Homeless Hero

by

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Cover photo: The word *hero* is not often associated with the word *homeless*, but Chicago, who is dressed in self-made chainmail, may see himself as one.

Dedication

To Bowtie Bob, a man I also know as my father.

By his own definition, Bowtie Bob is a simple man. This simplicity of character taught me what I first knew about humanity. My father is kind, giving, patient, loving. His work ethic is based on living and acting to the highest limits that his humanity and his humility will allow. Bowtie Bob is known for the bowtie he always wears. It matches his general style of dress—suspenders and all—that he wears to work at his volunteer job at a homeless shelter in Albuquerque.

This is where *hero* and *homeless* began for me.

I once asked him if he saw the good he was doing at the shelter. I wondered if he actually saw people's lives change. He responded, "Not really."

"Then why do you do it?" I asked. After all, isn't the point to make a difference?

He responded in a compassionate, gentle, surrendering, yet unrelenting tone, and with no judgment, no indignation: "Because it's the right thing to do."

My father did not mean that statement in a moral sense. He never cites morality for the reason to do something, or anything. So I knew he must mean something else.

But what?

It was my desire to answer that question that inspired me to write this book….

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PROLOGUE

When my father retired from his job as a well-respected environmental scientist, I thought he might take up golf, travel the world or just watch a lot of TV. Instead, he started volunteering five days a week at a homeless shelter. I was shocked, to say the least. Who retires from 30-year career to work at a homeless shelter for free? Who fantasizes about that day when they won't have to work anymore so they can work some more at no pay and with the homeless?

Further, he admitted to me that he didn't feel his volunteering there made much of a difference. This was a solution-driven, results-based man. He wouldn't have lasted a day as a research scientist otherwise. What had happened to my father? Was he truly (as I had always suspected) crazy?

My lack of understanding only grew. During my first visit to the shelter where he worked, I had the opportunity to talk with some of the homeless persons there. I was 39 years old, and it occurred to me that I had never spoken with a homeless person before. I did not even know what the term meant.

I was also shocked to learn that many of the homeless people I spoke with seemed no different from you or me. And that scared me a bit. I'd always assumed there was a difference between them and us. That difference kept me from being "one of them," from being homeless. If there wasn't a difference, or if I didn't know what that difference was, then I could just be one chance occurrence or one unforeseen mistake away from being homeless. I had just left a stable job of 13 years for reasons I didn't fully understand. The decision, I worried, could easily be that unforeseen mistake.

But the emotions ran deeper still. I sensed some kindred feeling when I spoke to the men at the shelter. They were a reminder of a feeling of emptiness—of being out of place—that I only then realized had followed me for much of my life. At times, when things were good, I hardly noticed it. But even during good times, the emptiness had always been there.

It was that night, couched safely in my parent's home—the home I had grown up in, that I pondered my first real interaction with homeless persons. How did they get there? Why did my father work there? What was keeping them there? I didn't have good answers to any of these questions, which led to an even greater concern: I really didn't know what homelessness was. I was 39 years old, yet I couldn't hold a discussion with someone about homelessness beyond the fact that these persons had no homes.

As a person who prides himself on being knowledgeable about the conditions of the world and, more importantly, the causes of those conditions, it bothered me that I didn't know or understand anything about what I was witnessing. I had literally never thought about "it." I had just chalked "it" up to bad luck, mental illness, drug addiction or just plain laziness. But the brief time I spent with the men at my father's shelter had already poked holes in such sophomoric theories.

Bad luck couldn't explain why someone stayed homeless. True, some of the men seemed a bit "off," but so have a lot of the people I have met and even worked with. Drug addiction seemed like a factor for some but may have been more of a symptom than a cause. (And again, many of the people I used to work with in corporate America had drug addictions.) As for laziness, many of the men worked very hard, harder than I was accustomed to. It just didn't seem to get them anywhere, and of course, I didn't know why.

My simple visit with my father had left me with a myriad of complicated questions. What made them homeless and me not? Did they deserve their lot? Why did the entire issue scare me to think about or to get close to? I think many of us at some time in our lives have asked at least a few of these questions. But most of us, myself included, have never really answered them except by assigning some unexplored blanket answer. They're crazy. Lazy. On drugs. Unfortunate.

I knew that in order to properly answer any of those questions, I would have to understand the subject they all stemmed from. I would have to understand what the term "homelessness" really means. At the time, I just knew that I did not know.

So it was over a family dinner of steamed artichokes—a dish my mother had made for me 100 times—that the idea came to me. I would interview homeless people and also those, like my father, who worked with them in order to discover what homelessness is. What the term really means. That simple man, that innocuous visit, that familiar dinner and that small idea are what started this book.

THE ORDINARY WORLD

My intent for this book was to research homelessness in a brand new way so that by the end, my readers and I would have a real understanding of what the word means—and not just in a technical sense. This book grasps at the emotional scope and depth of the concept.

I started by reading a couple of books on the history of homelessness in America, hoping that an understanding of the past would lead to an understanding of the present. I learned that homelessness has been a phenomenon in our society since the dawn of Western culture on this continent. It was also present in European society long before we colonized the North American continent. But interestingly enough, the homeless population exploded during the Industrial Revolution and has basically not subsided since.

Some of the books I read suggested that the birth of large industry fueled the exponential increase in the rates and numbers of homeless persons in America. Factories employed large numbers of people, and then because of seasonal demands, increased efficiency, or economic conditions, laid them off. These workers then were released in large numbers into the cities that could hardly reabsorb them.

In addition to the powerful flux of supply and demand during this period, there was also a change from rural to urban lifestyles. Farm life was disappearing—for it was also becoming industrialized—and city life was growing. If you wanted to work, you needed to move to the city. Some of these books on the history of homelessness in America suggested that this change further fueled homelessness, as many persons were just not suited for factory work, but it was the only work to be found.

The introduction of interchangeable parts created a move toward greater conformity in our society. As all mechanical parts had to conform, it was not unreasonable to assume that

those who made them had to do the same. To many, repetitious tasks done for long hours inside dark, stuffy buildings simply did not suit their nature, and they often couldn't or wouldn't hold down such jobs.

And of course, wars occurred. More importantly, wars ended. At the end of each war in U.S. history, there was a surge in homelessness as soldiers returned and couldn't find work or were unable to work.

These theories made sense to me, but they still didn't give me an understanding of what homelessness means today. They instead focused on the many academic aspects, possible historical causes, facts and figures. While useful, this background research doesn't explain why Joe X or Jane Y is on Z Street corner today.

I couldn't just write off the idea of homelessness by blaming it on modernization. Factory conditions today are far better than during the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, but homeless numbers are not. City life is better, too. We've had a century to adjust. And not all homeless people are veterans. The causes just could not be that simple.

Still, the research I did had value to inform me that homelessness affects many different types of people and has many different causes. I had a new appreciation for the diversity of the issues I was about to tackle. But I still felt that I was looking in through the peephole of some front door, trying to get a feel for the house inside. So I kept reading, finding books that documented the stories of homeless persons. Their stories were fascinating and sad. I felt great sympathy for the individuals and got lost in detail after shocking detail. After all those stories, I thought I'd have a pretty good understanding of homelessness.

But I didn't.

I was still left with a feeling that I didn't know the people behind these stories. Most important to understanding homelessness is understanding the people, knowing their stories personally, and coming to learn how they are related. What connections allow all these different people to fall under the category of homeless? And what does that category even mean?

Socially, I realized that the people I came in contact with most days were all basically the same. This is not to say that they made the same amount of money, dressed the same, and thought the exact same thoughts as me. Rather, I mean they all made money, bought their clothes in retail stores, and digested roughly the same media. The choice in my world for tonight's dinner is to eat in or eat out. Pondering those two options leaves no room to consider a third: don't eat at all. Or a fourth: eat, but out of a trash can. Like me before I started to research, you may not notice these givens in our similar worldview, because they seem so ordinary. To this extent, I remained blind to the larger picture.

From this, my plan to understand homelessness emerged. I thought I'd begin by interviewing homeless persons and those who work with them—not about their stories, but about who they really are and what they think about homelessness. After all, if anyone knows what homelessness is, these people do. It started as a hunch, a shot in the dark. I wanted an answer to my question but didn't even fully understand what I was asking.

Unlike other books on the homeless, I did not want to interview homeless persons about the details of their lives. Instead, I wanted to interview them on their thoughts on life. I wanted to find out what makes them different from—or the same as—you and me. And since insight is a mater of perspective, I was fairly sure they would have new insights due to their different perspectives. I hoped to gain a new vantage point—the vantage point I needed to

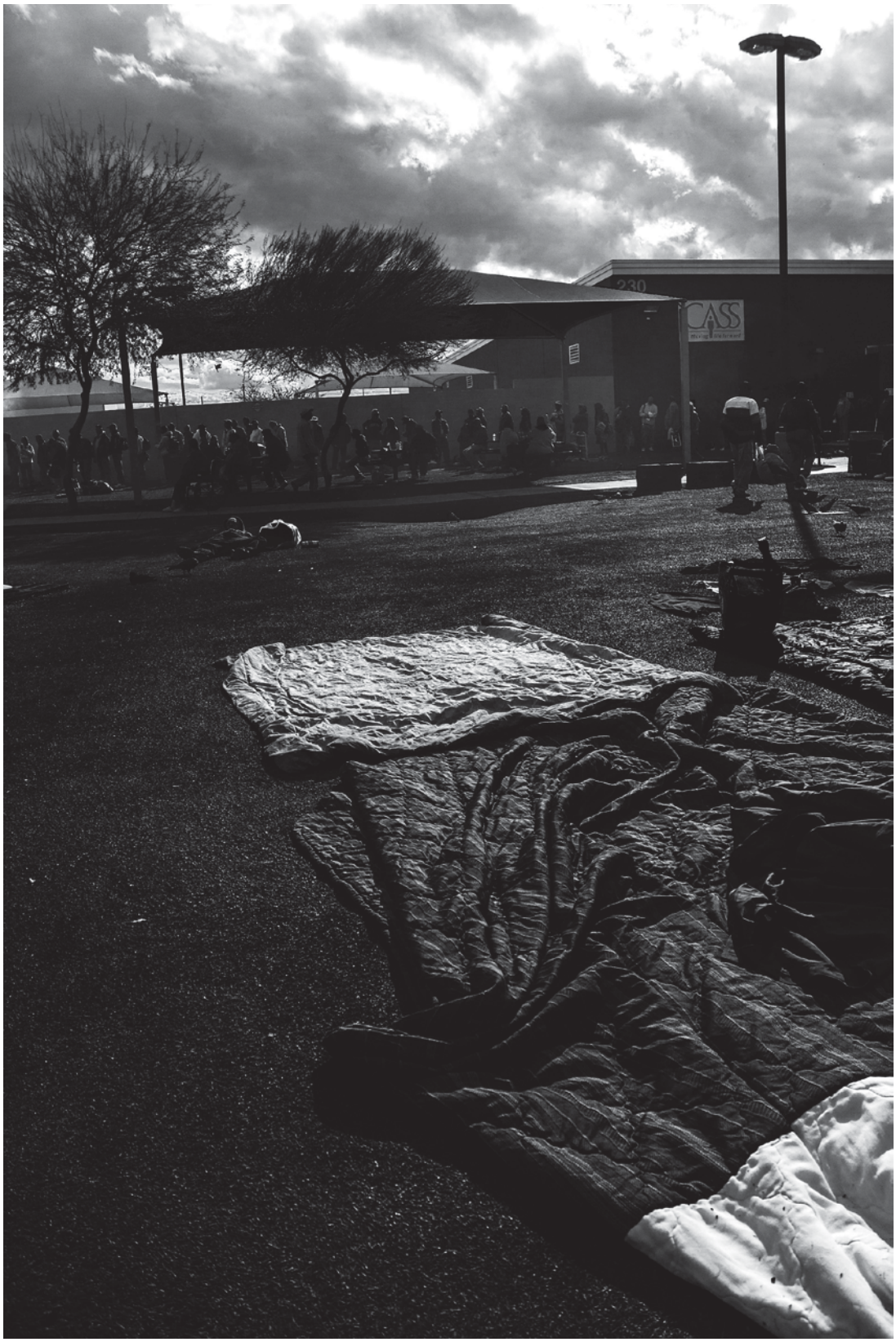
properly interpret the histories and stories of homelessness. By the end, I might actually understand the concept of homelessness itself.

There is no growth in understanding unless you dare to look into the unknown and outside your usual reality. If ours is the ordinary world, theirs is a special world—not necessarily better or worse but running parallel. While a real part of our society, the homeless are anything but part of our daily lives. Even if we see them daily, we don't know them. Just how separated or connected the homeless really are from the rest of us was yet another question I could not answer. Were these worlds really separate, or was I just blind to the connections?

Speak to the average, normal, and ordinary and you will learn what you already know: the average, normal, and ordinary. If you think about it, this is what we do most of the time. We speak to people who share our general worldview. But homelessness is a whole other world, and to us who have housing, it is anything but ordinary.

Unsatisfied by facts and histories, I was determined that my book would focus on the philosophies of those who dare to live outside the norm and those who dare to work with them.

I considered that the special world could teach me a lot about the ordinary world.



Ordinary world.

CALL TO ADVENTURE

ME, HOME: Monday, January 5, 2009, 10:00 a.m.

It is the first day of the rest of my life, a day that seems quite uncertain at the moment. I awake with a rush of worries and concerns. This feeling is all too familiar lately. I recently left my corporate job, no longer able to justify staying in a position that demanded long hours and was of little personal interest. I don't know where my next paycheck will come from or if I might also be homeless in the near future.

But today, I have an appointment to meet with Jessica Berg, the executive director of the Lodestar Daily Resource Center (LDRC), LLC, in Phoenix, Arizona. From what I've gathered, LDRC is a type of central services center for homeless persons. The director was very receptive to the idea of my book. She felt that interviewing willing clients would give them a much-needed voice and act as a type of therapy. She also hoped it would help to raise public awareness—that is, if it ever got published. We both know that is a long shot—but my whole life feels like a long shot at the moment.

So I have a contact, and an accommodating one at that. It has taken me weeks of e-mails and phone calls to find someone interested in my project, so I should be excited to get started. But instead, I awake in a less-than-great mood. My back had gone out in a bad way a few days earlier, and I don't even want to try to get out of bed. I wonder how long I will suffer its crippling effects. The last two times this happened, it was months before I could get out of a chair properly.

I lay in bed now, belabored over feelings of unemployment, injury, and loneliness from a recently ended relationship. I'm not sure I want to start writing a book—and will there be a book anyway? I only have a glimmer of an idea of what I am looking for.

Curiosity may not sell books, but for me, it's what writes them. So I pry myself out of bed, shower, and leave my middle-class home in northern Phoenix to head downtown. As I turn off 7th Avenue onto Washington Street, things start to change.

The buildings, if anything, improve. Downtown Phoenix has been well attended to by city planners in recent years. There is the Carnegie Library, a turn-of-the-last-century red brick structure in the center of a beautifully maintained park with large old trees towering above. Located across the street is the quaint Arizona Skies Café and Coffee Bar. The capitol is just a mile in front of me to the west, and other well-maintained civic buildings are all around.

The people are what I most notice changing. All of a sudden, there they are: homeless persons, or those whom I presume to be homeless. Their numbers increase as I turn onto 12th Avenue; they number in the hundreds by the time I reach LDRC. I have to slow my Honda Fit down to a crawl so as not to hit anyone.

I pass through the sea of people, through the open gates, and am struck by the sheer size of this place. The LDRC is just one building on what I now realize is a very large spread called the Human Services Campus. I was expecting a single building like the shelter where my father volunteered, but I feel as if I'm traveling out of the orbit of the ordinary world and entering a strange new one. It occurs to me that we spend billions of dollars looking for life on other planets when we don't even recognize all of the life right in our own backyards. I have lived in Phoenix for 18 years and never known this place was here—in the middle of downtown.

The Human Services Campus looks like a typical community college campus. Stepping out of the car, I feel like an urban astronaut on this cool January day. One small step

for man, one giant step for a man with a hurt back. The smell of cigarette smoke hits me at once. I look at the other cars in the parking lot, mostly the cars of homeless persons seeking services there. My car sticks out like a sore thumb. I know it's brand new, but this is the only time in my entire life that my car is the nicest, most expensive one in the entire parking lot. In Scottsdale, my car would be one of the least expensive in the parking lot. No one seems to notice, but I do.

I walk across the lawn toward the front doors of the LDRC located in the center of the campus. Laptop bag over my shoulder, strolling toward the institutional double doors, my feeling of being out of place increases. I am struck by the diversity surrounding me. Each person here is radically different from his or her neighbor. They each dress in a way that is completely unique to everyone else. It is as if every single person is from a different era, past and/or future.

I've lived a lot of life in my 39 years and am therefore shocked to feel so ill at ease, nervous, alien. And it is all coming from me. I am greeted by everyone I pass with smiles, hellos, sometimes hollow indifference, but no animosity—not even curiosity. Not one single person looks at me as though I don't belong here. And I've been in places where they make it very clear you don't belong. For some strange reason, that type of fear bothers me much less than my present alienation. The fear of danger bothers me less than the fear of being an outcast, of not fitting in.

The atmosphere changes as I enter Lodestar Day Resource Center through the double institutional style metal doors. It smells warm and stale in here—not exactly filthy, but like wet dirt. In certain Scottsdale locations, one is overwhelmed with aromas too, each sweeter and sappier than the last. I tell Ryan, a young guy at the front desk, that I have a meeting with

Ms. Berg and take a seat in one of the few available chairs nearby. There are two rows of colored plastic chairs—maybe 20 in all—with additional seating in the form of a very long bench built into the dividing wall between the reception area from the large main lobby. The wall is less than four feet high, so I can easily crane over it to view the many round tables and chairs beyond. Two of the center's walls are entirely made of thick glass and framed with metal. They do little to mitigate the industrial atmosphere.

And of course, the lobby is filled with people, looking as though they are from every place and space as they are filling every place and space.

I am immersed in the sounds of hundreds of conversations, culture shocked as I try to take it all in. I look down a long hallway that extends from the lobby to the right. It ends in double doors, and staff members occasionally enter or exit through them, whipping out an access card before disappearing. As I watch, the left one opens and out walks a young, petite woman in her thirties, with a fashion sense that could be described as 'professional bohemian.' She looks at the waiting area from a distance for a brief moment before her eyes land on me. She smiles knowingly. I don't know if it is the look on my face or fact that she recognizes everyone but me.

"Michael?"

I smile and nod. Her voice is sweet, relaxed.

"I'm Jessica Berg."

She looks like she might belong behind the counter of a boutique coffee shop—not an attribute I would expect from someone who deals on a daily basis with the rugged realities of the homeless, whatever those realities are.

Jessica speaks quietly, clearly, and with great articulation. She is excited to share. I have the crazy thought that she has the power of a fairy: delicate and light, yet also charming, strong and fearless.

As we walk together amongst the clients, Jessica explains that the Human Service Campus is arguably the first homeless campus formed in the United States. In November 2005, Maricopa County decided it might be a good idea to group a number of homeless-related organizations and services together in the same geographic area. The 25,000-square-foot facility known as the LDRC is meant to be the liaison point for directing people to the resources they need. On a sprawling 11-acre campus, that is no small task.

Jessica explains that the name Lodestar comes from one of the main contributing foundations (Arizona State University Lodestar Center for Philanthropy & Nonprofit Innovation), and is also a term for a guiding star, a tool used by sailors for navigation. Lodestar is a point of reference, a guide in choppy seas. Clients can come to the LDRC and get directed to various other service organizations on and around campus, not to mention what seems like a plethora of services offered by the LDRC itself. Jessica further explains she refers to the homeless people they serve as *clients* because she and her staff work for them, just like any other business. Apparently it's about "service, not charity." And no, I don't fully get what that means.

The campus has five anchor agencies: Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS), Maricopa County Healthcare for the Homeless, Northwest Organization for Voluntary Alternatives (NOVA)–Safe Haven, St. Joseph the Worker, and St. Vincent de Paul.

The campus is a massively ambitious operation meant to coordinate and address every aspect of the immediate and long-term homeless challenge. It's truly astounding in it's scope

and vision. And Jessica hints that the LDRC helps clients navigate the campus and even life itself.

All of the main five agencies stand alone as separate entities under LDRC's umbrella. Jessica explains that she has no authority over much of the campus, even many of the agencies located within the LDRC building. The campus is a "campus of cooperation," she says. If that's the case, I instantly see why Jessica is perfect for the job. Her real title should be CEO of Cooperation.

Jessica continues walking me around the LDRC and I continue to feel overwhelmed. I expected to see a shelter that housed and fed a few hundred homeless people. I am now in the center of a gigantic homeless campus with hundreds (perhaps a thousand) of homeless persons. Up until this point in my life, I've never seen a total of a thousand homeless persons in my life and never more than a dozen homeless persons in the same place.

When I got in my car just an hour ago I was wondering if there was really a book idea to be found here. But now Jessica is spewing out more relevant information than I can record. The side questions are endless. I only wonder which ones to pursue.

I could write a book about Jessica alone. This woman is eclectic. Before holding this position she was an art therapist, summer camp director and she earned degrees in public administration and art therapy, which as she says "is ironically a great combination" for what she's currently doing. That is, if anything could prepare one for what she's doing. Nowhere else in the country does a nonprofit effort quite like this one exist.

I ask her point blank if she likes her job, which she has now been in for two years. She lights up in a rosy, Christmassy sort of way. "Yes! I love it!"

"Doesn't it get draining? Frustrating?" I ask.

"Well sure, of course, sometimes." What bothers Jessica most is when people don't work together. "We have to get rid of egos here and stick to the goal, and for the most part that's what we do," she says.

Jessica leads me into her office behind double doors at the end of a hallway. I'm finally able to lower myself into a chair (I hate looking disabled) and open my laptop to take proper notes. I'm already upset at the wealth of information I failed to capture on tape or paper.

"So Jessica, how do you do a job that's never been done before?" I ask.

Jessica explains that one of her hobbies is improvisation. "The first rule of improv is: yes, and…." This is her guiding principle, her lodestar. She continues, "In improv, you never deny what you have been given. You only look as to what you can add to it."

This approach makes sense, because the LDRC in many ways is an improvisational concept. It is the newest agency on the campus (the other agencies existed in other locations prior to the creation of the campus), and they are still defining and discovering the identity of LDRC beyond simply coordination of services.

Before I can ask another question, a woman enters to the office—casually—but like a woman on a mission who is not unprepared to kick some ass if necessary—as her cowboy boots imply.

"You're going to love Dawn," Jessica says by way of introduction. She explains that Dawn Shires started as a volunteer but now wears many hats at the LDRC, namely as the volunteer coordinator. While being on staff means a paycheck, I assume no one works here for the salary.

Dawn says hello, but seems too busy to talk.

"What's the movie this week?" Jessica asks her.

Dawn replies with a smart-alecky grin and a New Jersey accent: “Now you know I’m not going to tell you that.”

“Movie?” I venture.

“Yeah, people try and trick me into telling them what the movie is going to be,” Dawn replies.

I try again. “Movie?”

Dawn catches herself, realizing that I have no idea what she’s talking about. She sits down and, at 60 M.P.H., explains that every Saturday she holds a movie workshop for the homeless.

It sounds like a cute idea, but impractical. I’m not quite sure what all the people in that lobby need, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t a movie workshop. Still, it’s obvious to me that Dawn is not into cute and is very into practical.

Seeing my look of confusion, Dawn lays out the objective of the workshop. Essentially, she carefully picks movies that feature a hero who has to conquer some great obstacle. Then, she leads a group discussion about the movie and how the hero overcame his or her challenges.

The point is “to get them to identify with the character and see that they are their own vehicles for change,” Dawn says, still in rapid-fire mode. She is trying to get the “head, heart and will aligned” for each client who attends the workshop.

By this point, I feel overwhelmed. Dawn keeps talking faster and starts dropping phrases like, “your state of residence is not your identity,” “trigger event” and “strategic thinking.”

My head is whirling. I was not expecting these impassioned persons to be staffing this place, this place that exploded from a small shelter in my mind to a giant campus in reality—a campus that I didn't even know existed, and right in the middle of my city. And I definitely did not expect to see such radical approaches to changing human behavior put into practice while housing, job assistance and dozens of other services are provided simultaneously.

Suddenly, I feel like I might cry. Not just because I saw all these depressing looking people on the way in. (I did.) Not just because I feel so out of place. (I do.) And it's not even exactly that I have been feeling depressed myself lately (though I have). It's because these women are so damn impassioned about what they are doing! And I'm assuming, they, like the rest of us, have plenty of their own struggles to deal with. It is such a contrast to the "woe as me" feelings I woke up with.

Fighting back the unexpected tears, I ask Dawn why she does it. She seems confused, almost exasperated. "Does anyone even have to ask that question? It's my gift. It's what I've always done. That's what we do here. We share our gifts."

I ask her what her education was for doing all this, and she almost scoffs at the question. "It's just what I've always done since I was fourteen." She seems to imply that if the questions and problems are about life, then life is the necessary educational background. Especially when you're trying to fix something that no one has ever fixed before. There are no formulas, no schools on ending homelessness. These people at Lodestar are navigating their own course.

I ask if I can come to the movie on Saturday and Dawn is fine with it—not ecstatic, just fine. She doesn't seem to care if anyone notices what she is doing. I ask her if she ever feels down about her progress. (I ask for my research, but also for my own emotional state.)

Dawn again replies with that surprised of course look. “All of the time. I feel like people aren’t making enough progress or I’m not helping enough people. But then I remember that I’m contributing, and what is supposed to be happing is happening. The timing is not up to me.”

I tell Dawn and Jessica I have to conclude the interview and digest everything, setting up a later date to talk. I need a game plan for how to proceed. I’ve been complaining about the bills, my ex-wife, my ex-girlfriend, my hurting back…and these people have been changing lives! I’m not even sure which direction to take the book, because this brief visit to LDRC has already blown all my ideas out of the water.

This place is not as sure, simple, typical, or small as I might have thought.

Jessica and Dawn make me consider the power of passion. They gave me the call to adventure.

And frankly, our first meeting scared the shit out of me.