

Naming the Homeless

This is a project in which 28 homeless people had their pictures taken where they lived or liked to hang out and again after they had been made over to look like fashion models. There was no satire intended. Rather, the idea was to show these people at their peak. Further, I felt it would be so much easier for the rest of us to care about people, and harder to forget them, once we knew their names.

I still believe that, but I have now also to consider the view from the other side. Lawrence Green, the first model who called me after his case worker told him about the project, was upset by the idea that his name might be linked to homelessness indefinitely. “What happens after I get a job?” he wanted to know. “I’ll write ‘Happily Employed’,” I promised. But that was a flip answer. These peoples’ lives are fluid, while the pictures capture and keep a 60th of a second or less. Still, these pictures compare and contrast the documented life to the invented one – the one that might be.

Some people whom I asked to contribute money or goods to this project worried about what would happen after the models had been made over and then had to go back to their real lives. These models are complex adults as rich as reality. Just because they are in need doesn’t make them simple. They shoulder extraordinary responsibilities in order to protect their children from dangerous people or, like Mr. Toshi who travels an hour and a half by bus each way to get his son to school each day. Does that mean he can no longer imagine? Take a holiday? Separate work from play? Do we insist that the homeless must be genuinely helpless before we can assist them?

There are as many different kinds of homeless individuals as there are housed. I hope this exhibit reminds us that the homeless are not only the people we feel threatened by because they are sleeping in a doorway we wish to enter. Or because they are begging for money. Or that all homeless people become so out of stupidity or shiftlessness. Twenty-five of the 28 people in this exhibit showed up on time and worked well and hard.

I defy you to find the one who showed up six hours late and drunk. She’s the one who holds herself like a professional model. But she hadn’t washed her hair in three months and she arrived at Architects and Heroes too late for a cut. She got ugly with the make-up artist who had given her time and materials for free and might have expected some appreciation. But the homeless are people just like paying customers, they have sweet personalities and cruel ones. It’s our vanity that wants people to be grateful for charity.

It was shocking, sometimes, to discover how easily some people had reached their predicament. Richard Stephens was once one of the guards who protected President Kennedy. Recently he had been living a happy, productive life in Portland, Oregon, until he got hit by a car one day and had to be hack-sawed out of his driver's seat. It took him years of hospitalization and therapy to become one of the amazing recovery stories. But he had nowhere to go after he got out of the hospital. He lives with a friend now and needs to work again. He's got aspirations to teach golf for a living. For fun, on Sunday mornings, he teaches kids to play. I think he'd be good with kids.

His case worker, Danielle Lacampagne, at the Veterans' Administration Compensated Work Therapy Program, talks a lot about the miracle she finds in each of her 'survivors.' These miracles are made out of facing hard facts and surmounting them day by day. The social workers I met were unending in the trenches helping to make difficult decisions. Their organizations didn't want to be thanked in this exhibit. Many helped generously, but should the models be unhappy with the experience the advocacy organizations want that to be my fault, not theirs. I often had to say that before taking the first pictures of someone who had come to me because their case worker had told them about the project.

I had originally intended to select the models after having met them and decided that I could make them over. It didn't work that way in practice. There wasn't time. There wasn't a way to meet people. Instead, case workers at various advocacy organizations asked individuals if they'd like to participate, and if so, they called me up. With a few exceptions, I included whoever called me. I simply made an appointment on the spot and went to take their picture. It was impossible to get in touch with many of the models by phone. No none had their own transportation, with the exception of one couple who lived in their van. We should remember how much harder it is for a homeless person to participate in society than it is for us. We should give them double the credit when they do participate.

For me, the heart-rending person is Suny H. Roberts. She's the only model I met on the street. This was in July, when I needed a picture to put on the proposal for this project. She's the only one who sleeps on the streets and eats at soup kitchens while she waits for her boyfriend to get out of San Quentin, again. Suny has the most beautiful face, life shines out of her. I met her once at the Martin de Porres soup kitchen where she was having lunch. I guess she'd forgotten I was coming because she wasn't inside the door as promised. Instead, she was sitting at a picnic table hovering over her food with a hood over her head, but still I spotted her in the crowd without trouble. Her small slice of cheek looked like velvet in a row of lettuce.

LucyGray

photography

It was that day she took a picture from her pocket revealing a very unattractive, very overweight Sheryl Roberts. That was Suny before the degenerative bone marrow disease that keeps her in constant pain yet somehow ravishing. Suny wants to leave San Francisco. She wants to go somewhere easier. I want to scoop Suny up and give her a place to rest her bones and keep from getting a chill. But I can't do that by myself. I'm just a photographer who can introduce her to you. This exhibit is one effort in a very large social structure.

I don't want to undervalue this exhibit. I'm proud of the community effort this represents. Grace Cathedral has been astonishing in their caring and skill. I think the pictures challenge our assumptions about appearance. Many of these people have a big gap in their resumes, but so do mothers who take off work when they have children. This project has been called controversial. I should hope so. Grace Cathedral says they are hosting the exhibit in the spirit of open discussion of important issues. I felt the same when I set out to make this project. Having met the models, I have more hopes for their future employment than I did beforehand, but for the rest of us and for potential employers, I hope these pictures stir you up. For good or ill, at last the homeless are then in the forefront of your thoughts. And maybe you've got a better way to help.