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Going homeless: Social worker gets perspective

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(August 22, 2005) — Of all days to become homeless, Jennifer Wolfley chose a day when the rain came down not in drips and dribbles but in streams.

"At least the sun isn't beating down and at least it isn't snowing and bitter cold," she said from the comfort of her kitchen in Brockport.

For months she and her family had been preparing for this experiment, this day when she would leave her suburban home and all its trappings to experience what many of her clients at Grace Urban Ministries know all too well — what it's like to be homeless in Rochester.

"I don't like to give my clients advice I wouldn't take myself," Wolfley said.

She and others at the center in northwest Rochester offer HIV/AIDS testing, clothing, workplace training and a bathroom to get washed up in. And sometimes, when clients don't come to her office, Wolfley goes to them. Under bridges. Along Lyell Avenue. Places where people in transition are found.

So, the three days of homelessness weren't just a chance for someone from the suburbs to dabble in street life. It was a lesson in the obstacles her clients face, a chance for her to remember what it was like when she was younger and lived on the streets in New York City for a short time. And it became, in essence, a room of mirrors that provided new ways for her to look at her own life.

"It feels odd to leave home without my keys," she said as she and her husband walked to their SUV and then drove downtown with a reporter in tow.

The drop-off place was Broad and Main streets — more than a mile from Hope House on West Main, where Wolfley would spend the night.

Before the 41-year-old woman had walked three blocks, her jeans and top were soaked. By the time she checked in at Hope House, little puddles formed with every step.

Hope House knew Wolfley would be checking in that day, a Wednesday in late July when she wouldn't be knocking anyone else out of a dry place to sleep. But Hope House, operated by the Salvation Army, does accept walk-ins off the street and women just out of jail. Many stay for 30 to 45 days while looking for work and a place to live.

Looking for work

"I worked harder than I've worked in a long time," Wolfley said after spending a full day seeking a job downtown in the same clothes that had been rained on the day before. Most shelters don't have money in their budgets to purchase clothing, said Connie Sanderson, coordinator of Rochester/Monroe County Homeless Continuum of Care Team. Instead, they count on donations from the public, which can be plentiful one week and lacking the next.



KARIN VON VOIGTLANDER staff photographer
Jennifer Wolfley shed her name and her suburban comforts for three days of life on the streets of Rochester. She would sleep in shelters and pick through garbage cans looking for returnable bottles and cans.

Homelessness

- The Rochester area has more than 600 emergency beds for people who are homeless or in transition. On any given night, 90 percent of the beds are full.
- Monroe County placed 1,802 families and 6,881 individuals in shelters last year, up 9 percent from 2003 and the most so far this decade.
- Key reasons people are placed in shelters: eviction; release from an institution; domestic violence.

Sources: Rochester/Monroe County Homeless Continuum of Care Team; Monroe County Department of Human Services

Choosing a name

During Jennifer Wolfley's three-day homeless experience, she used the name Gwen Robbie Gibson in case women at the shelter knew her name from her work with Grace Urban Ministries.

- Gwen was chosen to commemorate a dear friend who died of AIDS.
- Robbie recognized the experience of Michael and Robert Rosenberg, whose parents were executed in 1953 for conspiring to spy for the Soviet Union. Family members would not take the boys in for fear of being ostracized.
- Gibson is the last name of a 5-year-old Rochester boy, A.J. Gibson, who was killed in July. In her role as an outreach worker, Wolfley helped the Gibson family with funeral arrangements and read a prayer in Hebrew at A.J.'s funeral.

Despite Wolfley's rough appearance, a few businesses told her they were hiring and gave her applications — although one asked her not to fill it out there. Others told her she would have to go to another branch of the company in another part of the city, which she couldn't do because the shelter hands out only two bus tokens at a time and she had no money to buy more.

She tried to earn some money by digging through the garbage for cans that could be redeemed for cash, but an hourlong search yielded only 45 cents' worth.

"It's a strange experience to put your hand in a garbage can," she said. There are bees and rats. "You don't know what you'll find."

And you don't know how other people will react. One hot dog vendor seemed angry. "What are you doing?" he asked as he came toward her. "I don't want you in my garbage."

The incident startled Wolfley, who had her head down when he approached.

Maybe he was worried it would be bad for business, she said. "Nobody wants to be reminded that somebody else doesn't have their basic needs met."

Locked restrooms

Basic needs like restrooms and water were equally hard to come by. The restrooms at Midtown Plaza are locked, and most other places of business want only customers using their facilities.

"Going to the bathroom is not a luxury," Wolfley said.

A kind man at Bennigan's restaurant on East Main Street allowed her to use the restroom, as did the Salvation Army at the Liberty Pole. A nearby church let her fill her water bottle.

By the time Wolfley made it back to the shelter, she was exhausted and her arthritic foot hurt. The sounds of toilets flushing and air conditioners kicking on and off didn't keep her awake. She could have slept on the floor.

She didn't have to. Her sparse bedroom had two twin beds, one for her and one for a stranger who told Wolfley she was glad to have a roommate to talk to.

Later, when Wolfley was having breakfast alone with the pigeons downtown, she better appreciated what her roommate had said because "I feel invisible."

It seemed as though every homeless person she passed said hello to her but the busy professionals didn't look her way.

"All the men that came to my aid were either homeless or in a transitional state," she said.

One woman seemed afraid of Wolfley, clutching her handbag and watching where Wolfley went.

"We weren't of the same pack," Wolfley said, touching on her theory that even humans live in packs.

Buses came and went as a man and woman preached to the crowd near the Liberty Pole. Another woman sat to the side, talking to someone unseen by the rest of the world.

"Do you know what the difference is between me and her?" Wolfley asked. "I have two bottles of medication and counseling."

There were others she encountered, she said, including "a man out there doing Kung Fu, Matrix-type stuff into thin air and a man sleeping by Subway. Isn't anybody paying attention that the streets are loaded with people who need help?"

In Wolfley's role as director of the Mary Magdalene Women's Outreach Center, part of Grace Urban Ministries, she often reaches out to prostitutes and drug addicts.

"As aware as I thought I was, I had sort of lost touch with a parallel world," she said.

Eating ravenously

In the world of the homeless, one of the most important things you can do is sit down and eat with someone. When you are new to a school or business, you often wonder where you'll sit in the cafeteria, Wolfley said. But when you're eating at the Salvation Army, you can sit anywhere and will likely have many invitations to join people. One man in line at the Salvation Army even got a meal ticket for Wolfley when she had to leave the line for a restroom break. As they sat together and ate their hot meal, he studied her and said, "You ate recently." Their eyes went to a man nearby with his face practically in his plate, eating like a dog would.

"I've never seen a human being eat so ravenously," said Wolfley, who pushed her dinner roll over to the hungry man.

When people are struggling financially, "It may not be that they don't eat," said Sanderson, of the homeless care team. "What they eat may not be nutritionally sound."

The friendliness at dinnertime also was evident at Hope House, the women's shelter on West Main. In many ways the shelter had the feel of a college residence hall. Women swapped clothes and used duct tape to pull in tummies. A boom box was almost always on in an enclosed yard where women went to smoke and show off blouses they had purchased for a few dollars at a thrift store.

There was joy and laughter, even though they were all down on their luck.

"Every staff person is uplifting," said Tonia Jones, program manager at the shelter.

The Salvation Army is a Christian organization and "we're to show the fruit of that," Jones said. "Even if we see the same person four or five times, we need to still accept them with love. It's a clean slate.

"There's already enough guilt and shame. We need to embrace them. Who are we to not do that?"

Lessons learned

A week after Wolfley left Hope House, the shelter and the people she had met were still close to her heart — and so were the lessons they had taught her.

"I feel like I have another home there," she said.

She returned with clothes and hygiene items for her roommate and others. She took water bottles, fruit and cookies and left them at the Liberty Pole, which she now calls God's living room.

At home, she is less likely to let her cell phone interrupt time with her family. She pulled out her good china and has been using it daily "because every day is a special occasion."

At other times in her life, she had questioned why her father had died when she was 9. Why there sometimes wasn't enough food. Why she was sexually abused.

"But now I know that even my personal suffering was not in vain. Obviously I can survive it and I can help somebody else survive it."

Wolfley said she has a better understanding of herself and is more grateful for every piece of food that comes her way. "I can look at my clients and look in their eyes and say, 'I get it.'

"When you are in the same underwear for three days and you're trying to find a job, you get it."

When she started the experiment, she described herself as a social reformer. Now she plans to be a political activist.

"I'm not the type of person who goes to rallies, but I'd like our society to be accountable." She's looking forward to asking politicians what they are going to do *for* the homeless, not *with*.

And she's looking forward to teaching her clients that when they face their fears it brings power, just as when Wolfley faced her fear of bees to reach into the garbage.

She knows she has made a difference, even in small ways, in the lives of her clients over the years and in the lives of her students at Rochester Institute of Technology, where she teaches literature and writing.

"But I'm no different than the people I lived with. They all have something to offer."

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