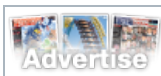


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GUEST COLUMN

Tent City offers glimpse into lives of 'all the lonely people'

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It was Halloween Eve and I joined a group of 15 students from a private high school in Sylvania to volunteer at Tent City. The students had collected winter clothing for distribution to the homeless and hurting. They also volunteered to serve an early breakfast Saturday morning before free medical treatment would be offered to the needy. The effect of their effort was temporal but the lessons learned will last a lifetime.

Tent City, an effort to coordinate volunteers with the needy, began 20 years ago. Ken Leslie, the energetic event coordinator of this three-day event, welcomed us warmly as we sat by a pile of split logs and a roaring fire on Civic Center Mall, just across from the courthouse. Three large tents had been set up. One housed tables and chairs and food offerings. Another tent housed an amazing array of well-organized clothing, toiletries, shoes and stacks of new blankets. The third tent had rows of chairs surrounding a stage where live entertainment was happening. The gleeful students anticipated a night of camping Downtown. The unseasonable temperature of 75 degrees was an enormous bonus. Full of energy, volunteers set up several additional small tents, so they could somewhat experience what the homeless endure day after day. To the teens, it was like experiencing the Hooverville Camps of the Great Depression. "Will we make Hobo Stew?" they wondered.

As the night wore on, the stage crooners belted out songs like "California Dreaming," "The House of the Rising Sun," "Working Man Hero" and "Eleanor Rigby." The words of the latter were haunting, "All the lonely people/where do they all belong?"

The rosy glow on the evening was shattered as the campers bedded down for the night. Gale-force winds whipped through the tented area, pounding rain blanketed the mall and the thermometer plunged like the bad luck of many gathered. The water-saturated ground could have been tolerated but the winds decimated small tents and the rain hit like a tidal wave. Dorothy was no longer in Kansas. Halloween had arrived. Students grabbed their saturated blankets and made a dash past the smoldering fire, past the port-a-potties standing in 2 inches of water to the main tents. Draped all over the chairs and the soggy ground were many snoring bodies already fast asleep. The battlefield was littered with the bodies of wounded from the war on poverty.

What followed was a night of misery — and stern reality for many. Wet clothing and blankets were chilled by the winds, chairs toppled, tent poles creaked and threatened to give way and fresh rounds of stinging rain came sweeping in. This was punctuated by snores and stale odors. The homeless slept, on while the teens agonized. I wondered what a Korean exchange student would write home to her parents about America. Most students concluded that the fetal position was the warmest way to endure. There was nowhere to reach for any creature comforts.

Before dawn, an influx of volunteers arrived. Leslie was as chipper as could be. "Imagine all the great people who probably performed on this portable stage. And to think you slept on it," he said as he covered muddy areas with cardboard, directed us to collect litter and to fold chairs as chiropractic tables and medical paraphernalia arrived. Students who are accustomed to sleeping late on Saturday mornings were surprised that the mini-mounds of humanity, still draped in old blankets, were queuing for dental care registration and other services. A Red Cross kitchen in a mobile unit was full of swift-working volunteers who were cracking eggs and sizzling bacon. A fellow tent dweller, not able to wait for the breakfast, stirred old coffee with a shriveled hotdog that was still setting on a table. "All the lonely people, where do they all belong?"

Exhausted, wet, shivering and still hungry, the van load of mud-coated students took off for the confines

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of their heated school building. They all but kissed the floor in the lobby as they ran to the restrooms with flush toilets and sinks. Tent City and 1Matters is not only seeking to aid the unhoused and impoverished, it is helping raise the awareness of the hundreds of volunteers in the area. Lessons learned will linger long after the appreciation for hot showers and comfortable beds fades. The school of hard knocks has able teachers.

"All the lonely people, where do they all belong?"

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