

The Night of the Two Sarahs

Sarah McFeeley and Sarah Christianson are a force of nature. They are known throughout Sanctuary as the two Sarahs. They have volunteered just about every Monday night for the last two years. Everyone, from guests to management, thinks extremely highly of them. Both were a joy to talk with and their obvious passion for helping people was infectious.

In this article, when a given Sarah speaks, I will refer to Sarah McFeeley as “Sarah M,” and Sarah Christianson as “Sarah C.”

Why do you volunteer?

Sarah M: “I first started volunteering because of my church. I asked Dan which night they needed me the most and he said Monday. I volunteer because I figure this has as much impact as anything else that our church does. I like it when we get out into the community. I enjoy it. I’ve been doing it for four or five years. I like the contact with people, the other Sarah and the people who come through. What originally drew me to Sanctuary were all the religious faiths that are behind it. I think their needs to be more of that.”

Sarah C: “I started volunteering Christmas Eve about two years ago. I volunteer because I want to do something for the community. I’ve been doing some things for the homeless since my kids were young. I wanted them to see that it could happen to anybody and I wanted them to know that you shouldn’t treat anybody differently. I like how Sanctuary treats people. I like that there aren’t so many requirements. Everybody here is as much a part of the community as anyone else. The stigma surrounding this group of people is sad.”

Sarah M: “I like the saying that Jesus was a community organizer. I think volunteering is something more of what He would be doing. It’s about doing what Jesus really preached. We’ve been together on Monday nights for over a year now. [The people who work at Sanctuary] need to walk a fine line. They do it well and that’s hard. Sanctuary does not push any one religion.”

Sarah C: “I miss the interaction with everyone when I leave. I like helping people find the things they need. I help them look up things on Craigslist. I worry about the people who I see that have been here for a while. I talked with one person who got housing and he said he couldn’t sleep because it was so quiet. They get used to the lifestyle and when it’s not there, there’s something missing. It’s so humbling to volunteer at Sanctuary. It makes you really grateful for every little thing you have.”

What are your impressions of Interfaith Sanctuary?

Sarah C: “I remember one time I saw someone I knew from Sanctuary at Winco and said hi. He started to joke around with me and tell me to go away. Someone saw this and told Winco he was harassing me. He was banned from that place for a while. I’m careful now with what I say. I just wave. When I pass by someone and they ask me for money. I ask them if they’re hungry and I can tell them where to go get food. I don’t have the money to give out but I feel good that I can tell them where to go.”

Sarah M: “You don’t need to practice a certain religion to stay at Interfaith Sanctuary and I think that’s a good thing. I think Sanctuary is filling a need. For the most part, the people who stay here are willing to work. They are not the lazy type. I like the fact that people can get help here in all areas. They can get help in housing, counseling and other things they need. It doesn’t matter, Sanctuary helps out all types of people.”

Sarah C: “On my first night volunteering at Sanctuary, they told me to treat the guests with respect. We are at different places in our lives. They are not judgmental there. I know just about everybody by name. It feels like we’re all friends on a certain level. We treat [guests] just the way we want to be treated.”

Sarah M: “About three weeks ago, I noticed a lady that I hadn’t seen in a while. I remembered her as having a lot of anger. When I saw her again she had let go of that. I think that’s a good thing and I think Sanctuary had a lot to do with it.”

What do you want people in the community to know about homelessness?

Sarah M: “The homeless need support as much as anyone else. They are not all addicts, or lazy bums. There are exceptions to every rule, but for the most part the guests there have just hit hard times. The real misconception is that people tend to generalize about the homeless. If you come to Sanctuary and you actually experience a night there, you’ll be surprised. The people at Sanctuary range from one extreme to another. You have to take them as they are, just like you have to do in other parts of life. I think there are a lot of people out there who walk around in denial about homelessness. They don’t want anything to do with it. I wish people would take more notice so that families can get more support because they need it.”

Sarah C: “It isn’t what people think it is. Unfortunately society judges this group of people harshly. I can’t imagine how hard it would be to walk through these doors and know that this is your home for the night. If people walk through the grocery store, they probably wouldn’t know who was homeless or not. These people are members of the community. If people would come down and work here for a while, they would see that. It’s disappointing to me to see people get treated badly because they are homeless. It takes seeing a place like Sanctuary for yourself to really understand.”

As relayed to Barry Franklin, Sanctuary PR Team Writer