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Student walks in the shoes of the homeless

NEXT GENERATION: OPINION

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Growing up in downtown South Bend, I've been around the homeless pretty much all of my life. Around age 11, I began hanging out downtown more and more. It soon became apparent to me how these people were being treated, as if they weren't human at all. The following story is my in- depth look into the life of the homeless.

I never thought when I started this project that it would be so hard to do. I never expected being homeless to be easy, but the challenge of it took me by surprise.

My day starts around 9 a.m. Today, I'm no longer Bobby Williams, but Robert Patrick McFadden.

The first harassment I received today was from a car of two guys, maybe in their mid-20s, just driving by laughing. Poverty sure is funny, or at least must have been to these guys.

The first woman I asked to spare some change at first tried to ignore me. "Excuse me, miss. Could I maybe talk to you for a minute?" I said as politely as someone could when they're hungry and ashamed. "No," she said firmly, avoiding any and all eye contact. I just shrugged it off and let her keep walking. A few seconds later, she turned back to me and asked for directions to the library. So she can't talk to me when I'm just a person on the street, but as a map I'm fine to talk to. I told her how to get there to the best of my ability but, given as I'm new here, she might have ended up at McDonald's or something. But I tried to send her in the right direction. Then as soon as I was done helping her get where she was going, she walked away just as quickly as when she said, "No" when I asked to talk to her.

One thing about the people downtown is that they will go to great lengths to avoid you if you look like I did today. People would wait in their cars, until I was a safe distance away, to rush to the Chocolate Cafe so they could get their \$4.25 large mocha lattes. When I was waiting on the other side of the street by the lightpole, people would jaywalk at the middle of the street to keep from

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crossing paths with me. Another thing I noticed from the successful men and women downtown was the hateful eye contact. One man actually put his hand over the side of his eyes to stop himself from having to look at me, as he broke into a mild jog down the street.

More than anything, it seems as if people are just afraid of me. What's the worst I can do to them?

After a long time of being rejected, avoided and looked down upon, I was feeling rather tired. Maybe I should go home and take a nap. Because I had no home to sleep in, I decided to see if I could catch a couple z's down at the library. As soon I walked in, everyone, employees, security guards, readers, everyone turned their heads. I walked in as casually as you can with a whole library looking at you, and pretended to be actually looking at books. Eventually, everyone calmed down, and I began to search for my real reason for showing up, a place to sleep. I soon found these really soft chairs and made myself at home. I leaned back, rested my head, and within a few minutes I was asleep.

But soon, I woke up and found a security guard kicking my chair to wake me up. "You need to go outside and get some fresh air," she said to me in the dominant voice security guards like to use.

Frowning because my nap had been cut short, I just silently left as she followed me outside of the building. I had been kicked out of the library; on top of that I still had no money for food. What a day this has been.

At the Homeless Shelter

After all this, I found myself having a lot more respect for the homeless. But is this really how all homeless people live? Are all homeless people the guys on the street begging for money? The dirty types, who smell bad, and fall asleep on the chairs at the library?

For more answers, I went to the homeless shelter in downtown South Bend. As I walked around, I realized how many different types of people were living there. Some looking like college professors, others with lip rings, others wearing Aéropostale hoodies -- just all types of normal, everyday people that you might see wherever you go.

Sometimes you meet the most amazing people at the least expected places. While at the homeless shelter, I got a chance to meet Kelly and George Lawley, When I first saw them, I thought that they were working at the homeless shelter, not staying there. George was carrying a cell phone with a collared shirt on, while Kelly wore casual pants with a nice flower design on them.

George, it turns out, is a recovering addict from crack, alcohol, marijuana, heroin, and shrooms. Before coming to the homeless shelter, he and his family were pretty much on the run. They were robbed at gunpoint and had every thing stolen from them as their children were sleeping. "We have five kids," Kelly explained, "and it's a lot of responsibility."

But the Lawleys have something bigger than all the disadvantages placed against them, and that's a strong will to keep on going and not let anything stop them. "I vowed when I came here that when I left I would not pay rent, but start a mortgage on a house," said George. In just about eight months they say they are well on their way. Thanks to the homeless shelter programs, Kelly got her GED.

George has overcome his addictions and has landed a job with the Youth Service Bureau (a program to help get kids off the streets.) These are people who were once homeless, but have taken their lives and made them theirs' again.

I asked George what he would like to tell people, and he said, "Don't think of being homeless as a downfall or a failure. Being homeless is a misfortune, but not a tragedy. If something's broke all you have to do is fix it. When people think of homeless people, they think dirty, smelly, drug addicts. That's not the case every time.

"All we want is to be treated the same as every one else. We are no different."

Jump to a day:

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