

United Way on Homelessness

- United Way Annual Breakfast
- May 15, 2014
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Dan Wilson, thanks. This is a dream come true for me. Let me tell you all a little secret about myself. While many people count sheep to go to sleep at night, I every single night imagine myself standing at the plate with a catcher behind me giving the signals. I concentrate on the pitch flying in fast, low, curve, slider, and I try to connect with the ball and stroke it over the left field fence. Actually I'm quite good! I always imagine it is Randy Johnson hurling at me: tall, lanky, gangly, growling, mean-goateed Randy Johnson. I must admit that I have some trouble with his inside curve! So call the signals, Dan, and let's see if I can connect about what United Way is doing and can do for and with homeless people in King County.

I am privileged to continue to serve on the Board of the United Way after 15 years and also to be on the Governing Council of the Committee to End Homelessness. Homelessness is my issue, the measure of my humanity; homelessness is our issue, the measure of our community. I'm thrilled that at my university we've hosted Tent City and that we lead the Faith and Family Homelessness Initiative. I've done the One-Night Count, finding 14 homeless between Denny and Lake Union, Eastlake and Westlake; 14 homeless in cars, inside cardboard boxes, on leading docks, in doorways, or just walking aimlessly at 4:00 a.m. But that's only 14 of the 3,123 who were found unsheltered this year on the One-Night-Count. I visited Nicklesville, listened, looked, learned and I hope loved the people there. At the meetings of the Governing Council of the Committee to End Homelessness, I've been surrounded by hundreds from shelters, streets, cars, camps, and couches and I have held above my own name plate a sign bearing the name of one actual person who has died on our pavements this year. I know the statistics, the numbers, the data, the graphs, the metrics, the dashboards, the goals, the failures, the progress.

In all of this, my starting point—and I believe our starting point—is the simple act of seeing the homeless. A newborn child looks instinctively to find his or her mother's eyes, wanting to be seen lovingly, because only by being seen can the child find his or her identity and only by being seen in the eyes of a mother can the infant find the pathway to all relationships. Being seen is the most fundamental need of all of us always. The homeless even more than most need to be seen. In tent cities, in shelters, on corners, in transitional housing, in food lines, the homeless, even more than a roof over their head—which they do need—need to be seen in their humanity, to count in their dignity, to be perceived with respect. We are the eyes to which they look to find their identity and their pathway to a healthy relationship and life. Pope Francis—now there's one over the left field fence, Dan—says that when someone tells him they gave something to a poor person on the street, he always asks them, “Did you look the person in the eye?” Few say yes. Then he asks, “Did you touch the person?” Almost no one says they did. Seeing and touching the poor is what is needed.

See and touch the success we are having in the 10 year plan to end homelessness. See 34,000 people whose homelessness we helped end over the last ten years. See confused veterans,

women fleeing domestic violence, whole families thrown on hard times by the recession; see youth rejected for being gay or lesbian, see foster kids surviving on brutal streets when they've aged out of care. See them and know that United Way and its partners saw them, and touched them, and helped them. We have succeeded and we've succeeded with the hardest people to help because we've seen and we've touched and we've known how to get thousands of people to join with us out of their care and their humanity.

The One Night Count has not gone down but this year reached an all-time high. Are we dispirited? No. The economic downturn, the cost of housing, new needy people coming to our compassionate community, and more homeless youth have kept us from attaining our goal. But we've seen, touched and helped many more people than are still on the streets. We are still a community that will continue to say from the last decade to the next one: "We will not let people suffer the indignity of having no place to call home." We will see them, we will touch them, we will house them, we will love them. To do what we do at the United Way it is important that we do counts. Even more important is the simple fact of who counts—counts as persons—for United Way, and who counts for our volunteers, for our donors, for our communities. We ask both, "What's the count?" and "Who counts?" We will decrease the One Night Count, but we will not drop who counts for us.

Looking into the eyes and touching the homeless, we have a simple, clear plan:

1. stop people from falling into homelessness;
2. catch people fast when they lose housing;
3. help make homelessness rare and brief for those who, no matter what we do, will end up on our streets and help them with such basics as safe car camping and tent cities with access to water and bathrooms;
4. build more beds, both permanent and in shelters.

This is more than a plan on paper, this is a plan shaped by success, failure, changing conditions, painful progress, shaped by a United Way and a community which will not give up.

I come back to you neighbors, attorneys, techies, baristas, pastors, parents, donors, doctors, volunteers, citizens. No one ever became a great hitter by learning and memorizing all the statistics of baseball. Statistics are for the commentators and the fans. For the players—that is for you and for me—what makes for a great hitter is great eye/hand coordination. The "eye" of seeing the homeless and letting them see themselves whole in our eyes; and the "hand" of touching the homeless in their humanity in the most practical ways, an affirming touching, a hope-filled and hope-giving touching, a hand willing to reach from our humanity to theirs because we see them, we love them, and they count. Thanks.