

Liz Powers
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Invisible

Last week I was confused. My friend Katie said in an interview with a reporter that she often feels “invisible.”

I was confused because I think of Katie as one of the most visible people I know. It has taken me a while to unravel this paradox. I used to think that feeling “invisible” would mean that no one noticed you. But in fact, earlier in the fall Katie told me about how often people notice her and stop her on the street. Over and over, people offer her shoes.

Katie appreciates all of the people who are kind enough to offer her shoes. But she is tired of having the same conversation again and again. The conversation when she explains to a stranger on a chilly fall day that she doesn’t like shoes. That she prefers what she calls “living in the wild.”

So many people have offered her shoes over the years that she finally decided to use thread and a needle to avoid these conversations. She just completed a patch for her hat that says “Please don’t offer me shoes.”

The attention that Katie gets for her bare feet does not make her feel visible. In fact, this kind of attention may even intensify her feelings of invisibility because people are focusing on her poverty and her difference.

One of the only times Katie doesn’t feel invisible is when she is painting in an art group on Wednesday afternoons. Katie is currently homeless. She is around my age. She hasn’t had stable housing for a while. She is living on a porch and is thankful because she has a “place to exist.” She told me, “I spent a long time fighting for my right to exist everywhere I went. “

I have known Katie for about a year or so, and she often amazes me. She is incredibly talented and thoughtful. Her paintings sometimes inspire me. Her paintings sometimes scare me. Her paintings make me think.

My career goal is to help Katie and other invisible individuals get some positive attention. I first began working with homeless people seven years ago, and I remember the volunteer coordinator encouraged me to follow the “strengths-based approach.” This powerful idea challenged me to focus on the positive. It helped me notice things.

Instead of exclusively dwelling on the fact that people do not happen to have housing at the moment, why not focus on their talents? Their ability to write poetry. Their listening skills. The concept really stuck with me. It is central to my career choice and my daily life.

Since I graduated from college, I have been both creating and collaborating with art programs in homeless shelters. While running art groups in shelters, I have worked with many people who have suffered unimaginable pain. One artist had recently escaped 30 years of domestic violence when she came to her first painting group. She was slowly gaining confidence and learning to overcome her past. I had studied social problems in the abstract through coursework at Harvard but had no true understanding of the pain she felt.

I developed simple techniques to empower the women who participated in the art groups. I hugged everyone when they entered or left the group. I told goofy stories. I listened. I made jokes. I encouraged. I shared my palette. Each day we built a stronger community of trust.

Whenever a woman said that she did not know what to paint, I would tell her to paint “hope.” Through my art groups, I helped women build strength, realize their talents, and develop more self-confidence. In other words, marginalized individuals slowly felt more visible as they created more art.

During the process of creating art groups, I worked with a wide range of people including ex-convicts, recovering drug addicts, and disabled individuals. After running an annual art show for three years, I realized that there is a need to offer a year-round marketplace for marginalized artists. Last year, my brother and I founded ArtLifting, a social enterprise that empowers ill, disabled, and homeless artists through the celebration and sale of their work. As ArtLifting grows stronger, artists like Katie finally feel appreciated for their talents. Artists like Katie finally receive attention for their strengths instead of their differences. Artists like Katie become more visible.