



Homeless Potential: Project Proposal

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There are many reasons why individuals are forced into homelessness. The issue of poverty obviously goes hand-in-hand with homelessness, since it is difficult not to be in some state of poverty and be homeless. Sadly, 18 percent of the Madison community lives in poverty. [1] The other main reasons for living homeless is violence or the threat of violence, which is experienced by 36 percent of families in Madison, and mental health problems, which 49 percent of homeless single women in Madison experience. [1] There are many other reasons why individuals and families are forced into homelessness, including illness, physical disability, divorce and other unique life situations.

Despite the aforementioned facts, many people believe the majority of

individuals can control whether or not they become homeless. In fact, based on an online survey I conducted (viewed [here](#)), over half of the respondents reported this exact sentiment. Not only did respondents blame homeless individuals for the situation they were in, they stigmatized them. When asked to describe homeless individuals, nearly three quarters of respondents labeled them as “substance abusers” and over half labeled them as “lazy.” While respondents seem to have concrete labels and perceptions of the homeless, ironically enough, 92 percent of respondents have never pursued information on homelessness and well over half the respondents did not personally know a single homeless individual. [5] So, through my survey, it became crystal clear to me that stereotypes and stigmas of homeless individuals exists, but more concerning was the fact that most of these assumption are from a misinformed or disinterested public. People simply don’t have the proper facts or don’t care enough to find them. That is where I come in.

Originally, I wanted to find a sustainable solution to homelessness. I thought of all the ways I could help. I could give money, volunteer at a soup kitchen or shelter. I even considered taking a homeless individual off the streets and allowing him or her to leave in my house, which is an idea I doubt my roommates would have warmed up to. The more I thought about how I could help and talked to people about my ideas, I began to realize the fundamental problem with how people view the homeless. Even though I didn’t personally have a stigma against them, I found from my survey above that many do. Sure, giving money would help in the short-term, but the whole idea of this project was to create sustainability long-term, which requires a productive action that a mass population is able to consistently repeat. Without breaking the stigma of homeless individuals, a consistent feeling of generosity towards them can’t possibly exist. In this sense, I would really “just be one person” trying to a problem suffered by millions. However, changing the perception of homeless can be reciprocated easier than calling people to physical action. It is easier to change minds and thoughts than it is to change people’s actions. Ultimately, the goal is that the former will lead to the latter.

3. How often do you pursue information on the issue of homelessness in your community?

#	Answer	Bar	Response
1	Daily		0
2	Weekly		0
3	Monthly		2
4	Never		23
	Total		25

*Survey results from primary research

I had my goal in place to breakdown the stereotyping and stigmas of homeless people by educating and engaging the public. I knew I could not try to delve into this endeavor on my own, so I began to reach out to anyone and everyone I thought could help. The first person I talked to was Maurice Gattis, assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Social Work. Maurice had little experience with the issue of homelessness in Madison, but he did extensive research in Toronto, Canada on the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) homeless populations. Enamored by this interesting double-minority situation, I became all ears from the second I walked into Maurice's office. The minutes went by like seconds and before I knew it, I had been listening to Maurice's stories for nearly an hour. Neither of us were concerned though as we shared our thoughts on the situation. A statistic that he told me, which I will never forget, is that 26 percent of gay teens, who come out to their parents, are forced to leave their house and live on the streets. [2] What's even more disturbing is that 20 to 40 percent of all homeless youth identifies as GLBT. [3] The facts didn't stop there as we started to delve into the stereotypes that homeless individuals are faced with. The most ground-breaking stereotype that he refuted was that the majority of the homeless population reported a drinking problem. The truth is that roughly 35 percent of Madison's homeless population has reported having alcohol and drug abuse issues. [2] While that number is definitely notable, it is certainly not the majority, as my survey respondents loosely suggested.

As the conversation was coming to an end, Maurice left me with a perspective that has changed the way I look at the homeless situation. He described homelessness as an invisible problem in the sense that the majority of those, who break the stereotypes of substance abusers and “moochers” are on the move, living in their vehicle, away from the public eye. Maurice admitted it is an individual choice to give money to someone on the streets. However, if you choose not to give because you feel they deserve the position they are in, then maybe you are giving to the wrong person. It becomes a matter of figuring out *who* to give to, rather than *if* you should give at all. This epiphany led me to find a way to get in contact with the “invisible” homeless people and give them a voice. For this, Maurice put me in contact with Donna Asif, who was described in an article by the Isthmus as a “tireless advocate for the homeless in Madison.” [5] Donna would end up being the catalyst to my entire project.



Donna Asif, leader of the Madison Homelessness Initiative

Donna runs a non-profit group called Madison Homelessness Initiative, which puts an emphasis on helping one homeless individual at a time in order to give them the proper attention they so desperately need. The majority of Donna’s time and energy goes

towards advocating for the Madison homeless community in any way she can, even if that means whistle-blowing. Any way Donna can get the attention of the media, public and local business, she does. When Donna is not wearing her cape out in the public eye, she runs two programs for the homeless (Project Bubbles and Shower Power). The former was created to allow homeless individuals to wash their dirty clothes at a local laundry mat and the latter program, which I am currently volunteering my time, allows homeless individuals to bathe themselves in a private shower stall in the basement of the First United Methodist Church in downtown Madison. Like a true hero, much of her work is behind the scenes, going unseen by the public.

Immediately after meeting Donna, she convinced me to volunteer my time at the shower program. I volunteer on as many Wednesdays and Fridays as I can from 10 am to 12 pm. The interaction with the homeless community is definitely a worthwhile experience, but I learned a valuable lesson about where my skills and motivation would be best utilized. After one of the shower programs, I informed her that while I enjoyed getting to know everyone on an individual-level and being on-the-scene to help those in need, I was becoming increasingly disturbed by the despair that many of these people showed as I would help them. On one hand, I felt good about providing showers and support for those in need, but on the other hand, I couldn't ignore the harsh reality of their situations. It was frustrating to face the realization that many of them had nowhere to go. The last straw came when I met a man who lost his job, was evicted from his apartment and had his girlfriend move to another state, taking their daughter with her. He said all he wanted to do was see his daughter. He was no different than you or I; he was just handed bad breaks. He repeated this fact over and over and admitted that he had few people to turn to for help, as most just assumed he was a substance abuser or somehow responsible for his current lifestyle. I wanted to help him, but money was not enough to save this man. He was broken by his unfortunate turn of events and the stereotypes that kept him down. For the first time in my brief experience with homeless individuals, I realized the true potential each and every one of these people possessed. When I told Donna of my "ah-ha" moment, it sparked an idea in her head for what would end up being my project.

Donna and I realized that, while I would continue to volunteer at the shower program, I carried a passion to change the public perception of homelessness. She informed me of the National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day vigil and service, which is held in various cities, Madison being one of them. It is held every year on December 21, the first day of winter, the longest night of the year and its purpose is to remember those whose lives are lost due to homelessness. In fact, the mortality rate among homeless populations is nearly four times that of the general population. [4] She suggested that her and I put together a local awareness campaign for the event. Our goal for the campaign was to encourage those other than just homeless individuals to come out for the event. Our purpose is to promote the idea that all human life is equal and deserves remembrance, while also promoting awareness to the harshness of winter for those who are homeless.

To implement our plan, we decided that utilizing social media, specifically Facebook, would be the most effective way to reach the broadest audience. This fit into my skills as a journalism major, since I am well-versed on the effects of mass communication and have over 700 "friends," many of whom are linked to the Madison community.

To jumpstart the campaign, I started a Facebook event (found [here](#)). I invited every one of my 706 Facebook "friends" and also shared a link to the event on my profile page. Within the first week of posting the event, to my surprise, there were four people who posted on the event wall, 14 people listed as attending the event, 18 listed as "maybe" attending the event and 65 who declined to attend the event. The specific numbers of who planned on attending and who declined to attend was not what surprised me. It was the sheer fact that my event garnered nearly 100 responses within a day that excited me. By just simply uploading the event page, you are exposed to the content posted on the wall. Throughout the week leading up to the event, I will post quotes, videos and articles to inform and raise awareness to the harshness of homelessness.

To bring other people from the public to the Facebook event, we created and distributed over 50 posters around campus and nearby Madison areas. We wanted to make sure that our campaign hit a

diverse target audience. We had to make sure that our campaign spoke to the homeless community, which may not have a computer to be able to access Facebook.



Homeless Persons' Memorial Day event poster that was distributed on campus

I guess this is the point where I determine if I accomplished or failed the goal of my project. The thing is, my project isn't done. What my project was "supposed" to be is nearing an end and I suppose I could evaluate the number of people that I was able to recruit to attend the upcoming memorial event, but that would be missing the big picture. Of course, I want everyone to attend the event but ultimately this event is being used as a springboard for our "big idea," which is breaking stereotypes and stigmas with our "homeless potential" campaign.

You may be asking, what exactly is "homeless potential?" It is the image I would like to have the local public shift to, instead of stereotyping and discrimination. "Homeless potential" is the potential each homeless individual has to contribute to society in a positive manner. After the memorial service on December 21, we will launch

our “homeless potential” campaign on Facebook by posting personal stories of local homeless individuals who have changed their lives around in a positive way. We will also post national stories of famous stories such as the Green Bay Packers’ Donald Driver, who grew up in homelessness.

Before we can shift people’s frame of mind to the potential of homeless people, we must break the stigma and near dehumanization of homeless people, which is widely perpetuated by a negative representation in the media. This will also be accomplished by using personal stories, but they will be through a darker lens to grab people’s attention and stir emotions.

I understand this was suppose to be just a semester-long project for ILS 252, but I was so inspired by this project topic and where it took me that I have decided to make this an indefinite goal of mine to change the perception of homelessness in downtown Madison. This is no small task and quite honestly we have a very steep hill to climb, but I have formed too strong of a connection with Donna and her mission to simply stop. This project has certainly transcended confines of the academic setting.

We will see where the project will go from here. All I know is that after being exposed to the harsh realty of homelessness first hand, I just can't abruptly end this project and turn my cheek to injustice that happens on a daily basis on the streets of our campus. I firmly believe in what Donna and I are trying to accomplish and am confident that by changing people's perspective of homelessness, the willingness to help will soon follow. As a matter of fact, my survey shows evidence that this is true. Exactly 60 percent of respondents admitted that they would give money to a homeless person depending on certain situations. These "certain situations" were described mainly as safety, attitude of homeless person and how they would spend the money, all of which are attributes influenced by stereotypes. Moreover, nearly 70 percent of respondents admitted to feeling sorry for homeless individuals when they walked by them on the street. [5]

People want to do the right thing. They just need to be motivated to

do so. Most people need the reassurance that what they are giving, whether it's money, time or energy, will actually make a difference. Showing the success of past homeless people can shed light to the potential that current homeless people have. And so our "homeless potential" campaign begins.

References

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