

# STUDENT Life

## Sleep Out For the Homeless: It's More Than Just Spare Change!



By  
Modestine Welch

Statistics tell us that on any given night about 750,000 Americans will be without shelter. The problem of hunger and homelessness is a very serious issue throughout the United States of America and beyond. According to the United States Housing and Urban Development, a homeless person is an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate form of housing. Every year the week of November 14-19 is set aside to observe National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness. On Friday, November 19, 2004 the members of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. & Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. gave the students, faculty, staff and surrounding Wesleyan community an opportunity to gain first hand experience of being without a home in their first annual Sleep out for the Homeless.

Several students were very interested in the Sleep out for the Homeless but they could not actually believe that we were going to really sleep outside. They asked us questions like: Are there going to be real homeless people around you? What are you going to do if you get hungry? How are you going to wash your hands, and use the bathroom? Our response to them was, yes we will actually go to sleep outside for the homeless, but we also don't have the answers to every question. However, neither did those men, women and children on the first night they realized that they were homeless and going to be outside for more than one night.

In preparation for this event we invited the Executive Director of the Rocky Mount Bassett Center, Mr. Chris Battle, out to the campus to speak to us about the Homeless and Hunger Crisis and Campaign in the United States and the Rocky Mount Community. Mr. Battle explained

to us that homelessness does not affect just a particular type of people. Homelessness can happen to anyone, educated, uneducated, women, men, boys and girls. After Mr. Battle spoke, Ms. Debra Armstrong, an employee of the Bassett Center who was previously homeless, spoke to the organizations and everyone who attended the program before the actual sleep out took place. Once Mr. Battle and Ms. Armstrong were finished with their presentations about homelessness, we started preparing ourselves to be outside for the duration of the night.

There are thousands of men, women and children who are homeless and the reality of the situation is that you can't prepare yourself for this type of experience, no matter how you try. Walking outside we noticed that it was very damp, cold, and the ground felt harder than ever before. It was within the first hour of being homeless that we gained a greater understanding of what being homeless meant, but the night was just getting started. The night seemed extra quiet and the sky extra cloudy, which kept me from at least having the stars to count, which could occupy my mind. Initially, I was left to sit on the ground, which led to my feet, legs and butt becoming numb, and having poor circulation. Having only cardboard boxes to sleep in, and on, the members of Phi Beta Sigma and Zeta Phi Beta diligently worked on creating what would be their beds and shelter for the night. While putting the shelters together some people became very territorial, working fast so that no one could steal any of their supplies.

As the shelters were being built I found myself thinking about why I was participating in this event. My mind became consumed with the facts of the event. I tried to prepare for this night by reminding myself that this is the lifestyle thousands

of people experience daily, weekly, monthly, yearly. Before falling asleep I saw several students walking past our location looking, pointing, and whispering. At that moment like never before I understood how heart breaking and hurtful the ignorance of people can make another person feel. Instantly, my mind went back to my days as a little girl between the age of 7-10 when I would walk from one building to another with my mom in downtown Washington D.C. My mother always told me not to stare, not to point, but as a child it was rather overwhelming to see people living on the street. As I became older I understood the homelessness crisis in this country and I no longer wanted to point, stare or whisper.

As my body temperature decreased I found myself wanting to lie down. Although I knew what participating in this event meant the idea of lying on the ground still seemed frightening. I knew that once my eyes were shut I would no longer be in control of what was done around me. With this fear of falling asleep I realized that homeless people might feel the same way at times. Therefore they walk the streets all day and night or sleep in the day and stay awake at night. The fear that someone will steal from you, or attempt to harm you, is a very real thought and there are many crimes committed each year on individuals who live on the street. However, in my case sleepiness

overwhelmed me and I decided to lie down. Before I realized it I was asleep and it was the next day.

Although I was awake and safe my body did not hesitate to remind me that I did not sleep in a nice, warm, soft bed with pillows. My arms felt like they weighed a thousand pounds. My feet felt numb and my back was hurting rather bad. This event caused me and the other participants to think about homelessness and hunger in an entirely different way. We all began talking about how we have forever been changed by this experience. Our opinion on homelessness and hunger has been changed and now it is time to educate all of those people who think that homeless people are lazy, drug abusers who don't want to work.

Throughout my life I have encountered several homeless people and now that I have participated in this event I will no longer just walk past a homeless person who is asking for money and ignore them. I decided that a better way to communicate with the homeless population would be to offer them a bag lunch or information on how to get assistance. It is really easy to ignore people who we decide are different or strange. However, as human beings people who are homeless have feelings and they desire to have their basic needs met. Therefore stop and take some time to give thanks for having your needs met and help someone else have the same experience by giving a non-perishable item to one of your local food donation collection sites. Give a coat and know that you just warmed another humans body and there heart. Give a toy and know that you just help put a smile on a child's face.

