



The Invisibles

The working homeless are too often unseen. One woman brought her story from the streets to the stage at TEDGlobal.

By **Becky Blanton**

Three years ago, I was living in a van with my Rottweiler and a housecat in a Wal-mart parking lot in the US. By July 2009, I was speaking at TEDGlobal in Oxford, England. Physically, the journey from “homeless” to an international stage was a rough one, but the emotional and mental challenges were greater. I was one of the lucky ones.

We all make bad choices. But when I decided to quit my \$50,000-a-year job as a small town newspaper editor in 2006 to deal with my father’s recent death from cancer, I had no idea I was deciding to become homeless.

I thought I was doing something good for myself by taking time off to travel and see the country. My father, a man who had physically, emotionally, and sexually abused me throughout my childhood, had died in February of that year, and his passing hit me hard.

No matter how much you’re told about how the death of an abuser may affect you, no one can prepare you for it. So when that emotional storm hit, I ran. I retreated into the one world I felt safe in — camping and traveling. I told myself I was “taking care of me.” How wrong I was.

Although I was freelancing, and sometimes working a second part-time job, the co-workers, employers, police, and people around me considered me homeless and “less than,” because I lived in my van, and not in an apartment. At a time when I needed friends, encouragement, and understanding, I got harassed, shunned, and shamed.

For more than a year I bathed in employee showers and truck stops, washed up in public restrooms, parked in different lots each night to avoid police hassles, and struggled to keep my clothes cleaned and presentable, and my job intact. I sweated in the heat, froze in the cold. When I was sick, I used a bucket and trash bag for a toilet. I went without food so I could afford gas, and I risked my health, safety, and security every day. The only difference between me and my former colleagues at the newspaper was that they

paid a mortgage or rent on a home. I paid rent on a storage unit.

My depression deepened, and eventually someone referred me to a homeless health clinic. I went. I hadn’t bathed in three days. I was as smelly and depressed as anyone in line; I just wasn’t drunk or high. When they realized that, several of the homeless men, including a former university professor said, “Why are you really here? You aren’t homeless.” Other homeless people didn’t see me as homeless, but I still did. The professor listened to my story and said, “You have hope. The real homeless don’t have hope.”

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At some point someone told me that the journalist Tim Russert had included an essay I wrote about my father before he died in a new, best-selling book. At first, I laughed. Was I a writer or was I a homeless woman? I went into a book store and found Russert’s book. I stood there and reread my essay and cried. I knew then the answer to my question. I was a writer.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that 2.5 to 3.5 million people — about the population of Denver, Colorado — experience homelessness each year in the United States. That includes 600,000 families and 1.35 million children. Many of them live in a family vehicle because they are able to find and maintain a job, or had a vehicle before their crisis hit.

Studies show the most economically efficient way to end homelessness is to prevent it in the first place. The most common cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing; it accounts for 50 percent of all reasons given. Emergency assistance (including rent or mortgage and utility assistance), which helps provide time-limited housing subsidies until families become financially stable, can help prevent homelessness and is more financially effective than getting someone off the street.

So instead of handing a homeless person \$5 or \$10, contribute \$10 or \$20 to your local energy company when you pay your utility bill each month. It will go towards helping someone keep the home they already have. Donating to businesses or groups that can provide car repair, transportation, rent and food, or medical care to people in need can also help. Rather than volunteer at the local soup kitchen on Thanksgiving and Christmas, why not help set up a crisis clinic or donate time at a free health clinic?

Pity isn’t a solution. Practical, political expediency is. Providing safe parking, allowing the homeless to use public resources such as parks, showers, transportation, and libraries will help thousands of families get off the streets or out of their cars quicker. Getting your local government to decriminalize homelessness is harder than spending the morning at a soup kitchen, but the payoff is so much greater.

After realizing I had a skill I could use, I moved back home to Tennessee, alternated between living in my van and couch-surfing with friends, and I started writing. By the following summer, I was a working journalist, winning awards and living in my own apartment, no longer homeless or invisible.

It’s superficial, but society equates having a permanent address and a permanent structure to live in with having value and worth as a human being. I used to not believe that. I do now. ■