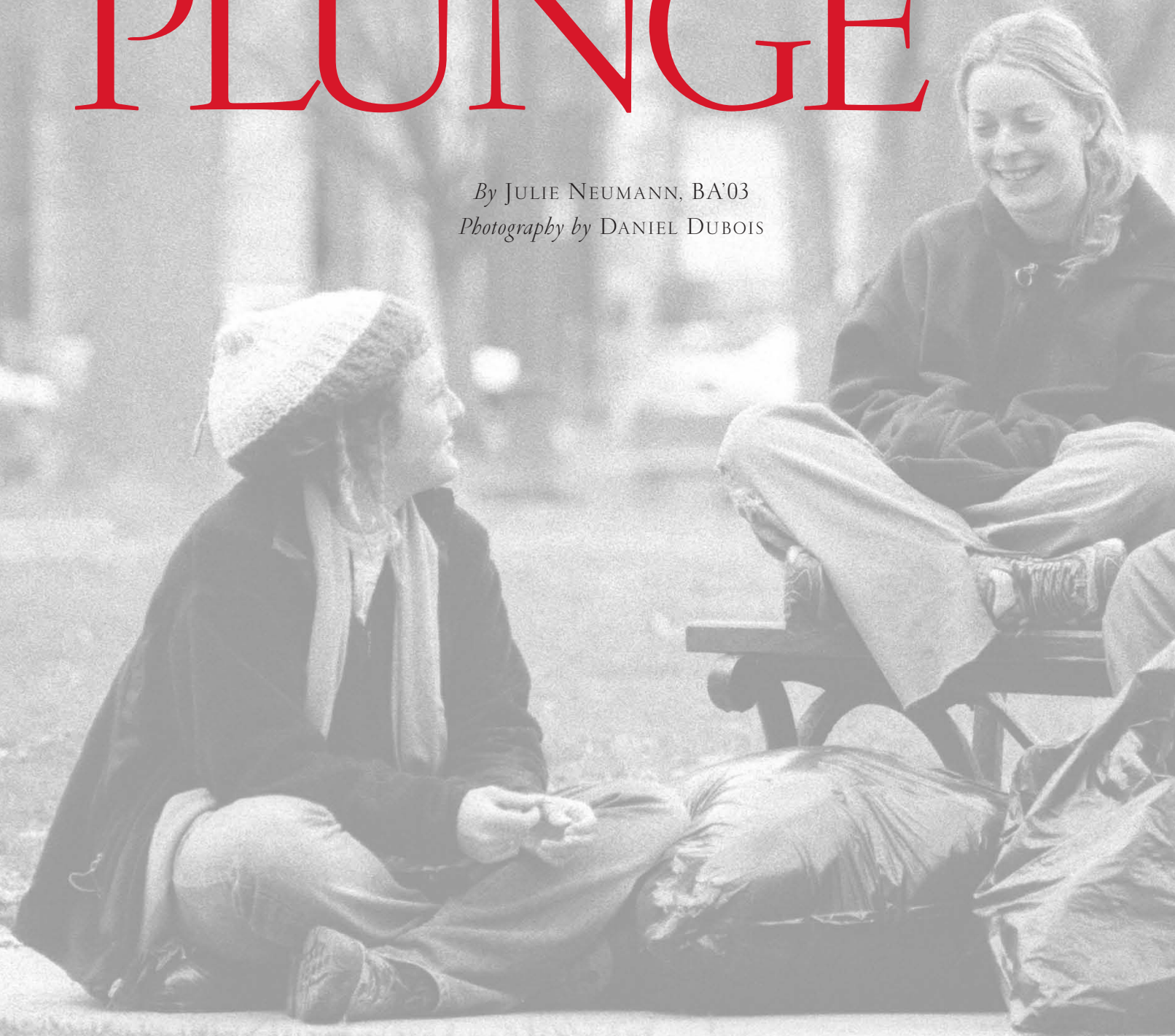


URBAN PLUNGE

Homelessness becomes reality

*By JULIE NEUMANN, BA'03
Photography by DANIEL DUBOIS*





for 12 students who take to the streets during their spring break

DAVID HARRIS SPEAKS SOFTLY and eloquently, each word chosen with the care of a true poet. This beautiful voice does not fit the rest of the picture. His face is dark and weathered with carefully guarded eyes. An oversized jacket covers multiple layers of sweaters and shirts. More telling is the defeated hunch in his shoulders, his hesitance to make eye contact. David's intelligence and kindness are never realized by most of the world because he is homeless.

"One of the first things you have to do when in service is get to know the people you are serving," says Randy Smith, a Nashvillian who has volunteered with Alternative Spring Break (ASB) at Vanderbilt for more than a decade. "You have to get down into the streets, you have to know who it is you are working with. Once you get to know them, you get to love them. And once you start to love them, then you can serve them."

Twelve Vanderbilt students spent their spring break getting to know David, his friends, and their struggle with homelessness. The ASB group went to Washington, D.C., to speak with their elected officials about homelessness issues, to work in soup kitchens, and to take an "Urban Plunge," a program developed through the National Coalition for the Homeless in which participants live as homeless people for 48 hours. They arrived in the nation's capital with open minds and good intentions, and left with a new understanding of what it means not only to have a home, but to be a human being.

MARCH 9

The Night Before the Urban Plunge

The Father McKenna Center is an unassuming brick building several blocks away from Capitol Hill. It serves as a shelter for homeless men, a Catholic church, and the base of operations for ASB's first-ever Urban Plunge. For the past three nights, the students have slept between pews in the chapel, waking up every morning at 5:45 to clear out before morning mass.

Carol Carrillo, Meghan Dukes, John Goodell, Betty Lackey, Jake Brewer and Jon Boughtin sit around a table in the center's industrial-sized kitchen making sandwiches. They have just returned from a series of meetings with senators and representatives regarding a bill to protect the rights of homeless individuals.



Meghan Dukes

**"No one should have to live like this.
This isn't humane. It kills your soul."**

Panhandling their way through the business district, Jake Brewer and Kerry McAuliffe encounter rejection and occasional small kindnesses. "Each time somebody says no to you it builds up, like a punch to the face," says Kerry.



Tomorrow morning they will begin their Plunge. They will live on the streets for two days without money, food, showers or shelter.

"This morning we met with the National Coalition for the Homeless, and they told us how to prepare clothing-wise so that we

fit the stereotypical appearance," says Meghan, a senior from rural Madisonville, Ky. "But emotionally and mentally, I don't think you can really get too much instruction." Meghan's goal is to open up to the homeless people with whom she comes in contact, to let them know she views them as her equal, and is interested in who they are beyond their present circumstances.

John, a D.C. native who is on his fourth ASB trip, is making a conscious effort to enter the Urban Plunge without any preconceived expectations. "The only thing I expect is to try to walk in someone else's shoes just for a little bit.

"There are two Americas—the America you see all the time and the America you don't. I'd like to take a few days on my break to discover how the other side views things."

Ron puts more bread and cookies on the table. He is overly conscientious, apologizing for the lack of food while offering more options than the students can possibly eat. Now an employee of the Father McKenna Center, he spent a year living on the streets and staying in the shelter. "This was my safe haven," says Ron. "They opened their doors to me, offered some hope."

He believes the Urban Plunge program is a powerful experience for the participants, and that ultimately it helps people such as himself. Two days is just long enough to get a glimpse of the degrading conditions he suffered. It was easy to get food and a place to sleep, he explains, but being able to shower and go to the bathroom was nearly impossible.

"I would choose not to interact with other people. I could smell my own stench so I knew you can smell it too, and you don't want that near you. I don't want it near me either, but it is me, and that is so degrading."

Ron says the longer someone is on the streets, the worse it becomes, the farther they fall out of society. "Homeless people want to present themselves to humanity as human beings. Instead they are monsters. People walk past them like they are dead, like they aren't even there."

MARCH 10 — Day One

11:30 a.m.

The sky is flat and gray, the frigid air threatening to turn the fine mist into ice. John, Meghan, Ben Diop and Brittany Murray follow their guide, David Harris, as he walks toward the Church of the Brethren, one of the few soup kitchens that serves lunch. The students are clothed in sweat pants and old jackets, with dirt smeared across their cheeks and underneath their fingernails, and large garbage bags slung over their shoulders. They already look worn down.

"We just walked past all the places we went yesterday," John says. "You don't notice it when someone doesn't look at you normally, but we really noticed it today. They make an effort not to look."

A set of rules is posted on the door to the soup kitchen: "No drinking, no drugs, no fighting. Eating here is a privilege." The group gathers folding chairs and waits for the meal to be served.

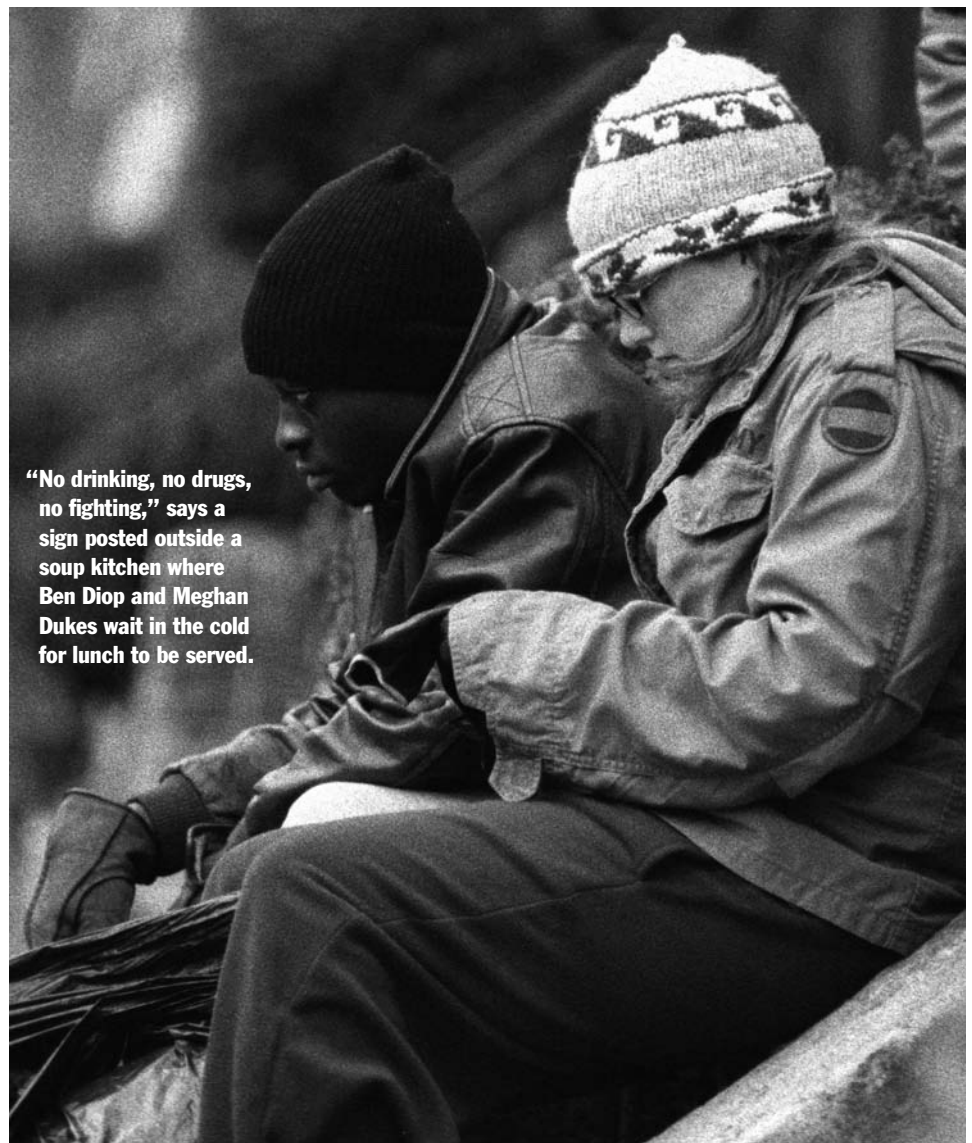
David is quietly observing his group. He has been homeless for three years since congenital heart disease and a stroke left him jobless. Since then he has struggled with ongoing health problems and depression, but is actively overcoming his problems. Having led more than 40 people through their Plunge, he is one of the most experienced guides working with the Coalition.

"Urban Plunge gives me an opportunity to help others," he says. "I live in a shelter, I am fed in soup kitchens, I live off help from others. That is really hard on my self-esteem."

I worked for 20 years, and now someone else takes care of me. So I like to help when I can."

He has observed that one of the most emotional experiences for Urban Plunge participants is when they have to panhandle for the first time. "They aren't used to being ignored like that," he says. "It's a little different [for them than for actual homeless people] because they don't need the money and they know in two days they will be OK, but it is still degrading. They say they will never forget that feeling of being dismissed as a human being. I could tell them what it feels like, but nothing compares to being the person holding out that cup."

Lunch is ready. A kitchen worker declares that sandwich toppings are limited, but they can eat as much bread as they want. Vitamins are passed out as well.



Urban Plunge guides say the experience of being dismissed as a human being is difficult for most students. “I can tell people don’t want me to come near them,” says Kerry McAuliffe.



“Homeless people want to present themselves to humanity as human beings. Instead they are monsters. People walk past them like they are dead, like they aren’t even there.”



Formerly homeless, Ron now helps others.

David softly adds that he has a good feeling about this group. The students eat in silence, unsure when their next meal will be or if the weather will take a turn for the worse once they return to the streets.

2 p.m.

They are unrecognizable. Huddled together on a park bench in DuPont Circle, Kerry McAuliffe and Jake become invisible behind their dirty jackets and a cardboard sign used to solicit handouts. Both have their eyes closed,

trying to rest after a long morning of panhandling near 19th Street and the George Washington University campus. The business people and students they approach have an eerie familiarity; they are begging from people who could easily be their parents or their friends.

“It’s like asking yourself for money, and you say no,” says Jake. “It’s more surprising when people actually say yes.”

One woman gave them half her sandwich and cash; a student from George Washing-

ton University gave them directions and offered money as well. These kindnesses have made a much deeper impression than being turned down.

“I feel guilty asking for money,” says Jake. The experience is giving him an insight into emotions of those who panhandle to survive. “You swallow your pride ... it is humbling.”

Kerry is having a more difficult time interacting with the people they pass. “Each time someone says no to you it builds up, like a punch to the face,” she says. “After a while it is easy to get depressed. It makes me really sad, not for myself of course but for homeless people, because no one treats you like a real person.”

Putting on the mask of homelessness is like entering another country where you don’t speak the language or understand the culture. A wall is between you and the people passing by—invisible, yet substantial as concrete.

When a man walks by with a little black

dog, Kerry visibly resists the urge to reach out and pet it. “Usually, I’ll go up and pet any dog that walks by. I love them. But now I feel bad; I can tell people don’t want me to come near them.”

The two of them begin to walk back through the business district. They have no place to go; no one is expecting them. They simply move because there is nothing else to do.

7 p.m.

John Harrison slowly takes off his layers and spreads out his belongings at a booth in McDonald’s. He often comes here because the food is cheap and the workers will let him stay inside in the warmth as long as he purchases something. It was an ideal place to take his group of Kerry, Jake, William Banks and Kristina Ronneberg for dinner.

The students share their panhandling money so that everyone can eat. Jake and Kerry are surprised that they collected more than \$30, and John attests that if they were really homeless, success likely would not be so easy. “You guys look fresh, so people will treat you differently,” he says. He pulls up his sleeves to show the contrast between his raw hands and pallid arms and theirs. “You just can’t replicate living outside all winter. The way you guys look, people would think there is still hope.”

John adds his own stash of Oreos to the spread of fries and hamburgers. Everyone shares what they have, suddenly aware of the necessity and comfort of food. They discuss the merits of Urban Plunge while they eat.

“The real value of this is not that the kids will go on to work in soup kitchens or give a couple bucks to some guy at the bus station,” John says. “Maybe they will continue with their studies in psychology and come across a report that says 30 percent of the homeless population suffers from schizophrenia. They will have a deeper understanding of homelessness and bring that to everything they do.”

Soon the group must head back into the cold. John attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings every night as part of his agreement with the shelter he lives in, and he has invited the group to join him. “AA is a great support for me, but sometimes it can be a pain to run to meetings every single day,” he says

as he repacks his bag. “But this shelter has lockers, which is really nice. Most of these shelters are crazy places—you turn around and someone steals your soap off your bed. The locker is great; it lets you relax a little.”

11:15 p.m.

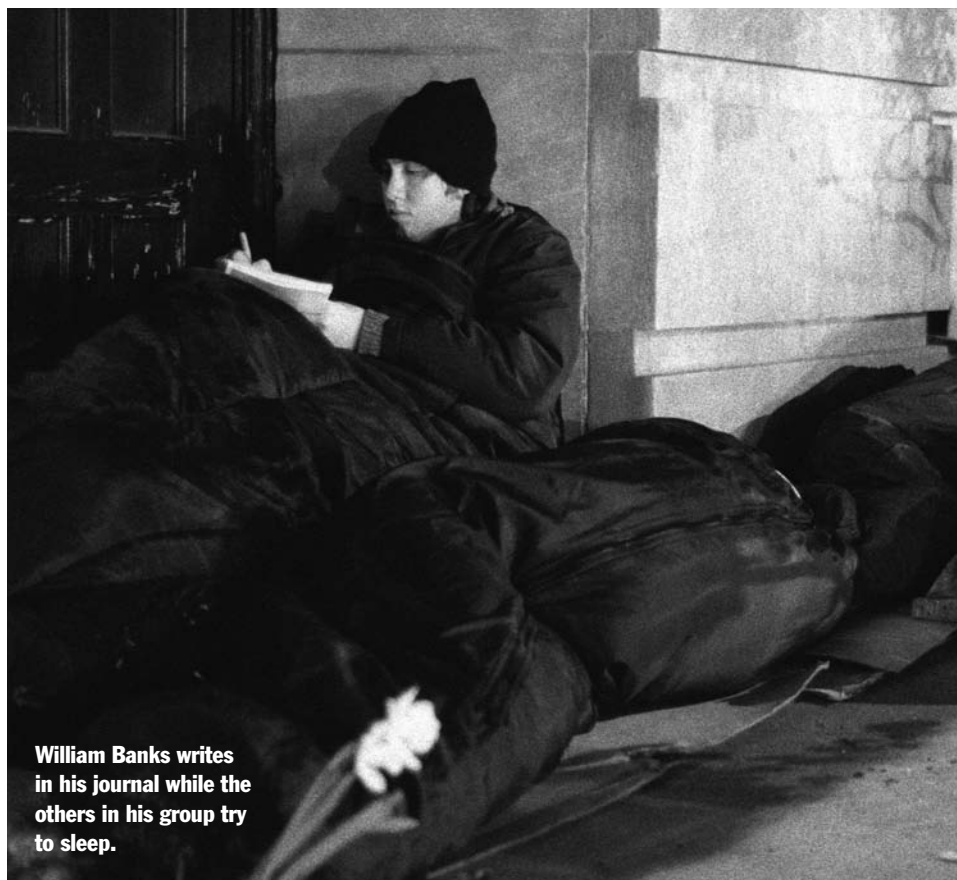
John’s group has already moved once tonight. Fearful that the rain would return in the middle of the night, they had planned to sleep beneath the wide blue awnings on the side of a bank, but a security guard kicked them out. Now they are settled in a small church courtyard. There is no cover from the elements, but they know they will not be turned away from a church.

The temperature is already in the low 30s,

On the other side of town, Meghan is curled up at the foot of an office building. “This is without a doubt the most miserable experience I’ve ever had,” she says. “It’s so cold. In normal life you just grab another layer, go inside, reach your destination. We have nowhere to go.”

She and Brittany lie between John Goodell and Ben, using their shoes for pillows. The only cardboard they could find to use as mattresses was covered in rotten cabbage, and the smell permeates their sleeping bags. They huddle close to one another to take advantage of body heat.

“No one should have to live like this,” adds Meghan. “This isn’t humane. It kills your soul.”



William Banks writes in his journal while the others in his group try to sleep.

but the group was able to pick up thick wool blankets from the hypothermia prevention van that patrols the D.C. area when it drops below freezing. Despite the long day, no one believes they will fall asleep easily. Lying next to Kristina in a doorway, William writes in his journal, trying to organize his thoughts so he can sleep in peace.

MARCH 11 — Day Two

6:30 a.m.

Jon is awakened by the boot of a policeman. The officer orders him to get up, and proceeds to move towards the other members of his group. “There is just an overwhelming feeling of not belonging anywhere,” he says.

Similar kicks and thrown newspapers

“Hour by hour I watched and felt the worst that people could be to each other, and five minutes later marveled at the most benevolent and beautiful acts of kindness I had ever seen. It was awful and beautiful at the same time.”



wake up Meghan and Brittany. They try to use the bathroom at a Starbucks but are asked to leave. Finally, they find a deli where the manager has his back turned and run into the restrooms before they can be stopped. Chilled to the bone from the frigid night, the two girls take their time, trying to absorb the warmth before a long day of walking through the cold city.

1 p.m.

Complete exhaustion is settling in. Jon and Danny Marin took turns staying up to watch over Betty and Carol the night before. Even

though they slept outside a nice bank close to the White House, drug dealers and prostitutes were continuously walking past them, suspicious of the large group huddled together on the sidewalk.

Jon has tried to panhandle with little success. More humiliating than his empty pockets are the empty stares from people who pass by.

“Before this I thought stopping for a fraction of a second to give someone a dollar was making a difference, but what they really wanted was for me to keep my wallet in my pocket and ask how they were doing,” he says.

“Two different homeless people told me when someone says ‘good morning,’ that is when they become human, that is when they become part of the world.”

11:45 p.m.

Both David Harris’ and John Harrison’s groups are preparing to sleep in the church courtyard on their final night of the Urban Plunge. As they leave to get food and blankets, they refer to returning to this spot as “getting home.” The students are beginning to create their own community, a trait they share with the homeless people with whom they spent their day.

A stranger takes pity on Jake Brewer and hands him spare change.



"Normally, when people ask you how you're doing, you just say 'fine'; you don't really answer the question," Jake says. "But I've noticed that when these guys ask each other that question, they really want to know. And they really answer."

Kerry says everyone she has talked to on the streets and in shelters was genuinely concerned about her. "One woman talked to me for a long time and then hugged me, genuinely hugged me," she says. "They watch out for us."

As they share their stories from the past two days, the large group attracts the attention of two homeless men who wander over to the church. They recognize that the students are not truly homeless, and one begins to lecture them on what it is like to have to live every day on the streets.

"I know you are trying to learn something, to know something, but this is no kind of life. This is the richest, most powerful country in the world, and look at us with no homes and no jobs and no one is helping. It is no kind of life at all."

MARCH 12

The Morning After

The groups meet at the National Coalition for the Homeless headquarters where they say goodbye to their guides and donate the majority of their clothes and blankets before heading to John Goodell's home in suburban D.C.

Though they are no longer pretending to be homeless, they are still treated as if they are. At the subway station, their polite gestures are ignored. Metro passengers peek at their matted hair and garbage bags with distrust. They are still different, somehow not quite human. The commuters shift uneasily to avoid the possibility of physical contact.

When they exit the subway in a beautiful neighborhood, the perfectly manicured lawns and well-kept houses make them more self-conscious of their dirtiness. Once they reach John's house, their first instinct is to run for the bathrooms. The smell of a home-cooked meal is overpowered by their odor.

"I am tired and smelly, and I want a shower more than anything," Betty says.

Street Smarts

"We think more about the fact that we are going to change someone else a lot more than we will be changed ourselves," Randy Smith tells the ASB students when they return to Vanderbilt.

future career. "Now I feel a strong, emotional connection to the homeless," says John, who plans to be a human-rights advocacy lawyer. "Do I think I could fight for homeless people without walking in their shoes? Yes. Would I have been as effective? Absolutely not."



Kristina Ronneberg and John Harrison share the McDonald's french fries they were able to buy with panhandling money.

None of the readings or films they studied had truly prepared the Urban Plunge group for the reality of being homeless. For two days they were shut out by society, and even though the gate has been reopened and they have been welcomed back, many cannot walk back into their old lives.

"I am having a really hard time readjusting," says Meghan. "It's impossible to articulate what we saw, how it felt, and we only went through two days of it. Yesterday it got so cold, and I couldn't stop thinking about David sleeping outside in D.C. I just can't push that aside. But I don't know how to help, either. Just going to a soup kitchen won't be enough for me."

Though Meghan is struggling to find a way to apply her passionate feelings, John already sees a place for the experience in his

The ache of homelessness goes far beyond missing a house in which to live. In that exposed condition, a desire to be treated with respect often outweighs the physical needs. More than just learning what it feels like to sleep on sidewalks with an empty stomach, the students saw humanity stripped down to its most basic components.

"Hour by hour I watched and felt the worst that people could be to each other, and five minutes later marveled at the most benevolent and beautiful acts of kindness I had ever seen," remembers Jake. "It was awful and beautiful at the same time. Looking back, though, it seems there was far more of the latter." ▼

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