

“Giving Shelter”

Leore Lavin

Let me tell you about one of the first times I cried in college. I was leaving the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, just two blocks from where you are sitting now. I was about to step out into freezing Massachusetts sleet—stressing about an upcoming assignment and exhausted from my shift—when I saw a woman standing at our door.

It was Issa, shivering and weeping. And she asked me for a pair of boots. “Of course,” I said. “I’ll go see what we have.” I turned around and went back in; I looked around for a size 10 pair of boots. The odds were not good. People tend to donate their white eyelet tankinis, and clubbing skirts, and 1000 pairs of cargo shorts; but not warm winter coats or boots.

I grabbed the only pair that might fit Issa. She removed her soaked Nikes in our vestibule and her feet were blue and curled in. They were covered in pieces of drenched napkin – her makeshift socks. And, the boots didn’t fit.

“I’m so sorry Issa, I can’t find, there aren’t,” I said...“I’m so sorry, but I have to go now.” I remember running down the block to my friends, chest heaving in sobs.

To this day I can’t stop thinking about the anguished look on her face, and how similar her curled feet looked to my grandmother’s hands in her last few years. That it was chance that I was warm and pursuing a Harvard degree, and that she was alone and frostbitten on the streets of Cambridge. And most of all, I am troubled by how little I could do in that moment. Issa didn’t just need a pair of boots that night – she needed, and still needs, a home and an income and someone that cares that can actually connect her to the resources that she needs.

You see, the written lines for Section 8, the subsidized housing vouchers, are 4-10 years long, and they are basically frozen in place. In 1980, Ronald Reagan ended federal funding to community mental health centers. Today, enormous numbers of mentally ill people live unsupported on the streets. On a single night in January this past year, 564,708 people in the United States-- over half a million people-- were homeless.

Our shelter is one way to fight homelessness, about 50 seconds from this dining hall, open every night during the 5 coldest months of the year. It's run entirely by your peers. Ironically, both the staff and guest communities have become a ~home~ for me for the past four years. I always laugh about how crazily familiar the routine of running a homeless shelter has become to me --I call it our hotel to my friends.

These four years of experiences at the Harvard Square Shelter have given me a glimpse into the systemic poverty that plagues our country.

Why do I say systemic? Let me take you on a tour of a typical Tuesday night. I come in with a co-director at 6:30 pm, running from our classes or our labs, to set up the shelter computer and then greet our volunteers at 6:45. We then make dinner - Harvard's frozen leftovers- and also set out snacks kindly donated from Darwin's or Pete's, and then open the doors at 7pm for our guests. That's happening at the shelter right now, even as I speak.

Mary always comes in first, frail and tiny, she's always reporting to us whose been sneaking a smoke in the bathroom but is always so grateful to have a bed. There's Paul, in his 70s and funny, and whose telling me for the 400th time that he will find me a job for next year if I go on a date with him. There's Steve, in his late 20s and

getting served dinner, he usually jokes about his “situation,” but these days he’s depressed about the call center job he feels trapped in. There’s Meg sitting at a table, crying to a volunteer about her growing tumor while trying to count the hats she sews and sells. I’ve seen all of these people for the past 4 years. They may never be able to get themselves out of these trauma-inducing situations and out of poverty. They’re the same people, every week, every month, every damn year.

I grew up Orthodox Jewish, and one of the most important tenants of my faith is that we were all created “b’tzelem elokim” in the image of god, and so must respect and give grace to each person. The services for getting people out of homelessness in this country do not come close to fulfillment of that truth. Our shelter is just a band-aid in a country where there is a gaping wound of a housing crisis.

We need advocacy, we need more people, and we need to improve housing assistance in this country. While we still have a long way to go nationally, the personal impact that staffing the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter has had on me has been profound. I never would have thought that volunteering there could have so intensely changed my perspective on government and activism and human dignity. So let me know if you ever want to volunteer. Maybe you’ll be able to find the pair of boots this time. And maybe, the experience will be as meaningful to you as it’s been for me.

Thank you.