

Living Without Doorknobs

When you are first introduced to Joseph Gill, you immediately notice his perfectly gelled hair. He frequently wears blue jeans and his favorite Red Wings t-shirt. Joe, 43, owned his own business for 20 years, but unfortunately business declined and he became bankrupt as a result of the recession. Easy-going and likeable, he is now employed at a local business in Ann Arbor, MI. What is not apparent, however, is that he is homeless and lives in Camp Take Notice, a homeless tent community on the edge of Ann Arbor.

As an active volunteer for the homeless over the past six years, I wanted to focus my art on the newly homeless. Since the onset of the recession, the issue of homelessness has emerged as a social crisis in our country, one having detrimental effects on millions of Americans. I intend to remove the misconception of homelessness, as many believe a homeless person to be an alcoholic, drug dependent, mentally unstable individual wandering around the community. The reality is today's homeless could be your next-door neighbor, who is without a job, and soon without a home. PBS News reports: "Over the next two years, an additional 1.5 million Americans will be homeless due to the effects of the recession," (PBS par 3).

My journey began in October 2009, when I reached out to Camp Take Notice board members, volunteers who assist the homeless campers. The members excitedly welcomed me to the weekly Monday night meetings at the Ann Arbor District Library. Halfway through my first meeting, I realized a few board members were representatives from the camp. One could not detect their homelessness from appearance; it was only through conversation that I realized a few members at the meeting would be sleeping in the frigid cold that night.

The board provided the meeting agenda and rules of the camp. No drinking. No drugs. No stealing. No fighting. If you break the rules, you are asked to leave.



My Photographs from CTN

Board members invited me to participate in Wednesday night meetings at Camp Take Notice. This was my first introduction to the twenty homeless campers. Surrounded by canned food and blankets, campers crowded together in the freezing communal tent to discuss concerns. I introduced myself as an Art & Design student and was immediately showered with questions. “What medium do you work in?” “What programs are you using for graphic design?” “Is that an SLR digital camera?”

I was not expecting the homeless campers to be well-spoken, smart, compassionate, and motivated. I soon learned a number of the campers recently lost their jobs but were without a support system. After meeting the homeless individuals, I wanted to share their heartbreaking stories. In order to accomplish this, I observed how other artists used storytelling in their work. I looked closely at the work of photographers Austin R. Hermann and Salvo Galano; in addition, *The New York Times* “One in 8 Million” project provided great insight on how to piece together narratives using both photography and sound.

I am inspired by Austin R. Hermann’s cohesive photo essay, “Home”, which focuses on the Michigan housing crisis (Hermann par 1). Hermann takes beautiful black and white photos of Michigan families standing in front of their homes. The artist asks the participants two questions: (1) What do you think is broken in the current economic/housing system? and (2) Are you moving? I like how the artist chose to ask participants the same two questions; however, I am less certain of the questions he chose to ask participants. The responses were not compelling, which relates back to the questions asked and Hermann’s limited time spent with each family. Because the pictures are so literal, I believe the project would be even stronger if deeper and more personal questions were asked. After seeing this project, I knew I wanted to take a different approach in my own work and spend a considerable amount of time with my subjects. I believe the more comfortable the participant is with the interviewer, the better the conversation, which results in opportunities for deeper questions.



Photograph by Austin Hermann, “Home” series

Another artist, Salvo Galano, takes an unconventional approach to photographing the homeless. The artist’s goal is to show how homeless individuals are no different from anyone else. The artist created a makeshift studio near a NYC soup kitchen; the backdrop of the studio was created out of blankets. He took black and white portraits to capture each individual’s personality.



Photographs by Salvo Galano

Another source of inspiration came from *The New York Times* “One in 8 Million” project in which the publication captures the life of a New Yorker through multi-media storytelling (NY Times). In one story, a violinist discusses his passion for music; every day he jams with his quartet, The Ebony Hillbillies, in a NYC subway station. The black and white photography captures the chaos of the subway station; the audio captures the background noises of commuters enjoying the music on their way to work. After hearing the audio stories, I knew I wanted to incorporate sound in my own project.

These works had a great influence on my senior integrative project. I saw the importance of carefully studying the subject matter, and for over seven months, I researched the issue of homelessness. Unsurprisingly, articles are published daily about the troubling effects of the recession. To illustrate, *The New York Daily News* published an article discussing how Prince William slept on a cold London street to bring attention to the homeless organization “Centrepoin.” This act achieved great publicity for the charity and increased overall awareness (NY Daily News 1).

After researching the issue at large, I spent a great amount of time researching the homeless individuals at Camp Take Notice. Through photo documentation and recording several Camp Take Notice meetings, I learned about the people inside the tents, especially Joe, who agreed to be interviewed. Since October 2009, I have conducted at least twelve hour-long interview sessions with him. Over the course of five months, I asked Joe personal questions about his current struggles and journey to overcome homelessness.

These interviews provided the basis for my three-minute audio story, “Doorknobs.” In November 2009, I asked Joe if there was something in particular he missed since becoming homeless. Joe shared that in addition to cooking over a hot stove and watching the Discovery Channel, what he missed most were doorknobs. During one of our interview sessions in January, I returned to the subject of doorknobs, resulting in a 30-minute conversation about this object. He discussed both the literal and emotional reasons behind missing a doorknob. I pieced together the most compelling parts of the interview to create an audio story. Perhaps the most powerful moment in the sound piece came when Jay talked about what he will do when he overcomes homelessness: “I miss the indoors so much, having a doorknob, a door, and a door frame, that if I did get a door, where you open it up and it creaks, I would probably leave it that way, just so it makes a noise. It would remind you that it’s there and that it should be appreciated.”

In addition to being interviewed, Joe agreed to collaborate with me on an element of my integrative project. I gave him a disposable camera and asked that he photograph his current living situation. He provided handwritten captions for each photo. I edited the photos and layered his handwritten captions onto the images to visually tell his story.



Collaborative work with Joseph Gill

Jay's photographs are truly heartbreaking. Instead of imagining his daily struggles, we witness it through the small details in the photographs, such as the storage crates he uses to organize his clothes, as well as the dozens of blankets he layers on his bed to keep warm. What I found most significant were Joe's captions, as they echo his sarcastic personality. When I layered his captions onto the photos, I saw an interesting irony between the words and images. In one photograph he shows us his small tent, yet he describes it as a "stately home." The authenticity in his writing makes the images even more distressing.

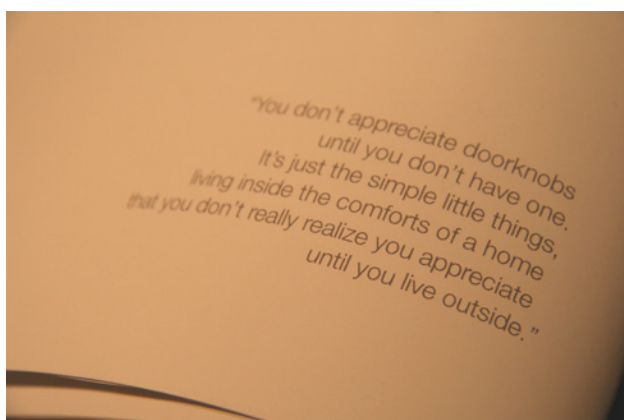
Upon developing Joe's compelling images, I gave him another camera and asked him to continue. Shortly thereafter he sent me a startling text message: "Major catastrophe. Snow from last night collapsed all of our tents." The camera enabled him to document this devastation.



Collaborative work with Joseph Gill

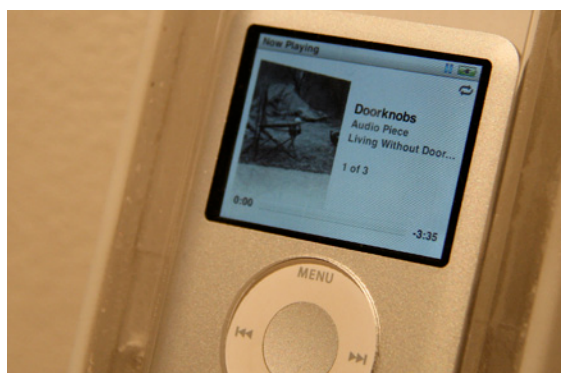
Because these photos have a natural narrative, I created a book. On each spread, there is a juxtaposition of Jay's image with a carefully selected quote from the interview sessions. I created a book with clean design; I wanted the quotes from the interviews to be surrounded by white space to allow the text to breathe on the page. I was cautious not to pair the quotes literally to an image. For instance, on one spread, there is Joe's image of a decorated Christmas tree at the tent community, with the caption "Our Holiday Tree." The page opposite the tree is a quote describing how well the campers get along with one another, trust each other, and rely on one another. I felt this was a stronger statement, as opposed to including a quote that discusses the ornaments his friend created for the tree.

Additionally, the book allows me to write about Jay's complete journey. After six months of homelessness, he saved enough money from his new job to rent an apartment. He has overcome homelessness. In the book I explain how he is very lucky to overcome such hardship. There are thousands more who are currently homeless.



In order to create awareness, I shared my work with various media outlets. My sound piece “Doorknobs” appeared on the National Homelessness Marathon, a 14-hour radio show broadcast around the country, dedicated to raising money for the homeless. I also published an 800-word article for *Ann Arbor News*, which included the sound piece and 6 images. In addition, various websites have blogged about my project, including Kenneth Cole’s Awareness blog and witness.org. In addition, Mark Horath and Kendra Kellogg, two homeless activists, recently tweeted about my project, resulting in a significant increase of hits on my blog. It is exciting to see the positive feedback; I am going to continue sharing the work with other media outlets and organizations.

This project allowed me to tell Jay’s story through several mediums: photography, sound, collaboration, design, and writing. I believe the strength in this project is that it lives throughout many media platforms. Homelessness is such a large issue and one very hard to grasp. It is my hope to create awareness of this major issue by sharing one individual’s story.



Transcript to Sound Piece

<JAY>

I try not to look homeless, but sometimes, when I walk around, I have a, kinda like a, um, a what do you call it a, complex, that people are looking at me and thinking that I'm homeless, but I know I don't look homeless.

INTRO <ME>

Joe has hair that is always perfectly gelled. He is always wearing a Red Wings t-shirt because he is the biggest Red Wings fan. Joe had his own business for 20 years, but unfortunately because of the recession, his business became bankrupt and he has now been homeless for 6 months. One day I asked Joe what he missed the most. He said three things. He said he missed cooking over a hot stove, watching the Discovery Channel, and doorknobs.

<BACK TO JAY>

You don't appreciate doorknobs until you don't have one. It's just the simple little things, living inside the creature comforts of a home that you don't really realize that you appreciate, until you live outside.

Doorknobs to most people who are not homeless are just, there. Once you have to struggle with zippers, zippers in the cold, zippers in the rain, zippers when you have to take your gloves off and deal with trying to open up the zipper and it gets stuck in the fabric.

And there are so many times when you forget something you have to go back in your tent, cuz you don't want to leave your tent your tent open for a split second, because even if you like walk 5 feet away for from your tent for 10 seconds 15 seconds, a mouse could run in, a possum, skunk, whatever, you don't want to leave it open at all 'cuz you just don't know.

Doorknobs, especially if it's a doorknob that you paid and installed yourself, it means a lot. It means that you have security. You have security and comfort in knowing that you have well, a roof over your head. Four walls, four walls and a roof mean a lot.

Five years ago I wouldn't have even thought twice about a doorknob, or anything else for that fashion. I appreciate now, every single aspect of a home, If I look at a home I would appreciate the screws and the struts and the molding and everything else, 'cuz you just don't have that, when you are, homeless.

I just started working again but unfortunately I am not really saving, I mean I haven't been able to save in the last month, towards rent, I have been nickle and dimed towards a lot of expenses here and there. I had to buy a new heater, I had to buy a new winter jacket.

I hope to have a doorknob, soon. I hope to have a doorknob that opens up to, ya know, a nice hot shower or bath.

I miss the indoors so much, having a doorknob, door, and a door frame, that if I did get a door, when you open it up and it creaks, EEEEEEE, I would probably leave it that way, just so it makes a noise. Cuz I could fix it, I could oil it or tighten the screw, but I would like to have an Adam's family type of door, where you open it and it goes EEEE, you'd appreciate it. It would remind you that it's there and that it should be appreciated.

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