

Homeless in Michigan
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Senior Thesis

Introduction

“My husband and I are tax paying, law abiding citizens. We both go to work everyday and cart our kids to activities I am homeless....”

Lara, a homeless mother of two who was forced from her home.

Homelessness is a huge problem in this country, it is also one of the most misunderstood, social issues affecting our nation today. After talking with Lara and her husband about the problems their family had been faced with, I learned that the cause of their homelessness was a result of financial circumstances spiraling out of control and causing them to be forced from their home. Luckily for this family of four they had relatives that were able to put them up. There are many people in this country that share a story very similar to this family. Their circumstances may vary, but they have one thing in common: They do not have permanent housing. On average, as many as 3.5 million people in the United States experience homelessness in any given year with forty percent consisting of families with children.¹

Due to it's lack of attention, I want not only to become more aware and knowledgeable, but to help the fight against this phenomenon in our country. I feel that a good way to be persuasive to the public is to create large scale photographs of individuals who are homeless. Along with the almost life-size representation, I have produced a book with text taken from interviews I did with individuals who told me their stories. I have also included photographs of the subjects so that the viewer has a face and name to go with the individual story. I have shown a variety of subjects those that are chronically homeless and others that maybe experiencing homelessness just temporarily so that I can communicate that homelessness can and does affect anyone. I have also shown the many degrees of homelessness. For example there are those that choose to be homeless and then there are others who want to have a place to call home very badly. It is also important to show the viewer that despite what preconceived ideas one may have, homelessness is not discriminative and therefore does not have one face, despite what we tend to be told by society.



¹ Homelessness in the United States http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness_in_the_United_States

I began researching to learn the many facts and statistics about homelessness, as well as the multitude of reasons behind why this becomes a reality for so many. I found that there are many causes such as untreated mental illness, substance abuse, physical disabilities, loss of income, or domestic violence. With all this newly gained knowledge I went out on the streets to begin my search for answers and to make connections with people of the homeless community in Ann Arbor. I felt it important to meet people and hear about their lives in hopes of building some kind of connection with them so that they would become more comfortable with me and more honest as a result.

Every person has a different and unique story to tell, and I feel that those stories are important and should be heard. Early on in my project it became important to me to get to know the people experiencing homelessness at all levels in their lives before I started to photograph them. I wanted to find the truth that is so often over looked by the public and the media. The truth of why these people are without a home I wanted to know them personally and to give them the opportunity to share with the general public of who they are. In the time I have spent with the people of homeless community I have noticed that the knowledge I've gained through my project has made a difference in my perception of the reality and I hope that my project will help change the perceptions of how others view the homeless as well.

Creative Work/Content of Project

The aim of my integrated project is to focus on the issue of homelessness, particularly in Michigan and to make more people aware of this serious problem that exists in the communities in which we live. With the reality of Michigan's poor economy there are many in this state that are just one pay check away from becoming homeless themselves. Perhaps then it will take an even bigger toll on those who have not experienced it. There are many misconceptions, stereotypes, and ignorance revolving around this issue, and I wish to challenge viewers idea's about how they see homelessness, and why it shouldn't be ignored. I have decided to give my subjects a voice through a book of photo essays. In this book there is text about the person represented in each photograph. This text was taken from interviews I did with each person. I feel that once the viewer has a face to go along with the story it will be easier to be accepting of the people and their various situations.

I must admit that there was a time when I had preconceived ideas of who was homeless. Old men, primarily black, these were the people I would pass by as I walked to class; so they must be the face of homelessness. Sadly it wasn't until I started my project that I identified that I had developed stereotyped ideas of what homelessness looked like. I was very shocked at this reality and quickly became aware that I too was a part of the ignorant general population that I had been so critical of. I had to identify my own ignorance and change my perception before I could help others do the same.

To start my research, I began volunteering at a shelter in Ann Arbor back in November with hopes of meeting some new people. I was curious about what life was like at the shelter and what a typical day brought for the residence of the shelter. I wanted to learn

about the different resources provided for the area's homeless community. I was also interested to see what I might have to offer to them. For the most part people have been very receptive.

Along with a couple of photo sessions that I hosted at the Ann Arbor Public Library (images on pg 4), I have been traveling to different cities throughout Michigan to meet with a variety of homeless individuals. I have been listening to people's stories and by getting to know them, have obtained their permission to create a series of honorable photographs. I have been doing this with a portable studio that I take on location with me. This studio consists of a few different tungsten lights, a soft box, reflectors, and a large roll of seamless paper used for the backdrop. I felt that the studio setting was an important choice in taking the photographs. I wanted to have control of the lighting and to create some softer images. I wanted to create portraits that would show them as being honorable and respected, rather than being pitiful and less fortunate like other images in the past have done.



(Me interviewing Gilbert a local homeless man)

Through hard work and networking, I have found that the end result of my integrated project will not only be displayed in a week long exhibit through the School of Art and Design. It will be displayed in a traveling exhibit throughout Michigan sponsored by the Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness.² There will be a community event for every opening in which any and all proceeds will go back into the communities shelters that are in need.

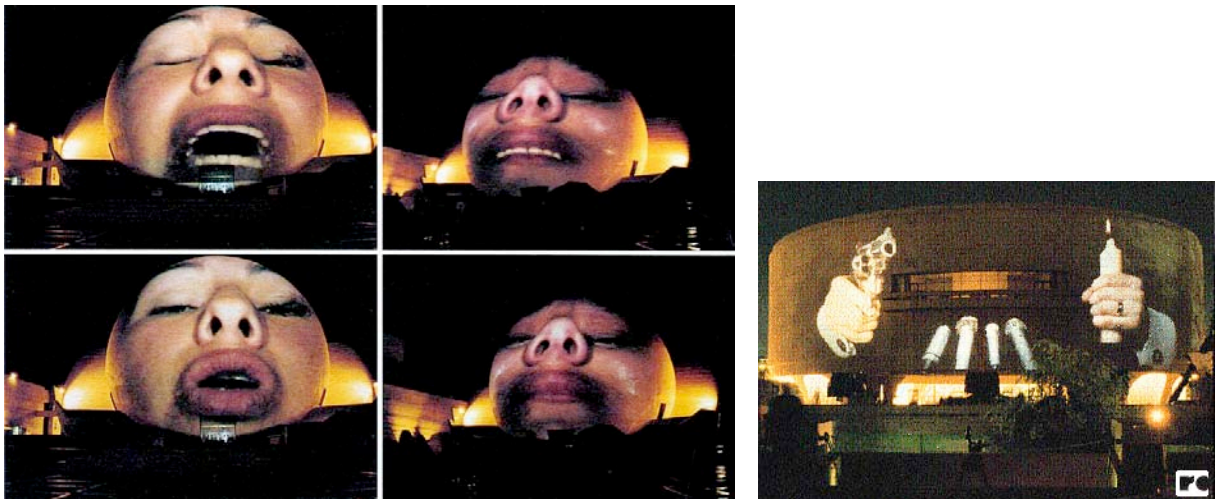
Influences

There is very little contemporary art addressing the issue of homelessness. However, I have been influenced by two artists that have done work concerning different social issues. For example, I read a book called Sidewalk Stories by Salvo Galano. Salvo took photographs of homeless people he encountered while volunteering at a soup kitchen in

² The Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness is a nonprofit membership organization formed as an association of emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, nonprofit housing and service programs, government programs and concerned citizens from across the State.

New York. One of the reasons I was drawn to Salvo's photographs was because of the ways in which he portrays his subjects. His photos capture things about his subjects such as character, love, and friendship. The way his subjects are looking at the camera is as if they are addressing the viewer and therefore they become very personal. Another artist who has influenced me is Krzysztof Wodiczko from Warsaw, Poland. Wodiczko creates large-scale projections of politically-charged images on architectural facades and monuments worldwide.³ He collaborates with communities and gives silent citizens a chance to be heard as in his project The Tijuana Projection in 2001.

I am drawn to Krzysztof's work not only because of its grand scale but because of the social and political topics in which he chooses to work with. His work inspires me to be an artist that works for change. In response, I am compelled to give those who aren't typically given a voice an opportunity to be heard.



Conclusion

One of the biggest influences for my project has simply been the people I've met. I have spent a lot of time talking with individuals in the homeless community for the past couple years now. It has been through their stories and their company that my views and understanding of homelessness has been transformed. It has changed me in ways I hadn't known to be possible. I have a completely different view and understanding of people without a home and the struggles they are faced with. This experience has allowed me to realize that I had unknowingly developed stereotypes of who the homeless are. But it was through my experiences and the relationships I have made that I have been able to identify my ignorance and eliminate it. I have met people who are homeless because of their own freewill. I have also met individuals who are homeless that are well educated but that have just fell under hard times. There are many people from many walks of life that I can say have helped put things into perspective for me and helped to shape my project.

³Krzysztof Wodiczko <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wodiczko/index.html>

Choosing to work on such a delicate topic for my integrated project has been the most challenging experience I have had to face yet. It's also perhaps the most rewarding. Since committing to this project I have been faced with many personal and social challenges along the way. For example, at one of the photo sessions I hosted at the Ann Arbor public Library I noticed that my numbers were far lower than the first time I had done it. I later found out that the security guard at the library told a lot of the people that had showed up that morning that I had called and said I wasn't going to be there. So most of them believed him and left. Although it was disturbing news that my own public library's staff would try to sabotage my project, I became more driven to complete my project. For there are many people like the library's security guard that just don't understand the homeless community and therefore push them away.

My integrated project has transformed into something much greater than a project just for school, but into a passion toward a cause that I will continue to support. Although this 8 month project has come to an end I will continue to be an advocate for the homeless communities and strive to educate those who need to be educated.

