

Homeless Mike

It was a dry, breezy summer day downtown at the park, the kind best spent in a lawn chair with a glass of lemonade. The grills were lit, and the smell of propane and charcoal filled the air, the billowing smoke wistfully rising from the greasy grates. Hamburgers were cooking with that familiar sizzle while brats were bursting from the heat. A somewhat rowdy group of men stood around the grills with spatulas and beer in hand, laughing loudly at bad puns and dodging a sudden burst from the flames. A quick hand from one man wiped grease on his jeans without a second thought. Children were running about the woodchips and browned summer grass, playing whatever games their imaginations could conceive. Their mothers sat atop of the picnic tables and looked on with smiles, trading stories. Teenagers were doing, well, who really knows. Everybody knew everyone else, and gathered as neighbors do at any other block party. The air was vibrant and cheerful. Things were good.

But a little prodding and investigating brought to the surface a much more ominous reality. The men's faces were more tired and weathered than usual. The mothers tried too hard to pull their hair back in a failed attempt to hide its worn look. Their hollow eyes sagged from years of hidden agony and abuse. The neighborhood was caught in a strange sort of urban decay, never developed into a dense and vibrant city, but enough to hang in a sorry state of affairs as time took its toll. In fact, that is what this scene really was: worn and stale, and hiding a scarred history. Nobody would say out loud, and I didn't want to even admit it, but most of the people gathered here in this little, hot park were homeless.

The park that day was the site of a local outreach organization conducting its semi-annual block party. Of course, it served a very practical purpose to provide a meal for people who hadn't eaten in days. But it was more than that, it was an effort to bring the people of this worn out neighborhood together to build a sense of community, safety, and downright humanity. And it was to that point somewhat successful. A year ago a homeless man was shot multiple times and killed at that very park by police. He had reached into his coat to pull out a dead cell phone after being confronted. They thought it was a weapon, and nobody bothered to ask any more questions. But here, a year later, what had been a forsaken corner of the city had become a site of happiness and relief. The darkened neighborhood that represented all of our vices and prejudices, that imprisoned its members in fear and depression, had slowly developed a sense of pride and belonging. Though broken, the gathered were optimistic.

The block party brought these outcasts of society and forgotten people together to stand up for each other. While the mayor tried to forget there were homeless people in his city, and while the city council tried to close down the homeless shelter to eliminate "undesirables," these people had to lift the state of this small community up from within and change the attitudes of both the city and themselves. They gathered to remind people that they did exist. They knew they mattered to someone, perhaps most importantly to each other.

In the crowd of volunteers and locals, I happened to encounter Mike. Mike was a tall, skinny, unassuming character who walked with his head hung low. He covered his grungy blond hair with a ragged red cap whose label had worn off. His face appeared sullen, reflected in his grey eyes that never seemed to focus on much of anything. The

skin on his face was wrinkled and patched with short hair. He was wearing a blue flannel shirt, a staple it seemed to the members of the park. But when he smiled, it was a brief but captivating moment. He had only half a mouth of teeth, but when Mike smiled he seemed to grip you in joy, and that was a peek into the hope carried by the entire neighborhood.

Once you started talking to Mike, I found out, you couldn't stop. He was fairly witty and quick of mind. He talked softly but steadily and with rhythm, never passing an opportunity to share pieces of trivia he picked up living on the streets. "Stay away from John, he's always unhappy; go wait behind the pub because late at night they give away day-old bread." Mike even weighed in on the political climate and global warming. It's good because winter stinks when you're homeless.

Mike, like the neighborhood, had seen better days but was trying hard. He was probably only in his 40s, and simultaneously seemed tired of life and full of it. I later found out from the outreach organization that at one point Mike had been a student in college studying engineering. Midway through he developed schizophrenia, lost his scholarships, and began a spiral downward. I'm not really sure what happened afterward, or understand how that happened so easily; I don't think Mike does either. But somehow he ended up homeless in the park on that summer day. This man, who at one point had a lot going for him, was destroyed by a mental condition completely out of his control. What's worse is that Mike has a vague memory of what life used to be like, but now he wanders the streets in solitude, never put together enough to hold down a job or remain settled in one place. He is truly a reminder of just how precious life is, and just how suddenly it can change.

So there we were, standing next to the flaming grills and having a rather entertaining conversation. Suddenly he asked me, “Are you in school?”

“Y-Yes,” I cautiously answered, hoping not to bring up a bad subject or sound “superior.”

“Good, I hope you never quit. You’d better stay in school.”

I was caught a little off guard, but relieved nonetheless. “Ha!” I sort of laughed forcefully, “Okay I will, and I plan to.”

“Stay away from drugs too.”

At this point I wasn’t sure what to think. Could I really be getting life lesson from a homeless guy? Or was he just screwing with me?

“Really,” he continued with earnestness, “I’ve seen it happen. People around here get real messed up. And booze. It really helps sometimes, but it really hurts too.”

Then Mike said to me something I will never forget. He said, “And I’m not a bum. I am NOT a bum.”

He had said it with such passion, resentment, and sadness that I had to dwell on it for a few moments, and I still do even today. Homeless Mike, as I have since referred to him, had nothing left. His belongings, his career, his family, even his hopes and dreams had all been stripped away. All that was left was a want to be respected as a *person*. I could only guess as to how many people cast him aside as a no-good bum, as the dregs of society on a daily basis. But he was a man, a human being. Mike never wanted anyone to feel sorry for him, but just to acknowledge his humanity, to not write him off as stupid or lazy or a no-good drunk. Yes he was homeless, but he was not a bum, and it *did matter* when people called him that.

Out of all of the lessons I learned from Homeless Mike, that was the biggest and most important one. And perhaps one that only a homeless man could teach me. Sure, stay in school and don't do drugs was fine advice, but that's something my dad can (and does) tell me. But Homeless Mike taught me first-hand that people are, well, *people*. It doesn't matter what sort of stigma the rest of society places on them, it doesn't matter how many times they knowingly screwed up: they still deserve respect. And not just to their faces, but behind their backs and in our daily conversations too. It doesn't matter if I call Mike a bum to his face or not; it is still harmful. In the harsh world Homeless Mike lived in, the one thing that upset him the most was an attack on his personhood. I found this quite inspiring. At the end of the day, we must embrace people's humanity instead of cowering behind dehumanizing labels that are convenient.

To this day I still hear people, even some of my peers, calling the homeless population lazy and dumb, moochers who need to get jobs. *Bums*. For crying out loud, some even have iPods. iPods! *The nerve*. How shameful it is to hear people speak this way. I am embarrassed. The homeless, like Homeless Mike, don't ask for much. At the very very least, all they want is to be treated with more respect than the benches they sleep on. They only ask that they be called people, and that the rest of us realize their struggles. And they deserve that much. *We* deserve that much as a society. That is what Homeless Mike taught me.

Today the neighborhood is getting along fine with the help of the block parties and increased attention brought on by the organization. Crime rates dropped, and there exists a positive relationship between authorities and the homeless populace that makes up the community. Many have moved on, some have stayed. But everyone knows that as

long as they are there, someone will care. Someone will notice when he or she leaves.

And that is a wonderful accomplishment. About Mike, I wish I could say more. Mike left the block party and no one heard much of him since.

After Mike left, I asked the organizers if there was anything anyone could do for him. “No, I’m afraid not,” one of them said. “Mike has a hard time with his mental condition, so he’s never around long enough to maintain a regular schedule. Medication won’t work, unfortunately, even if we could arrange such a thing. The best we can do is direct him to certain programs that offer temporary food and shelter, which we have done. He doesn’t stay though. They say he gets by one way or another.”

I know Homeless Mike manages to get by. He’s no bum.