

The faces of homelessness

Reality Check has 'Alternative Spring Break'

by Robin Clarke and John Miller
Contributing Writers

What you are about to read may shock you, might seem unbelievable to you, but--if you keep reading--will be the best story you hear today. Before we start, take a moment and ponder over a few words; form the most accurate images for these words that you can. Homeless, drug addict, unemployed. Soup kitchen, homeless shelter, drug rehab center. Father, mother, child.

Now let us tell you what we saw when poverty, homelessness and addiction showed us its face. Or, should we say faces? A group from Behrend's service organization, Reality Check, spent Spring Break with Baltimore, Maryland's homeless population, and saw the many faces that live with poverty day in and day out.

Ten students, along with Chris Rizzo, Director of Student Activities, went to Baltimore to live with 14 "drug users, thieves, and bull-shitters," as one of the residents of the shelter described all of them. We stayed at Christopher Place, a revolutionary homeless shelter in Baltimore's inner city--revolutionary because it literally transforms the most destitute and poverty-stricken into self-sufficient members of society.

One of the only ways one can understand the magnitude of the project underway in Baltimore is to experience it first hand, as everyone who went on the trip will testify. Let us, then, offer you a sample of what we saw and heard. Christopher Place was more than a shelter; it was a home. Entering the building, which was secured with barbed wire fencing, one encounters a large living room with television, lounge area, magazines and a chess board. This is where the men relax, and also where a drug counselor meets with them during the week.

Christopher Place is not a drop in shelter with a row of cots, a shower, and maybe a laundry facility if you are lucky. It is not what you envisioned when you thought of the word homeless shelter. It is very much a home, and the men who live there are members

of a class which teaches them job skills, math and writing, offers them help with interviewing, and re-orientates them toward getting a permanent home. Most importantly, the program requires that a resident be drug-free and sober throughout their stay.

We have described the elements of Christopher Place, but what makes it amazing for all of us is the men we were fortunate to meet there. These men--their honesty, kindness, and commitment to reclaiming control over their lives--astonished us. Here are some of their stories:

"George": Like all of the men, George spoke to us about why he came to be at Christopher Place. "This is gonna be a lifelong struggle for me," he said. "That drug, it doesn't just want me...it wanted everything about me." A father, like many of the men, George remembers stealing toys from his children, "all for the drug," because addiction for him was a loss of control. "That little boy inside me when I have my addiction...he doesn't always do what George wants to do." Perhaps this man best captured the essence of homelessness and what it does to the human spirit, when he said, "this was no way to live, for any human being."

"Ron": One of seven children, Ron (like nearly all men) said he "grew up in a productive family. My parents worked and I had what I needed." Behind the scenes of this productivity, however, "my father was an alcoholic...I thought I wanted to be like my father, but what I really wanted was attention." Ron did very well in school, namely because that was one way to get noticed. When this notice didn't come, however, Ron found other ways. "When he [the father] would have to come get me in jail, I got that attention." Also like every single resident of Christopher Place, Ron associates his recovery with finding God. "My biggest problem," he asserts, "was faith that God would take care of me when I couldn't take care of myself."

"Stanley": Stanley, though he might not want you to know this, was truly a teddy-bear inside a football player's body. He is also the big dog of Christopher Place,



The faces of homelessness: Members of Behrend's Reality Check with residents of Christopher Place in Baltimore, MD during spring break. Members stayed at the homeless shelter for a week as part of Alternative Spring Break.

Courtesy Robin Clarke/John Miller

in our opinion. We will always remember Stan playing Uno with us and, with a grin and oh so considerably, dealing out another's cards for her or him after receiving a draw four wild or a draw two. (This is not a gift, by the way, if you have never played Uno.) "I didn't come from what you would call a dysfunctional family," Stan told us. "I was a good Catholic school kid." A gifted athlete, Stan graduated from Grambling University, and was invited to play for the USFL. "I went from making \$78,000/yr. to \$100,000/yr.," he said because of his addiction. With remarkable power and candor, Stan looked us straight in the eye and said "that ain't no proud stuff for me to talk about, but that's real."

"Pete": Pete is a middle-aged man, one of only two white males at Christopher Place. In college, he tried acid, marijuana, you name it. He suffered a stroke a couple of years ago as a result. We called him nickname man. He called us: Pittsburgh, Big Boy, Tall Girl, Hands-on-Hips, and Hippie-Chick.

"Jack": John Miller describes Jack as the nicest old man he's ever met besides his own grandfather. We all agree. He was the quiet guy when we got there, but he really enjoyed us and by Thursday he was talking to everyone. He went outside and waved to us as the Penn State van pulled away Friday morning.

"Jake": Also an older gentleman, Jake became addicted during his term in

Vietnam. "When I went in I was just an alcoholic, but when I came out I'd been introduced to marijuana, LSD, mescaline, cocaine...you name it, we did it." In all those years since, this is the first time he's ever been in treatment. He is now 6 months clean and sober, and going strong.

"Harold": "Jails, death, or institutions"--these are the only options left for a crack or heroin addict, Harold knew. "My life was a revolving door" from jail to institution, he said. "I only had one other thing left: death." Harold spoke with the hortatory voice of a preacher or a politician, when he described the drug as a demon--"insidious, cunning and baffling."

Some of the other testimonies included "Daron," a Jamaican man, who said that "everything I ever worked for was lost" because of addiction. Let us not that Christopher Place is a homeless shelter, not

strictly a drug rehab center, and therefore what we realized is that homelessness and drug addiction are often in complicity with one another. That is to say, we saw a cycle of addiction and poverty to which anyone, especially a college student as the men emphasized, can fall victim. Two men, "Freddie" and Reggie", work in the shelter and are former graduates of the Christopher Place program. Reggie began his talk by grabbing a chair and pushing it a few feet behind him. "That's my past," he said. "That's where it stays--behind me." Both Reggie and Freddie were the epitome of positive change. Freddie told one of us that he has a twelve year old daughter, and that--by working days and nights, saving all his pennies--he plans to take her to Disney World. He wants her to see that he is not just some man who worries and broods over money; he wants her to enjoy time with him and for

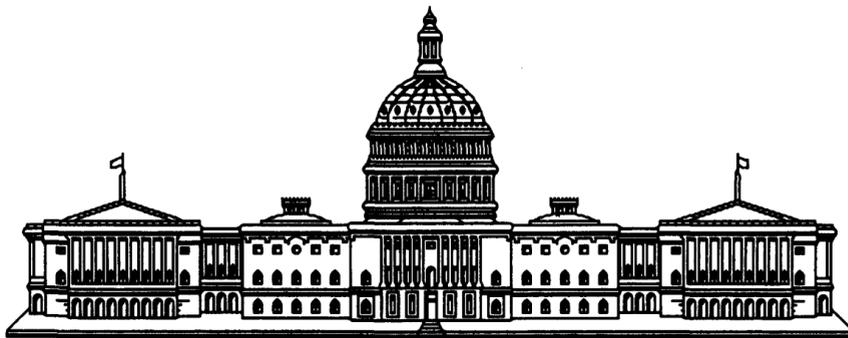
her to have something he never got.

Students spent the nights playing Ping-Pong, pool, chess and of course, Uno with the guys, whom we came to know by name and by personality (wow were they full of personality!). We slept in one room at the shelter, and shared an excellent dinner each night with the guys. During the day some of us worked at our Daily Bread, a soup kitchen like no other.

Imagine Wintergreen Cafe. Ninety-five people enter at 10:30 a.m. and sit down for lunch. The guests--you are always referred to as a guest--are served. You receive either a regular meal, or a veggie plate--both include a good mix of the food groups, plus dessert. You are permitted only one cup of hot tea, because between the hours of 10:30-12:30, around 800

see HOMELESS page 7

**STUDENTS ARE ONLY AS LOUD AS THEY SPEAK
VOICES NEEDED - RUN FOR SGA!**



**SGA ELECTIONS ARE NOW IN PROGRESS
POSITIONS UP FOR ELECTION ARE:
PRESIDENT
VICE PRESIDENT
SECRETARY
SENATORS**

**THERE ARE NO PREVIOUS REQUIREMENTS FOR THESE POSITIONS
ALL APPLICANTS MUST BE FULL TIME STUDENTS**

**PICK UP A PETITION TODAY IN THE OFFICE OF STUDENT ACTIVITIES
OR THE RUB DESK AND LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!**

**PETITIONS ARE DUE BY APRIL 4
ELECTIONS: APRIL 22-23**



Courtesy Robin Clarke/John Miller

Feeding the hungry: Participants in the Alternative Spring Break outside of Our Daily Bread, a soup kitchen like no other.