

People Like Us



Editor Malcolm Abrams (right) and a friend on The Bowery, New York City, 1974.

“Homeless people are just people without homes. We’re the same as you,” our writer was told by one of the photographers featured in our cover story “How the Homeless See Bloomington.”

At the present time, you and I may not be the same as the unfortunate men and women who come to Shalom Community Center, but we all have that potential. And we all know people who are like them.

It may be your cousin who has an addiction disease or a grandchild who’s living with bipolar disorder. It could be a neighbor with anger management issues or an old friend who got laid off at age 60 and can’t find another job. Perhaps it’s a niece with an infant whose husband abandoned her or a co-worker left penniless by crippling medical bills. Maybe the young person across the street is a soldier back from Iraq suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Or your own child who dropped out of college and just seems to have bad luck.

The difference between these people and the crowd at Shalom is that these people have family and friends who care about them. People who help them do the things that need doing and offer advice, financial and moral support, nourishment, encouragement, and, if need be, a roof over their heads. And when you have that kind of support, you retain some degree of self-worth.

The folks who come to Shalom have none of the above. Which is why we as a community are so fortunate to have Shalom.

I have an inkling of what it’s like to be down and out. In July 1974, in the midst of a heat wave, I lived for a week on The Bowery in New York City on assignment for a Canadian newspaper. The Bowery, for a hundred years, was famous as a place where “bums” gravitated.

I remember my first meal at The Bowery Mission. After standing in line, I was ushered into a commissary where the meal consisted of a stale slice of white bread, a hard pat of butter, a glass of lukewarm milk, and a plate of spaghetti with tomato sauce. The only utensil: a soup spoon. The second I finished eating, a security guard prodded me in the ribs with a nightstick and told me to get out.

The social workers stayed behind a counter protected by a metal grating up to the ceiling. You stood in line to get a chit that you took to a flophouse where you could spend the night. Disgusting places; I got lice the second night.

I hung out on the streets for a week, wearing the same clothes, not showering, scratching, panhandling, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, and

drinking moonshine with my new friends.

The days seemed to last forever. Regular pedestrians avoided me, not even looking in my direction. Nighttime was scary. One time, members of the Hell’s Angels pushed me around. In the July heat, my self-esteem melted like tar on the street.

By contrast, Shalom Community Center is a welcoming place where people in need can get healthful meals, do laundry, take showers, store personal items, and receive mail. Shalom case managers provide support in areas such as finding housing, employment, and health care. And Shalom serves as the “front door” for more than 20 visiting agencies, including the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, Positive Link, Broadview Learning Center, and Volunteers in Medicine.

Where would people without a support system be without Shalom? Where would Bloomington be without Shalom?

If you would like to contribute to the cause, there is an envelope between pages 112 and 113. Make your check payable to Shalom Community Center. We will acknowledge all contributors in the next issue of *Bloom*. Please be generous. There are people like us who need a helping hand.

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