

Commentary

BC to DC: Waking up in Washington...

by Lin Redmond
Clarion Assistant Editor

"So this is Washington, D.C.," I thought, as we carried our luggage from the train station. Surprisingly ordinary looking for such an important city, it was a world of contrasts: powerful and powerless, rich and poor, and there we were, 10 college students from the mountains staying in a youth hostel on the border between the ghetto and the "nice part of town." We weren't seeing the contrasts -- we were part of the contrasts.

Most of the homeless were black. Most of our group were white. I did not anticipate that. So how to bridge the gaps, racial and otherwise, between a group of well-fed students and those hungry who "live" on the streets? With visions of what we could accomplish, we set out to discover what it must feel like to be homeless and what could be done.

If you had asked us what we most craved before we left, I daresay the unanimous reply would have been an enthusiastic and resounding "CHANGE!" That desire remains. Yet, our tone has changed. What we naively thought we could grasp and alter in nine days turned out to be a monster problem of such complexity and proportion we could scarcely grab hold of its tail.

How do you grab a monster you can't see? Sure, its victims are in plain, undignified daylight before our eyes, but the monster has no face. What causes the problem? How can the financial and political aspects be understood, much less straightened out? Look at the word: homelessness. It's not even a thing; it's a lack of a thing. Cancer, drugs, war -- these are all afflictions which at least afford the comfort of a concrete focal image.

Our minds sought such comfort. If only we could put a name on the monster we would tackle it wholeheartedly for nine days. Again, the contrasts

came. With our stomachs full of Sybil's biscuit breakfast, we worked alongside those fasting at the Community for Creative Non-Violence to make a healthful meal from 300 pounds of rotten spinach and other apparently un-consumable donated goods. We worked with children -- bright, affectionate and innocent in spite of their harsh, crime-ridden environment.

Barriers down, we talked with homeless on the streets. Some were bitter and blaming and out of control, like the drunk man who came from behind demanding of me, "Gimme that pizza! I'm homeless!" Some were sober and constructive, like "Bill," who was young and unable to work because of a prison record. "I spend the money on food. I don't drink or do drugs," he said, continuing, "I'm taking care of myself as long as I can. I sleep in an old abandoned building and I keep looking for a job." Bill plans to get back to Georgia where prospects are better and life is kinder.

Some were sweet and understanding, like Karen. She sat reminding passers to notice the blooming cherry blossoms. When Jock asked her outright why she wasn't bitter, she replied, "You can't be mean to people. That's no way to be. It's nobody else's fault I'm here."

If comfort was hard for us to come by, it is unobtainable for the homeless. But homelessness is not just a lack of comfort -- a room around you, a ceiling over you. It's sleep-deprivation, malnutrition, fear, feeling like society's garbage. We had each other, the youth hostel with its interesting international students, good beds and Sybil's cooking.

I believe most people spend their lives half asleep. We went to Washington to help, to somehow share what we have so much of with people who have fallen through the cracks and have virtually nothing. What we did was



Homeless "Bill," panhandling on Pennsylvania Ave. in D.C., told BC students he wasn't bitter about his situation. (Clarion photos by Jock Lauterer)

wake up. We won't gripe about ARA food anymore -- an activity I've frequently engaged in -- or dorm life or how much we hate to go home. Every little math test will no longer seem a major inconvenience.

The marble in Washington is as beautiful as the cherry blossoms. But the concrete got really old while we

were there. It's ugly and it's painful to walk on for hours. Sleeping on it must not be any treat either. I wouldn't know. Tonight I'm sleeping in my bed. I keep having dreams about unbelievable contrasts. Tomorrow I'm going to the Transfer Office to find out about majoring in Public Affairs. I'm going to find that monster's face.

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