

HUMANISM IN MEDICINE: LESSONS FROM THE HOMELESS

Keila Rose López, Class of 2019

Empathy was a necessity in conversation, and I learned so much more when I just listened and looked beyond my personal biases to identify with and understand their struggles.

From experience, I can say that the only way to birth passion in the soul of anyone is to interact and integrate oneself with the cause that ignites it. This was true for me when I entered as a volunteer into the Salvation Army Women's and Children's Shelter. When I first walked into the cafeteria I felt reserved, like a stranger entering a sacred and private world. However, as soon as I met the women and the many rambunctious, playful children living in the shelter, my inhibitions began to melt away.

I first sat down with a woman named Emily. As we began to talk, I asked, "Where are you from?" She began to recount her story of trying to make a better life in Florida after being kicked out of her home when she became pregnant. "I have a one-and-a-half-year-old girl and I'm expecting a boy soon," she said, with deep worry expressed on her face. She talked about her dreams of finishing school, attending college, and having her own home where she could care for her children. My eyes watered in disbelief when I heard that she was my age.

Over the months that followed, I listened to these women's stories, from victims of heart breaking tales of abuse and sex trafficking, to women who had just fallen on hard times. I saw how tirelessly they worked to get back on their feet and how much they longed to be treated with validation. With fiery passion, I was determined to do something, to bring some joy to these needy women and their families in the shelter.

I decided to create the Salvation Army Women's and Children's Shelter Spa Day. It was a day created for the sole purpose of pampering and showering the women of this shelter, and their children, with gifts, food, and love. I assembled a team of professional hairstylists, manicurists, and companies such as Body Shop, Disney, and Sephora, to donate their time and assets to these women in need. When I walked in with my team, gift baskets and toys in hand, the sheer joy on the women's faces left me breathless. They could barely contain their excitement as a line was assembled for haircuts, manicures, and pedicures.

The first woman to get a makeover was known for displaying a tough exterior, but when she saw her face in the mirror she burst into tears, saying, “This is the first time in my life I have ever felt beautiful!” Many women became emotional, embraced me, and some even danced across the room, loving their new fabulous personas. I was moved as I heard a woman saying, “Thank you for loving us.” I wanted to do something for these women to show them that they were beautiful, to embrace their worth and meaning.

On every Spa Day, we shared laughter. Over the three years that I served at the shelter, I listened to stories of how the women became homeless, and observed the eclectic instant family that had formed in the inner workings of the shelter. Once, a woman shared with me, “Every time you do a spa day, you make me feel like I’m not living in a homeless shelter; you make me feel normal, like you’re coming to visit me at my house.” This statement truly solidified the importance of my work.

I truly feel that my experiences serving the women of the Salvation Army Women’s and Children’s Shelter has developed and influenced many of the qualities that I will carry with me in serving my patients as a physician. I had to demonstrate integrity in how I carried myself and in my interactions with the women. I learned that integrity is the foundation of building trust and demonstrating this quality allowed the women to feel comfortable in sharing their own personal stories. Every time I planned an activity, I always made sure that every woman felt cared for and made certain every child received a toy, that everyone felt content.

As exhausting as these efforts were, I learned these women needed, deserved, and demanded every ounce of excellence that I possessed. I had to be a leader, a team player, and a servant all at the same time, and this allowed me to grow tremendously and understand that excellence was not just being outstanding



A HELPING HAND

Julia R. Teytelbaum, Class of 2018

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for my own benefit, but being outstanding to bring something great to fruition for others.

Through my work I understood the reward of compassion, that it is not just a mere word, but an action that demonstrates love and serves to transform, break down barriers, and achieve mutual vulnerability. I understood altruism when the demands of exams and deadlines were pressing, yet the excitement of the women having something to look forward to, helped me push my needs

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aside. I learned in every conversation to demonstrate respect, to never treat the women I spoke to as beneath me because of their situation, their education, or their appearance. Rather, I admired them for their courage in overcoming insurmountable obstacles and their drive to better themselves. Empathy was a necessity in conversation, and I learned so much more when I just listened and looked beyond my personal biases to identify with and understand their struggles. I understood service with

every nail painted, conversation had, or meal served. That service is demonstrated with humility and action with pure intentions. Ultimately, I took a valuable lesson away with me, that the values mentioned are attitudes and actions I must demonstrate in becoming the type of physician that can truly embrace the needs of my patients. ■



BALANCE

Tamra Travers, MD

I reached out to Dr. Ken Brummel-Smith for advice when I was on my very first clinical rotation. His advice, included below, became the inspiration for this piece.

“You are being given an amazing gift, working with people who are suffering. The most important thing you can do for them is to recognize your feelings and not run from them. Your job is to remain present, and removed, at the same time. It’s the perfect Zen experience. Look at the Tao symbol and think of that when you are feeling overwhelmed.

The black is being overwhelmed. But even in that tidal wave there is a circle of hope. The white is your commitment to the patient and to yourself. There’s always a dark circle hidden in that, but the white is strong – and on top!”

Dr. Travers graduated from the Florida State University College of Medicine in 2016. She is currently a resident in the Family Medicine Residency Program at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Beth Israel.