

Stories from the streets of New York City:

“These people just walk by, and I used to be one of them.”



Illustration by Claire Gilmore

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As I exited the Astor Place subway station, I scanned the blocks ahead for individuals who so many of us pretend not to see, homeless men and women.

I noticed David because of the angle at which he rested against a storefront. He appeared to use the concrete wall as a pillow with his back flat on the sidewalk. I began with my approach, “Good morning! My name is Bethanne, and I’m a medical student, but I’ve decided to spend all summer meeting and listening to men and women who are homeless

in New York City. I've created a website to share these stories and photographs with a larger audience. Are you willing to spend some time talking with me?"

While I could not possibly capture the universal experience of homelessness, as one overarching narrative doesn't exist, I spent the summer following my first year of medical school collecting stories and taking photographs on the streets of New York City. I created an online blog that featured these narratives with each storyteller's permission and two goals in mind: to build a platform in which the people I met could share what they feel is important, in their own words, and to spark connection and empathy between storytellers and blog readers. I hoped these glimpses into these strangers' lives would invite readers to see aspects of themselves within each story. If readers could relate to, and understand, the fears, hopes, and loves that are revealed, perhaps they would be less likely, when encountering someone living on the street, to pretend not to see.

Prior to starting medical school, I spent a year volunteering full-time at an inpatient medical facility for homeless men in Washington, DC, where I had the honor of hearing fractions of patients' stories. Some described their struggles with addiction or incarceration. Others reminisced about the best parts of their childhood: rooting for the Redskins, favorite home-cooked meals, and sibling rivalries. A few shared hopes for their own children's futures.

As I shared these stories with family and friends, all of whom were comfortably sheltered, I realized that many people held generally uninformed and oversimplified views about the lives of those they referred to as "the homeless." Their views were not unlike the ones that I had once held. This misunderstanding seemed to foster isolation and exclusion of "the homeless" from the rest of society, protecting us from discomfort and insulating their struggles from our own. Many of the patients I spoke with reported feeling voiceless, invisible, and segregated from the rest of society.

David

Inspired by these experiences, I found myself sitting on the corner of Astor Place and 8th Street on a warm July morning next to David, clad in an old T-shirt, cuffed dress pants, a pair of worn Nike shoes, and an unshaven face. His sentences were punctuated by severe, productive coughing fits. As David spoke, I asked permission to record our interaction so that I could transcribe it later. He told me he was comfortable with his story and photograph being shared but preferred not to see the photo I took of him.

David explained:

I was a pollution control chemist. I made a very good living doing that for many years but there's no life in that anymore. They've moved it all offshore to Asia. People don't understand the difference between cost and price. They like low prices, but they don't understand the cost, the human cost, of this total neglect of human health, safety, or anything else. My career was off-shored. I lived in California for many years. Family brought me out here, they're in Jersey.

So now I'm reduced to begging because of health. I just can't do the walking or collecting cans and bottles anymore. I used to go up to Bryant Park collecting cans and bottles. Now I beg. I got sick about a month ago. I'm dizzy all the time. The doctors really don't know what's wrong with me. At this point I don't know what I'm gonna do. People here are not so generous. Well, some guy flipped me 70 cents. Actually, one day, he flipped me a bunch of money, which was very nice of him, because I like to drink.

I had some money coming to me. Thirteen hundred dollars. But the stupid homeless shelter sent the money back! They had the check. Oh, it takes up so much space! An envelope with a check in it. The money was from a job I had. It was a plating job, but I didn't get along with the plater. He had all kinds of funny notions. He didn't understand that he'd have to calibrate the pH meter. He had all kinds of funny notions.

These people just walk by. And I used to be one of them. This is not a very good time of day to beg. The best time is afternoon. People coming home from work. But today is Saturday. I should go to the library, for the Internet, but I haven't been going there recently since I lost this job and have been so discouraged. Crap. So at this point I don't know what I'm gonna do. I don't want to commit suicide. Although that's occurred to me. I just want somebody to come along and give me \$3 for a bottle of vodka. My nails are getting long, and I don't even have a clipper. I lost my bag and that had a pair of nail clippers in it. Crap. Somebody stole it. Crap. Put this on the blog, "Come along and give me some money!"

When I asked what he would like people to understand, he thought for a moment, and said, "That's an interesting question. I never thought it could happen to me. I passed people like me on the street every day when I had money

and didn't give a second thought to them. 'That can't happen to me!' And here I am."

When asked about the most interesting place he's ever lived, David said, "Oakland, California. I lived in Oakland for 12 years. I had a laboratory. I had all kinds of equipment, I did all kinds of interesting things, I had all kinds of interesting stuff. Now, all I have are the clothes on my back."

Months later, I received an e-mail that said: "Your blog featured a story about my first cousin, David Wichern. We would like to find him and help. He is a brilliant mind."

I was immediately flooded with despair—the goal of my project was to spark connection, but this level of connection? I had no idea where David could be; we spoke for one morning three months ago and I had no contact information for him. Through a flurry of e-mails, I learned that David's former classmate started Googling his old friends' names to prepare for their 40th high school reunion. He discovered my blog and sent the link to David's cousin who e-mailed me. I explained my lack of additional information but recommended that they reach out to a shelter where David mentioned he had been staying. The shelter had information that David was recently hospitalized, and within the week, his family had arrived at the foot of his hospital bed.

As I received e-mail updates from David's relatives, I felt optimistic for their fortuitous reconnection, but worried that David may not have wanted to be found. I have no way of knowing what his wishes were, but his willingness to share his story online with his full name and photograph suggests he sought some form of connection. A few months after reuniting with his family, David was transitioned to hospice care and died shortly thereafter.

The other voices

When I reflect on the parts of David's life that he shared with me, I am careful to avoid viewing his past and present as dichotomous, and instead appreciate the convoluted but uninterrupted arc of an extraordinary life. This span across seemingly opposite poles of the same spectrum became a common theme across many of the stories I collected. One man's description of his encounters on the street connected the depths of cruelty with the bounds of human compassion. A mother and her young daughter's relationship felt identical to flecks of my own childhood, yet also entirely foreign. A veteran's sobering account of his time on a nuclear submarine in Vietnam was followed immediately by a melodic riff on his bright pink guitar, and an impish grin. I found myself continually amazed by the remarkable range

of life experiences encapsulated in such short narratives. I hope that readers of these stories are similarly surprised and inspired to reflect on the voices that we as a society often tune out.

Tough decisions and second thoughts

From the early planning stages through my project's completion, I was propelled by my steadfast belief that people who are homeless, especially those living in a city known for its gargantuan size and unapologetic callousness, have incredible stories that need to be told. In spite of this conviction, and although my methods were thoughtfully planned, I continue to grapple with the ways in which I selected and obtained consent from participants.

By exclusively approaching individuals who I judged had capacity to give informed consent to participate in my project, what role have I had in silencing the stories of those who are introverted, intoxicated, or actively psychotic? If I had met David just a few hours later, and he had been intoxicated, I would not have approached him and the last months of his life might have been very different.

A few men and women were never approached due to concerns for my personal safety. How were my decisions to withhold this opportunity from "unsafe" individuals rooted in my own implicit biases? I decided not to compensate participants in any way so as to avoid coercing a vulnerable population from exposing their story for a small financial gain. Yet, my presence alone all but ensured that panhandlers would not receive any donations during the 30 minutes or more that I sat next to them. Should I have at least compensated them for this loss of income?

David's story exposes conflicting facets of my project's dissonant goals. How can I share the stories of others while also recognizing that they are not mine to tell? By transcribing these conversations, am I empowering individuals by featuring their own words, or spotlighting their tangential or circumstantial speech patterns? How do I create a space dedicated to the narratives of a historically voiceless population without reducing these individuals to sensational stories?

I cannot say that months of collecting and transcribing stories has offered any simple or straightforward answers, but it has led to a deeper grappling with trying to find my own place within this project.

I often wonder what David thought during those final weeks, and I find myself hoping he would have also wanted to share this chapter of his story.

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