

Spare Something Please

When I first arrived at Harvard Square as a pre-frosh, I emerged from the T stop expecting to be smitten with the cozy cafes and cute shops. Instead, I stepped off the train station escalator and was greeted by a sign that said “Seeking human kindness” held by a homeless man. I didn’t know how to react, so I just looked away from him.

I grew up in Bulgaria where homelessness is rare. Even though there may be beggars on the streets, the vast majority of them have shelter. My family and I moved to the Chicago suburbs when I was 10, but life in the suburbs did not expose me to many homeless people. I had rarely thought about homelessness until a few years ago, when I learned about homelessness in my own family.

In the winter of 1990, my dad and uncle were homeless in Paris for two months. They left Bulgaria while it was still under communism and got to the other side of the Iron Curtain. My uncle was 28 and my dad was 24 years old. They only had enough money for two train tickets home in case things in the West did not work out for them. They slept on park benches during the cold winter nights, covered in cardboard and old newspapers. If they were lucky, they would be able to sleep at a mall during the coldest nights. My uncle spoke French well and they both looked for jobs, but with no success. No one wanted to hire them when they could not put down an address on a job application.

Most of what I know about the months they spent on the streets of Paris I learned 2 years ago from an episode of the French version of the show *60 Minutes*. One day, my dad and my uncle were approached by a television crew in a park asking them to participate in an episode about homelessness. After it aired, a woman called into the TV station to offer them temporary shelter because she sympathized with them and wanted to help. After that, they had an address to put down on job applications and they were able to obtain work and get on their feet. My uncle has lived in Paris ever since and the very same woman who called into the TV station over 30 years ago to offer them assistance is now his wife.

I shared this story with you because I wanted to show you that the homeless are not the people we usually imagine them to be. It’s easy to blame them for their

condition and assume that they are homeless because of addictions to gambling, drugs, alcohol, or other fault of their own. I often thought the same.

When I first came to Harvard, I was afraid when I saw the sleeping bags on the street and the homeless people on every corner. It has taken me 3 years to muster the courage to get to know them and only as a senior did I start volunteering at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. I know it's hard. But I hope that hearing this story will show you that the homeless are people with hopes and dreams just like the rest of us. Many of them are trying very hard to change their lives.

At the homeless shelter here, I've met a gentleman who loves painting and brightens everyone's day with his colorful pictures. When he is not painting, he is tirelessly practicing for his upcoming job interviews. Another guest at the shelter is a dedicated political activist who lobbies for state funding for HIV prevention programs and many other relevant issues. I also became close with an elderly woman who has a job, a Master's degree, and many years of work experience but became homeless because she could not afford to pay for her health expenses and apartment at the same time. When I met her, she told me that she is looking for volunteer opportunities, asked me about school, my family, and I forgot that I was talking to a homeless woman. She reminded me a lot of my own grandmother.

I don't have a solution to homelessness and I realize that not every homeless person on the street is like the people I just described. Some struggle with mental illness, addictions, or are not looking for jobs. But I ask each of you to spare something please. Next time you walk by a homeless person on the street, don't just look away from them. Instead of ignoring the man by ABP selling the spare change news, smile, say hello, consider buying the newspaper, or simply say "No, thank you". Treating the homeless with basic respect can make a difference. I wonder if I had walked by my dad while he was homeless, would I have looked the other way or said "Hello"...