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A picture of home

He is useless. Dirty. She never gives. She always takes. He leeches off society. She is lazy – it is her own damned fault that she is in this situation. He is dangerous; riddled with disease. They are homeless. They are misunderstood. They are invisible. And I work for them.

These statements used to reflect my negative views of these people – views I had held my entire life. I was raised to believe these things about a group of people with whom I had never had any personal interaction. I was regularly told, “They’re homeless. They’re all alike.” They should be grouped together because they are just a uniform body of people. The descriptions provided above apply to all homeless people...right?

All gay people have AIDS...right?

All black people are gang-bangers...right?

All Italians are Mobsters...right?

All white people can't dance...right?

Wrong.

A few years ago, I began working for the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP). I met more homeless people in my first few months there than I would have ever previously cared to meet. That is when I opened my eyes. The truth is that the vast majority of the homeless population do not fit the mold society has created for them.

Since I've been working for HAP, I have had the opportunity to meet former teachers, carpenters, small business owners, artists, and homemakers. Some of these people, and I repeat *people*, walk in with small children. At times, they are dirty; other times they appear to be better off than me.

I've had people break down into tears as they tell me how people treat them in restaurants. They tell me that people cross the street just to avoid them. They tell me how people treat them on the bus. And then they tell me how the police harass them merely for walking the streets at night. What's next - separate [but equal] water fountains for the homeless?

Doesn't anyone see what is going on?

Don't get me wrong. No doubt, there are homeless people out there that prefer to be homeless. There are homeless people that are lazy. Some of them are diseased. Some of them prefer to leech off society and survive on the kindness of others. The system is abused. Some of them merit the label invisibly tattooed on their forehead.

I work with people like this every day. If they look ragged, I do not *get* to turn my head. If they ask me questions, I do not *get* to brush them off. If they ask for help, I do not *get* to be rude. If they smell funny, I do not *get* to kick them out. I do not *get* to avoid them. I do not *get* to discriminate against them. I do not *get* to pretend that they are not there. Because you know...they *are* there.

Instead, my job *helps* me talk to them. My job *allows* me laugh with them. My job gives me the *privilege* of hearing their stories. My job *enables* me to help. Unfortunately I'm not able to help them all.

One day I had a young woman come into my office with her daughter, a toddler. Judging from her appearance, she looked like a case worker visiting one of the tenants at the building. Perhaps something came up and she had to bring her daughter to work with her that day. She walked in quietly and shut the door, sitting her daughter down at a table in the corner of my office and giving her some crayons and paper with which to draw. After patting the child's head, she then walked to my desk and opened her mouth to say something; instead, she began to cry.

For the sake of privacy, I will call her Claire. A short, yet awkwardly eternal time later, Claire stopped crying and looked up at me. Through stifled sniffles and hiccups, she asked if we had any apartments available. I knew then that she wasn't a case worker.

Claire knew that the complex was a HAP property, and that it provides low-income/no-income people with affordable, if not free, housing. She told me that she had

been laid off over a year ago...and now, because she had been too picky about potential job openings, her unemployment had run out. She believed she would have plenty of time to find something comparable to what she'd had before. Tearfully, she related the story of the day she had been evicted from her apartment for nonpayment of rent. She wondered, "Should I go to a shelter? If I do so, will I lose my daughter? What will happen to her if I expose her to the harsh realities of street life?"

But Claire did not want to give up her daughter just yet. So, she had to come to me, asking for help.

The first step was to establish a permanent address – if she could do that with us, then she might be able to find a job, any job, as long as it meant she could provide for her daughter. I consider my judge of character to be pretty sound, and the woman in front of me seemed to be a truly genuine person. Her daughter was her life. She carried herself well; she was clean, polite, and well-spoken.

I looked back and forth between her and her daughter for a few seconds, dreading what I had to say next. "I'm sorry, Claire," I said, "but our waiting list is currently closed. It's closed throughout our entire portfolio. And to be honest, I don't know when it will open again. We have to wait until the list gets down to a year or less before we open it again." I almost suggested some shelters until I reminded myself that shelters were the type of thing she was trying to avoid.

She looked astonished. "So once it opens again, it still takes at least a year before an apartment will be available? What are people like me supposed to do in the meantime? What am I supposed to do about my daughter? What am I..?" She trailed off and started to cry again.

I couldn't answer her questions; yet, I was supposed to know these things. Sure, I had a little book full of resources and phone numbers, any of which I could have given her. But I knew they wouldn't do her much good. How would she last until she could get a place? How does anyone? What she needed was something *right now*, not a year from now. I didn't have to tell her that there wasn't much I could do. I didn't have to tell her that she would probably have to give up her daughter. I didn't have to tell her that, in her situation, I was virtually useless. She already knew.

Forcing a smile and straightening her skirt, Claire and her daughter left the office, only to return a few minutes later. Laying a sheet of paper down on my desk, she said, "My daughter told me as we were leaving that she had drawn this for you."

It was a picture, drawn in crayon, of the two of them holding hands. They were stick figures with gigantic heads. They were smiling. There was a little purple sun

shining bright in the corner of the page. They were in front of a house – a house they didn't have.

Bob Welch, a columnist for the *Register Guard* in Eugene, recently wrote an article titled "Hanging in, Despite Rain or Dire Days." In it, he describes an experience with homeless people that had been related to him by his wife, whom he refers to as "She Who Notices All."

"Finally, the encounter with a homeless man She Who Notices All told me about Wednesday. How he was smoking a cigarette outside Dari Mart, his life packed onto a bicycle and trailer. And how when the man saw her and our 2-year-old granddaughter, she envisioned a handout.

She was right.

"Here," he said, pulling out a crisp \$1 bill. "Put it toward her college education."¹

That man is the type of man that I get to work with every day. That man is the reason I have a job. Men like that are my clients. Men like that make me proud to do what I do. That man is the type that shows us that not only are all humans people, but that all people are human.

In my line of work, I thought I would be in the position to change lives. I thought I would be helping people every day. I thought I would make an impact. And on some days, perhaps, I do get to do those things. But one particular day, Claire and her daughter changed my life. *They* helped *me*. They forever changed how I look at my job, how I look at work in general, just by sharing their story.

And a picture.

¹ Welch, B. (2010, January 10). Hanging in, despite rain or dire days. *Register Guard*. Retrieved from <http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/sports/columnists/24333991-41/welch-january-endure-rain-soggy.csp>.