voices, next to a big, stern-faced, muscular black man.

What's the story? That's what I wanted to know professionally, but soon it started to become personal: why are they here – why am I there?

I asked questions and listened: vets who couldn't adjust, not always from combat, but from losing the structure of military life. Ex-cons, between past and future lock-ups, they said. Downsized professionals with no families to fall back on. Young guys on the road, finding an easy place to crash. Middle-aged guys with no exceptional stories. A loud, drunk that thought he was hilarious. More than a few barely coherent men, crushed by the weight of depression or trapped in their schizophrenic hallucinations.

I heard heart-wrenching stories, outright hustles, and desperate hopelessness. A lot, but not all, wanted a permanent home. Some wanted meaningful jobs, others wanted non-specific help, others claimed to be happy as is, and a few just wanted another drink.

But that night, they all got what they needed most: a hot meal and a warm place to stay. No questions asked. Nothing expected in return.

That, they told me was the beauty of the Shelter.

Over the next six months, working on the documentary, I learned a fair amount about homelessness and homeless people. Few have permanent jobs, though a number work day labor. About 30 – 40 percent are veterans. Anywhere between 40 – 70 percent have addictions and/or have active mental illness. Chronic health problems like hypertension, and pulmonary and heart disease are common.

During the filming process, I was struck with something: faced with a tough time – due to money or a troubled mind – most of us have family, friends, a church and others to say, “Don’t worry, I’ve got your back.”

Not so if you’re homeless. Their isolation is both cause and effect.

During production, I also learned about programs serving the homeless, including the future Comprehensive Human Services Center. Now, I was struck with something else: some people don’t want or aren’t ready to be healed, cured, saved, treated, rescued or redeemed.

Not to be a cynic but, if you build it, they won’t necessarily come, because our best liberal, do-gooder intentions can’t make someone enroll in job training, stop drinking, go to therapy, get off the street, go to work, or take their psychotropic medications. They have to be ready and want to.

Get there lives together? Some do, and some don’t, according to the Shelter’s director. And, he sees that as the beauty of the Shelter. It provides a safety net for people on the streets, providing them with a Spartan – but safe – haven, getting them off the streets. And, if they want more, referring them to programs offering more help, which in the future will include the Human Services Center. But, if they don’t want to get it together, that’s okay too.

The people I spoke with said, if the Shelter wasn’t there, in town and easy to get to, or if it made demands, they’d go back to the park benches, street corners, doorways and forest encampments – like the one that springs up in the woods behind my house, when the weather gets nice.

When the project finished I moved from observer to participant, from digital filmmaker to volunteer, because I was struck with one final thing: the Shelter needs to stay where it is and keep doing what it does – a job that no one else can, will, nor wants to do: providing shelter, without judgment, no questions asked.

Danny Pietrodangelo, a 2001 finalist for the Tallahassee Democrat’s Volunteer of the Year award, produced the award winning documentary, *Homeless In An All-America City*, and recently became a member of the Shelter board of directors.