

Reader-friendly, touching honest portrayal of homelessness to inspire action

Crossing the Line: Taking Steps to End Homelessness

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4. The Tiny Sparrow Flits Into My Life

The young, blond, frail looking woman, always wearing faded bib overalls haunted me. I'd see her walking all over town, on the rough-and-tumble streets of Joliet, in poverty-ridden, gang infested neighborhoods unfit for human habitation, much less a defenseless, confused woman walking at all hours of the day and night.

I'd often see her gingerly stepping backwards, sometimes talking—to herself, I guessed, because no one else was around and cell phones with microphones and ear buds weren't invented yet. I eventually dubbed her “the Sparrow,” this nameless creature as nondescript as a sparrow, flitting all over town, unnoticed by most, except thugs who tormented her, and me with my penchant for underdogs, or in this case, underbirds.

Not surprisingly, “the Sparrow” entered the picture early in my Catholic Charities days in Joliet, even before our shelter opened. People I knew asked me about her. Others had noticed her wandering our streets. A problem-solver by nature, I felt compelled to delve into this mystery. Who was she and what was her story?

Realizing nothing would happen until I found out more, I chanced it and finally stopped to talk to her. She didn't seem to register that I was a concerned human being. I felt like I invaded her world. I didn't learn much except that I had a lot to learn about mentally ill homeless persons.

Even to me, with no training as a mental health professional, she seemed out of touch, disconnected, and quite vulnerable. She obviously had no place to stay and possessed nothing except the clothes she wore. My inquiries to local mental health professionals yielded no useful information—some knew of her but cynically declared her hopeless. Their efforts to help her failed, and since she was “non-compliant,” she couldn't get help. That's the way the mental health system at the time operated. You had to be lucid enough to ask for help and to cooperate with the providers. They pretty well told me it was futile to think I could help her—which has historically challenged me to try even harder.

My more prolonged contact with her occurred after I found her beaten, robbed of her disability money by someone who knew how easy of a mark she was. Her battered face, dark bruises contrasting with her fragile features, infuriated me. My underdog protector mode kicked in and I became

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determined to do something to help her. I refused to believe this was an impossible situation.

Even though she had no place to live, some people must have let her stay with them for reasons I didn't want to speculate. I astutely figured that her disability checks she received at the beginning of each month attracted predators, therefore my first order of business was to get her to let me hang onto the bulk of the \$300-something she received. Over time, and with lots of patience (on both of our parts), we eventually got to the point where she trusted me and allowed me to hold her money (in the CC business office), giving her small amounts to spend as she wished.

I struggled with the reality that men of the lowest caliber were taking advantage of her, but she didn't seem too concerned about it. I couldn't lock her up. I couldn't follow her around every minute. I could just worry that these sexual escapades wouldn't leave her dead, pregnant, or infected with HIV/AIDS, the scourge *de jour*.

After my formidable efforts to get her some help, the Sparrow finally began working with the county mental health program, and was taking medications. She complained mightily about the meds because of side effects, especially bloating which became obvious even to me as she began to stretch the seams of her trademark baggy overalls. She also had frightening seizures, freezing up and becoming catatonic. She once had a spell while sitting in the CC kitchen waiting for me to come down to give her some money. When summoned downstairs, I was shocked to see what these meds did to her. I began to understand why people dependent on psychotropic medications were reluctant to take them despite the relief from their psych problems.

Eventually, once I started the Will County PADS homeless shelter (no longer called by that name), she stayed there off and on. By that time she would also be a common visitor in the CC office, stopping by for some money, chatting with the other staff who had gotten to notice and care about her by then. Her network of caring protectors grew as people learned not to fear her just because of her mental illness.

As I became more aware of her disability and the accompanying challenges, I inquired among other social service professionals as to the alternatives for housing and services. Dismayed, I found that because of her age, her mental illness (schizophrenia) and her track record, the Sparrow was out of luck, a determination I couldn't accept. So I looked further.

In the meantime, the Sparrow stayed at the shelter irregularly, and still kept in touch with me, allowing me to hold her money. She'd occasionally get jumped by punks wanting something from her. In one of our frequent visits,

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she referred to her father who she said lived in a small rural community about 75 miles from Joliet. He rarely saw her. Her mother lived out of state and they didn't seem to have any relationship. With her permission, I spoke with them by phone to no avail. They loved her in their own way but didn't know how to care for her. A sad declaration by parents, but understandable to some extent because her erratic behavior was frequently difficult to manage.

I was desperate for a solution to her homelessness. Despite her simplicity, she was more "high maintenance" than I could handle because my responsibilities were growing and seemingly countless homeless people needed my attention. I couldn't accept the idea of her wandering the streets with her untreated mental illness, but I was frustrated with her incompatibility with human service agencies. She wasn't as desperate as I was, but she was at the point that spending another winter wandering the streets was more than unappealing, so she somewhat cooperated with my inadequate efforts to find a solution to her homelessness.

A town about 70 miles from Joliet had a residential program for persons with mental illnesses. We went to check it out and I was unrealistically hopeful that the Sparrow would find it suitable and the operators would accept her—preferably on the spot, relieving my burden and meeting her every need. That wasn't to be, so we looked further. Another 20 miles away from there was a boarding house known to accept people with mental illnesses like the Sparrow, so I talked her into trying it, thinking it would be the solution if she'd just give it a chance.

Although she agreed to stay there and the owners seemed willing to work with her, I had an uneasy feeling about the solution. Sure enough, before I got back to Joliet they called my home to say she took off and they didn't know where to find her. I headed back, making the 70-mile drive perplexed as to the next option. I located her wandering the streets. We went back to her room in the boarding house. In order to get her to stay, I reluctantly agreed to sleep on her floor so she wouldn't be alone the first night. Ouch. Floors are hard.

She went AWOL again, and somehow managed to end up back in Joliet before I even knew she was missing from her program. She showed up at our office, disheveled, exhausted, saying she hitchhiked from her new town. She wanted some of her money so she could go stay in a motel. What was I going to do?

She returned to her new "home," which wasn't really a program, but more like a sanctioned dumping ground for unwanted people, and remained there for a short time, giving me short, but welcome respite from the heavy responsibilities of making sure the Sparrow was safe while I tended to my

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“real” responsibilities. I knew her solution was temporary, and she bounced between programs, housing, homelessness, and back again indefinitely.

Eventually she returned to Joliet to stay, cared for by an informal network of good people. By this time, volunteers from the shelter and others had become more aware of her, extending a newly-created support network. She seemed immensely happier than when I first reached out to her.

When I left Joliet in early 1990, I figured our paths would separate. My new job, running a shelter in Aurora, was pretty demanding and I hardly got back to Joliet, 30 miles away.

But the Sparrow found me, coming for a few short visits, once with her father. She seemed relaxed and coherent, having received intensive mental health services for a while, combined with a nurturing environment from countless people in the “City of Brotherly *(and Sisterly)* Love.”

The Sparrow, in her trademark bib overalls walking by the side of the road, talking to herself, one of so many vulnerable and discarded souls wandering our streets...

People like the Sparrow fit the definition of “chronically homeless,” a pseudonym for lost causes, not worthy of expending very limited resources on. Few options were available to keep homeless people like the Sparrow from freezing to death during winter months, a reality that deeply troubled me then as it still does now.

11. A Crushing Sense of Powerlessness – And Heartbreak

Kids were the hardest to cope with at the shelter—heartbreaking for volunteers to see that kids needed to live there, challenging for staff to make sure kids were getting proper supervision from parents, and painful for the guests to see that even kids had to endure this wretched situation.

Amazingly, most kids who stayed at our shelter were fairly well behaved. Some had conscientious parents who kept them in line despite this abnormal setting they called “home.” You could see the loving care that would hopefully compensate for the parents’ failure to provide a place to live for their family. Other parents ranged from pretty good to pretty awful, much like parents in homes across this country. We insisted that parents keep a close eye on their kids for obvious reasons.

I’ll never forget the image of a two-year old waddling confidently across the dining room late at night. “Why are you up here, Danielle?” I asked. “Where’s your mommy?”

“I want a drink of water,” she simply replied. “Mommy’s sleeping.” What struck me was that this little tyke was comfortable getting up in the middle of the night, stepping through a jam-packed room full of sleeping bodies of mostly strangers, climbing upstairs into a huge room with a handful of volunteers, and requesting a drink of water. What has this world come to that this would be a natural sight?

Perhaps what was most amazing was that many of these kids had miserable lives that none of us even wanted to know about, and yet they could adapt to living in this wacky community. In their short lives they’ve somehow survived harrowing abuse, abject poverty, neglected health care, nomadic and dysfunctional homes. Often, the crazy shelter environment was an improvement over their previous havoc-filled living situations. Most families were single parents (usually moms), although, occasionally, we had two-parent families and, on occasion, single male parents.

Every once in awhile, fortunately not often, we found ourselves stymied by someone’s problems. A family who stayed at both the emergency shelter and the transitional shelter had a cute little 7-year old girl, “Maggie,” with

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such deep psychological disturbances that I'm not sure she could ever get straightened out.

We expedited their move into the adjacent transitional shelter because Maggie disrupted the sleep time of all our families and single women by her uncontrolled behavior. She would spin out of control in a space literally covered with tired bodies trying to sleep on their pads on the floor. Her mother, understandably helpless, strained to also care for her other two children. I often intervened, removing the girl from the sleeping area, doing a gentle but firm time-out away from all the stimulation. It wore me out, but I had no other choice but to deal with her uncontrollable behavior.

One night, in the midst of the typical hectic pace of the emergency shelter, I got an urgent request for assistance from the woman working at the transitional shelter. Little Maggie, who with her family had just moved into their room earlier that day, was out of control. The worker knew I'd have the best chance to get the situation under control so she frantically called me.

Yup, Maggie was out of control, so I carefully restrained her and we went to the hall outside my office, which could be secured and was away from sleeping areas. I had the staff explain to Maggie's forlorn mother where we would go and what I'd do, giving mom the option of watching without her daughter knowing through the small glass panels in the hallway doors.

As strong as I thought I was, petite Maggie gave me a workout. For what seemed like hours, she screamed as I held her, trying to keep her from hurting herself and me. Her non-stop, shrill screeches and curses bounced off the concrete block walls, penetrating my head like a drill. She writhed, twisted, kicked and tried to scratch her way free. Eventually she settled down, worn out. Me too. We contacted some agencies the next day and tried to arrange help. The overburdened service providers could not help soon enough.

The next night pushed the situation over the edge—Maggie somehow managed to get a large, sharp kitchen knife and hid it under her pillow. Fortunately, someone discovered it before anyone got hurt. The crisis worker was called in and the family moved out, to where we don't know.

Hurricane TJ

One mom who had stayed at the shelter several years earlier returned, this time with her little boy, "TJ." Pathetic but endearing, "Terri" had encountered some alcohol-related difficulties, endured some horrendous relationships in her thirty years of life, and now was back in the place she

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least wanted to be again—a homeless shelter, this time with a child. TJ was a small kid for a seven-year-old, and he seemed adorable...until that evening.

My friend and lobbyist for homelessness issues, Barbara Duffield, was visiting for a few days, getting some “shelter time” to restore passion to fuel her advocacy efforts in Washington. She hung around, talking to folks, and was there when TJ and his mom arrived, so she chatted with them as well as many others. We let families stay inside during the non-shelter hours if parents carefully watched their children. So far so good. Terri seemed on the job with TJ.

The eye of the hurricane, from my Florida childhood memories, was an apt comparison to the calm before the shelter opened. Before our 7:00 p.m. start time, volunteers efficiently put finishing touches on meal preparations and went about the rest of the pre-opening preparations, even occasionally getting the “luxury” of visiting with each other and a brief moment of group prayer. We never knew when or if the tempest would hit, but if it did, it would guarantee to be at the busiest, most challenging time, when something horrible happened.

This time, “Hurricane TJ” erupted like a powerful storm in the women and family sleeping area. One of the women raced to get me and I rushed to find TJ literally bouncing off the walls of both rooms, springing onto and off the stacks of pads, upending plastic bags filled with belongings of the women and families, screaming adult-sized swearwords and just going nuts. Terri was standing, crying, and trying futilely to stop him. I grabbed him on the way by, quickly realizing that he was going to be a match for my strength.

I cleared everyone out of the room and used a pile of mats to sit on, holding him in a straitjacket hold, while talking calmly and soothingly to him. He cursed, screamed, and berated me and anyone he could think of with language I rarely heard even from angry, intoxicated adults. His tirade seethed with hatred and threats to his mother, himself, and me. All of this occurred as he thrashed about with all his strength and that of the demons inside him. I hung on for my life and his.

After what seemed to be an eternity, he seemed to calm down and we mutually agreed that I’d release him. Sucker! He sprang into action again, and I corralled him to repeat the entire process. Eventually, he wore down enough to convince me that a breather was possible. I tentatively released him, talking gently to him and getting lucid replies. We got up and went to the hall where his mother anxiously awaited. The situation seemed to be temporarily under control.

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During this whole time, Barbara was aware of what was going on—as was everyone in the dining room. Her heart was breaking, for both TJ and his mom. I wasted no time going upstairs; instead, I headed straight to my office to call the Crisis Line. I explained to the mental health worker what had happened and asked what the options were. Unbelievably, they rarely dealt with kids, so she couldn't fathom the level of chaos that TJ just caused. I found out that the mother had to be the one to request psychiatric services, so I went to talk to her about it.

I strongly believed that TJ was a “danger to himself or others,” criteria for involuntary hospitalization if the psychiatrist at the hospital agreed. I got Terri out of TJ's hearing and quickly explained the options. I had to tell her that staying at the shelter wasn't possible because of the level of his outburst. She reluctantly agreed to let the ambulance transport him to the hospital and I rushed to make the call. I hurriedly gave Barbara a heads-up on what was happening, which distressed her immensely because she had earlier spent some enjoyable moments talking with TJ and his mom.

Procedure was to call 9-1-1 and explain the need for transport to the emergency room because we had a person who was a “danger to himself or others.” When I mentioned that it was a 7-year-old boy, the dispatcher was audibly taken aback. Somehow, that shock must have translated to the police who responded because when I met them at the door, one of the officers practically berated me for not being able to handle a 7-year-old. I tried to explain TJ's behavior and the officer scoffed at me saying, “I have a 7-year-old. He acts wild too, but that doesn't make him dangerous.” *Grrrr...*

Just then, TJ raced through the crowded dining room toward the stairwell where we were talking. I knew he was winding up again and figured it was going to be trouble. “Officer Friendly” barely got a chance to register when TJ made a serious grab for his gun. As I used a split second to think of where to dive to protect my life, the officer prevented the unauthorized use of his weapon by pulling TJ's hand off it. In a flash, TJ bolted up to the third floor landing above our heads. He climbed up to the highest spot possible, screaming at the top of his lungs, “I'm gonna jump! I'm gonna kill myself!” The officer finally got it. This kid was a “danger to himself or others.”

Mom and TJ went to the hospital, and TJ was admitted—itself a rare occasion as I felt they tried to keep people from being admitted just to save money. Unfortunately, but to no surprise, Mom signed TJ out the next day, thinking they could return to the shelter. This was the part of my job I hated worst—to tell someone they couldn't come back. It was excruciating when it was a family. However, I could not risk this type of behavior in the midst of

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the unstable environment we had on a regular basis. Sadly, their options were extremely limited, but Terri was creative and they found someone to take them in for a while.

How did this episode look to Barbara, the “outsider” who sympathized with both shelter staff and the homeless people who had no option but the shelter’s inhumane communal living environment? Later that night we rehashed the painful events. She said TJ and this tragic incident would be forever seared in her heart and mind.

Her first thought was “what on earth could have happened in a mere 7 years on earth to make this child want to kill himself?” She wondered what kind of events would lead someone that young to want to end it all, and so publicly? Barbara later described the scene from her perspective of sitting at a table in the dining room:

“I remember the guy, maybe Harold was his name, who didn't see that I was sitting at the same table as him, and who, as we all sat in stunned and horrified silence, watching TJ's little body at the top of the stairs, said ‘That person... from Washington.... where are they now?’ To me, it was as if he were saying that THIS was homelessness— THIS was the reality of it— and someone needed to bear witness, to truly know what it was. I remember feebly saying something dumb like ‘I'm here’ and then feeling a crushing sense of powerlessness...”

Barbara described witnessing my “crushing sense of powerlessness,” something she was not used to seeing from me. “...you, usually the tireless crusader for justice and systemic solutions, were understandably tired and jaded. We talked about the need for wholesale change in social policies, housing and income especially, and I remember you saying something like ‘I wonder—even if we got all that—someone would find a way to screw it all up.’ It was, for me, evidence of what messed up systems do to people—the people who suffer the problems, and the people who try to help them. I knew you'd bounce back—and you did—but it was so hard to see your pain that night.”

TJ was imprinted in my heart and mind, too. Above my desk I taped up a reminder of TJ—a valentine card he had given me the day before his outburst. ***Fortunately, kids like TJ and Maggie rarely came our way, but that didn't stop us from knowing that youngsters just as deeply troubled were out there and hurting with very few resources to help them. Having children in a shelter environment was hard enough...but knowing some couldn't be***

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helped in today's social service scene infuriates me. Logic, fairly rare in government policies, dictates more resources are needed to assist families with kids like TJ and Maggie. Even if kids like these manage to grow up into adulthood, they will likely have little chance of a productive life. They will most likely be a danger to themselves and others until our nation is ready to truly prioritize the value of each family...

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