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On the Frontlines

The Gift of Community

**A formerly homeless man tells what he most wanted for
Christmas when he was on the streets**

By Wes Browning

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com

The Gift of Community

A formerly homeless man tells what he most wanted for Christmas when he was on the streets by Wes Browning



The author now writes about social issues for Seattle's *Real Change*.

I spent my first homeless Christmas at an un-Christmas party that was hosted by a group of Hindu Indian students. It was the 1970s, and I was a Ph.D. candidate in mathematics at Cornell University.

The Indians were escaping their isolation from the Christian milieu of an American college. I was escaping, for that evening, the isolation of class and homelessness.

I had been living on \$300 a month as a teaching assistant when, in my fourth year, I found myself homeless because of an abrupt rise in rents. One real estate speculator had bought out a large chunk of Cornell's Collegetown and jacked up the rents throughout. I found no rooms for less than two and a half months' income, and I didn't have it.

I stayed in graduate school. I kept going to classes. I slept on the floors of campus buildings, hiding from security. It was exhausting. I couldn't get enough sleep. That's the hardest thing about homelessness: You're constantly tired. There's no good place to sleep.

Homeless services were either unavailable or irrelevant. Had I needed it, there was a weekly free meal, courtesy of a downtown church. Eating wasn't a problem, though, because I continued to work as a teaching assistant. What I needed was a place to sleep, but there was no shelter in town. If there were, it's likely I wouldn't have been allowed to use it because I was a student.

But how could I abandon my education? When you have little, the little you have is that much more important to you. You hang on to your assets like drowning people hang on to dogs. My asset was an education that might lead to a career that could

prevent homelessness from happening again.

My situation was doubly isolating. I felt isolated from most of Cornell because I was so poor in the midst of general wealth. My classmates often discussed their stock investments in front of me. And I was isolated from the surrounding community because to them I was just another privileged outsider. I was quite willing to work off-campus and tried to find a part-time job, but I discovered a terrific animosity toward college students. Maybe that's why I became friends so easily with other outsiders at Cornell, like foreign students.

So I found myself invited to the un-Christmas party, which was held at a private house and attended by about 30 people. There'd been 2 feet of snow that day. With the hot, spicy Indian food planned, there had to be beer. But the refrigerator wouldn't hold it all. What to do? Somebody said, "Put it outside in the snow!"

Of course, the beer froze. We celebrated our shared fate of mouths on fire and only beer-sicles to suck on.

I survived that year, got a room, and eventually received my doctorate in mathematics. I began a career as a research mathematician. Even before my degree was conferred I started having seizures that I thought were heart attacks. Doctors told me they weren't, but couldn't help me otherwise. The seizures first prevented me from doing research, and then from teaching. I ended up living in Seattle, supporting my wife and child as a cab-driver.

It was 1983 then, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was just beginning to be a public concern in connection with war veterans. Mine had been a family war. In 1950, on my first birthday, I suffered a severe head

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injury at my parents' hands. They thought the child abuse might be discovered, and so decided to stage a car accident. It worked as a cover-up, though I didn't die as expected. Instead, I woke from a four-month coma remembering everything, including the two of them arguing over which one would drive into me.

Following that there were years of more abuse. I can't really say why. I can't comprehend my parents' motives.

In 1983, all that seemed behind me. My parents had recently died. But the doctors I saw at the time could not tell me that my panic attacks (the seizures), flashbacks, and growing agoraphobia were due to untreated PTSD. These symptoms finally destroyed my marriage, and I found myself at age 34 living out of an old car with just \$35, a polyester blanket, and my math books, right at Christmastime.

It was the one of the coldest Seattle Christmases I can remember. I continued to drive a cab during the night shift from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. After 4 a.m., I lived out of my own car. It had no heater, and before I discovered an underground university parking

garage that absorbed the heat of surrounding office buildings, I didn't know how to stay warm.

That Christmas I couldn't tell one day from the next. They were all cold. They were all Mondays. They were all lonely. They were all crowded with cab passengers who didn't know or care that I was homeless. I began to forget what year it was. It was the year I learned that you have to take your socks off once in a while, no matter how cold it is, or you will get gangrene and lose your feet. But don't take them off for too long, or you will lose them to frostbite. That was it. Merry Christmas.

It was all I could do to maintain my cab driving. I had to pay to drive, about \$35 per shift, plus gas. My earnings were whatever was left over. But I was too sleepy to find many fares. I averaged \$12 for myself each night.

There were services for the homeless all around me, but I don't know how they would have helped because I was in no condition, emotionally, to seek them out, and they didn't come looking for me. I considered looking for a homeless shelter, but I found out that I would have to quit my cab-driving job to stay in one because the hours would conflict. But that \$12 per shift was what was feeding me and giving me hope. It was my one asset.

Seattle now has one shelter that sleeps people during the day, so that a few homeless can use it without giving up their night jobs. But we had none then.

After many months of homelessness, I was fortunate to meet a therapist who agreed to see me for only a token fee. At her urging I finally sought state help and obtained disability benefits so that I didn't have to drive a cab anymore. But I didn't want welfare, and so I applied to the state's



The author helps the street community by selling homeless vendors their *Real Change* newspapers every Saturday. The vendors then sell the papers throughout the Seattle area, pocketing the profits.

office of vocational rehabilitation. They placed me in a janitorial workshelter program.

The janitorial work restored my sense of community. I was working on a crew. We were a team of six who all had similar problems, working on the same goals. I was eventually placed with a small janitorial company and got off welfare.

During that time I took up painting, which led to my involvement with an agency dedicated to helping the homeless. What was then called the Homeless Art Gallery in Seattle, and later the StreetLife Art Gallery, provided a place for homeless and formerly homeless artists to work on their art and sell it to the public. I was still poor and very much at risk of becoming homeless again, but through the gallery I could supplement my income.

After I had been a participant at the gallery for a couple of years, one

of my paintings was selected for the cover of *Real Change*, a new Seattle paper dedicated to homeless issues. One thing led to another, and I found myself writing a column for the paper. I also began to take part in a writing workshop that *Real Change* sponsored.

Then, in 1996, the janitorial company folded and I could no longer afford my rent. I became homeless again. I was 47.

But this time I was part of a community. It wasn't quite the same as drinking frozen beer with 30 Hindu Indians (nothing could ever top that), but through *Real Change* I found myself with people who understood what I was going through. The writing workshop was more than a workshop; it was a support group. It didn't just provide a bunch of would-be writers a service; it provided us with each other.

I don't know why, but all my homeless Christmases were white,

including that last one. I spent it snowed in at a house in North Seattle, where the members of the writing workshop had gathered to rehearse for a holiday reading at a church feed.

My next column in *Real Change* dealt with the concept of bread as the metaphor of metaphors. It's the communion thing. That's what makes or breaks a Christ's Mass. It's true that community brings vital services within reach: Through contacts at *Real Change*, I found my current subsidized apartment building, which has daily on-site support staff and regular community services.

But beyond that, for some of us the community we find in homeless services is the only decent one we have ever experienced – a community of equals united in a common cause. This is what many homeless people want more than anything else at Christmastime. □