

God has a heart

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Do you remember the walk that seemed to go on forever around Draycote Water at the beginning of the year? This seemed to be just another School commitment that was taking up my already limited free time. It was annoying. However, what I failed to fully comprehend when I was walking those 7.5 miles was what an incredible contribution I was making to the charities in question. We raised £30,000 for a charity called HOPE 4, an organisation “relieving the plight of homeless and badly housed people in Rugby”.

I went to visit Hope 4, sheltered away in a corner near the Church in Rugby. I went there twice: first to meet Reverend Michael Bochenski and Pete Wayman, both of whom were instrumental in the foundation of the organisation, and a second time to have lunch with the people affected by homelessness. It seemed appropriate to me, as I was walking to Hope 4, that it was a cold and rainy day; it served to highlight the purpose of the charity: to protect people who have found themselves in their own personal turmoil, to give them a place of sanctuary.

In practical terms, there are two paid workers there every day helping to oversee the food and shower facilities but also creating contact between the homeless and detox centres to help the homeless with possible drug or alcohol issues, housing agencies and finally job support. It appeared to me that the primary role played by the centre was to create a hub where people could meet and forge relationships in the midst of a society which seems to reject them as human beings. It is not just a refuge, it is a place of hope and conviviality. During my second visit, I was most struck by the image of a middle-aged woman crying discreetly into her tea in an effort not to attract attention. One of the workers there, recognising the sensitivity of the situation, quietly put her arm around the lady and said a few comforting words. There was no need for in-depth analysis of her upset at that moment, just the need to tell her she was not alone. The delicacy of the way the volunteer went about consoling the lady was so touching.

The experience helped me to break down every stereotype I had of the homeless; previously I was comfortable categorizing them as a homogenous group who had ended up in this situation through some fault of their own - perhaps through relentless drug-abuse. Another stereotype was my assumption that workers would be faced by persistent violent acts by the visitors. However, this assumption was dispelled when I found out that, during the 12,000 visits that the centre has received since the foundation of the charity, Pete has only been faced with aggressive behaviour three times. I strongly believe that they have been faced with such few combative gestures because Hope 4 recognises the importance of treating everyone as equals; that the moment the visitors step through the door they can forget the discrimination they face on the streets and genuinely feel at ease in a non-judgemental place. I felt ashamed at my lack of empathy for the homeless prior to my visit: it is this lack of compassion on the part of society that most alienates these people. Michael talked of a need for society to make an “empathetic leap”. This insensitivity towards the homeless was in evidence when local residents objected to the relocation of the Hope 4 centre due to the fear of the unknown. A syndrome commonly dubbed NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) prevented a move to an old hotel. The ironic point of this tale is that Hope 4 is currently situated above a children’s café,

surely a cause for concern if the local residents fear their presence. It is frustrating that people do not realise that the majority of the visitors at Hope 4 are harmless.

A theme recurrent in the interview with Michael and Pete was how easy it is for people of any status to find themselves in such a dehumanizing position. "Everyone is one disaster away from being homeless," Pete kept repeating. This message resonated strongly with me, as young people tend to feel invincible, like nothing can realistically harm them; it is this type of psychology that can lead to drug abuse and possible homelessness, depending on the severity of the situation. It was rather humbling to hear the story of an ex-primary schoolteacher who had met this fate; he was well-dressed, clean and well-spoken - not qualities one usually associates with the homeless. John, the man in question, had suffered a marital break-up and had ended up homeless. He said that through coming to Hope 4 he had found confidence and hope in humanity, as he was reassured that people cared for him. It has given him an emotional energy that has set him up to try to realise his ambition of working in a prison. John has now been given accommodation from which he can start to rebuild his life again. Dr Sutcliffe and I both had the opportunity to have a conversation with Alex Waddell, an affable man with an inviting smile. It was at first quite intimidating walking into the centre when all the visitors were having a jovial lunch. I felt like an intruder. However, I sat down and was greeted by the warm smile of Alex: he took a genuine interest in me, asking questions about my future ambitions. He was very comfortable talking about his situation, explaining that, when he split up from his partner, it was the expectation of the man to leave the home. Thanks to the work of Hope 4, he has also recently found accommodation.

It is hard to get a firm grasp on how many homeless people there are in Rugby due to transient nature of their existence, but the number has undoubtedly increased due to the economic downturn that has particularly hit industrial towns. At the moment, Hope 4 has 65 active guests, meaning that they come at least every month. Their visits are very fluid and there are usually around 10 visitors each day, a small nucleus of people milling around the centre enjoying each other's company. When I went for lunch, there were around 15 people in the centre eating lunch, watching the TV, reading the latest Jeffrey Archer novel and having a civilised conversation over the conventional English cuppa. There I got talking to Hannah, a 27-year old without a roof over her head. Her situation seemed very sensitive and I was careful not to push for too many personal details but, when talking about her position, she said "I wouldn't wish this upon my worst enemy". She explained that, when homeless, you lose the things that you take for granted, like brushing your teeth in the morning or having regular showers. It is a vicious cycle as, when you lose these basic necessities, society increasingly rejects people whose outward appearance or smell is different from the norm. Going to Hope 4, a centre equipped with showers and washing-machines, the homeless have access to some of these basic needs that enables them to regain contact with humanity.

I asked Michael and Pete, both Christians, what their main motivation was for creating and running such a time-consuming organisation. The inevitable answer was God. "God has a heart for the poor," they said. Idealistically, their goal would be to "not have anyone to serve, to close this place down". However the reality is that this is inconceivable in the near future. So, without any real end goal in sight, I asked what keeps them going. The answer was very simple. Hope. The name of the organisation might make this seem an obvious answer but hope is a quality so necessary both for the volunteers and for the homeless. It's what keeps both carers and guests going through the new

difficulties that present themselves and is needed in order to see a potentially very rewarding outcome.

Michael gave me the example of Lee Winley, a middle-aged father who came to Hope 4 two years ago, an alcoholic with a cocaine and heroin addiction. He had lost his family through his actions and had been denied access to his daughter. Initially, Lee had appeared to be a lost cause. He only attended the first few Alpha sessions (group discussions about Christianity) but he came back and completed the full course at a later date. From there, he found the courage to join a rehab programme called the “12 Step Programme”. He cited the Alpha course he attended at Hope 4 as his main inspiration for getting clean and starting afresh. He is now employed giving anti-drugs talks around the country and is an avid member of a Baptist activity in Derbyshire. It was the guiding light of God that enabled Lee to get his life back on track. There seems to be a subtle, but tangible stigma attached to the label of being religious amongst people of my age. However, going to the centre and seeing how instrumental the belief in a higher being is to the morale of both the workers and the people most in need demonstrates the value of religion that should provide food for thought for any atheist. Talking to Michael and Pete, both very different individuals, I could see that the guidance of God enabled the centre to function as a team rather than just an organisation, and this, above all else, helps to create the congenial atmosphere I so relished at lunch.

I was touched by the story of Lee Winley but it became apparent to me that out of 232 registered guests, this must be a rather exceptional case. Michael conceded that naturally this was a special case but emphasised that one story such as Lee’s was enough to feel like you’re doing something worthwhile. He then recounted a story that you may remember from a Chapel talk he gave a few months ago. A boy is on a beach awash with starfish. There are thousands of them slowly dying on the sand with no access to water. He walks along the shore and throws as many back into the sea as possible. His father comes along and asks him what the point of his exercise was when he could not possibly save all of the starfish. He replies, with all the optimism of youth, that, if he can save one, it would be better than nothing. It was easy to draw the connection Michael was alluding to: despite the relentless nature of homelessness problems, the problem has never disheartened him because helping one lost starfish is better than none.

At the end of the interview, Michael asked me why I had decided to do this piece, what had motivated me to find more about the plight of homeless people in Rugby. After several moments of slightly panicked contemplation, I told him that I was motivated by a desire to see how a community can work together to help people less fortunate than themselves. It is easy to forget how lucky one is and to take things for granted. He then presented me with a challenge that I want to convey to you, the reader. He said: “find ways of exposing yourself to the other Britain, to the pressures faced by people”. It is so easy to get involved in projects such as Teach First or volunteering at university to help those in need such as the homeless.

After seeing the charity for myself, I feel confident in reassuring you that the money you raised in September went to a worthwhile cause. The final sum enabled the organisation to pay for a three-year lease of the property they are currently occupying and to refurbish the centre. Michael wished me to express their immense gratitude to the School as it has lifted a huge economic burden from the organisation.