

**Elizabeth Durgin**  
**Lowell House Student Speaker Series**  
**Thursday, January 27, 2011**  
*"Never Be Homeless"*

I have been volunteering at The Harvard Square Homeless Shelter since I was a freshman. During nights at the shelter, I often find myself in moments of reflection. Tonight, I am grateful for the opportunity to share some of these reflections with you.

The official definition of a homeless person is someone who lacks an "adequate nighttime residence". Someone who sleeps on the street, in a car or in our shelter is officially, "homeless". But, the word is wrong. This definition does not really describe someone who is homeless, but rather, someone who is houseless. The people I have met have made this difference clear to me. I've learned that a home is much more than an *adequate* nighttime residence.

Last year, I was working an overnight shift and heard two men shouting at each other in the men's sleeping area. As the staff person on duty, I entered the sleeping area to see what was happening and try to resolve the issue. One man was shouting accusations. He claimed someone had been touching him and his belongings while he was sleeping. Unfortunately, because I did not see what had happened, I couldn't do anything to truly resolve the dispute. I issued written warnings to both men for disturbing the space, leaving both men upset. The man who had been disturbed in his sleep vented his frustration in an angry monologue, "I'll take your damn warning, but I woke up to him touching me. He was going through my stuff. I'll make as much noise as I want to protect myself. Don't you get it? If someone was touching *you* in *your* sleep then how would *you* feel?" Then he paused briefly and looked me up and down. "Wait. Why would you understand? You are *safe* in your home. It must be nice." He was right. No matter how many nights I work in the shelter, I always go *home* to a safe place at the end of my shift. The man had said nothing about a *house*. He did not miss the four walls, the floor or the roof. He missed the safety of a *home*.

In addition to safety, a home is also marked by community, or a group of familiar faces who share something....a group of people who know you, who care about you, who help you, and some who even love you. A community is a kind of family. *At the end of the day, there are plenty of people who return to a dark, empty house.* They are not welcomed home by friends, family or neighbors. Instead, they are met by silence. The Harvard Square Homeless Shelter is not dark, empty or silent. It is full of familiar faces, who know you, who care about you and who

help you. I am not just speaking about the volunteers, but also the relationships, the friendships that exist within the homeless *community*. One particular man convinced me that someone can have a house and still feel homeless. Three years ago we had a guest successfully transition into permanent housing. He had a key to his own house, yet he would occasionally stay at the shelter. He had built a community at the shelter, which he lacked at his new house. In this way, the shelter felt more like home than did his own house.

Just before Winter Break I was speaking to one of our guests. She asked me if I was going home for break. I didn't know how to answer. The truth was, I was going home to Marblehead, the place where I grew up. Then, I was traveling to Florida, where my family has a condo. Finally, I would return home to Lowell. I consider all three of these places home. In all of these places, I experience safety and a sense of belonging. I responded, "Yes. I'll be going home. Are you going anywhere for the holidays?" She responded, "I am also going home for Christmas." She may be houseless, but she clearly had a home.

I am convinced that the shelter should be called a Houseless Shelter, not a homeless shelter. The phrase Homeless Shelter diminishes everything we, as shelter volunteers, try to do. We try to build a safe space, where our clients can feel that they are protected. We try to create a sense of community for our clients, a support network that will remain, even when they begin living elsewhere. In no way would I trivialize the horrors of homelessness by suggesting that our shelter is a home. But, it does attempt to temporarily provide certain components of a home. In a similar way, calling Lowell a house devalues everything on which the house system prides itself. It is a safe place. It is full of community. It is *not* simply an adequate residence. It is Lowell Home.

I chose this topic because it has been on my mind quite a bit as I enter my senior spring. I am becoming increasingly aware of the importance of having a home. I am also beginning to realize that one must work to build a home. Homes do not come with the keys to a house. Homes must be built over time. If I have any advice worth giving, it is to never be homeless. I hope this now carries a different meaning.

To underclassman, remember to make Lowell your home, not just your house. To graduating seniors, remember to take time next year to make your house a home, wherever you may end up. And to everyone here tonight (and to so many more), thank you for helping make Lowell my home and not just my house.