Actions Over Words:

Jodi Peterson-Stigers on the Challenges Facing the Misunderstood Homeless

By Victoria Zunich

What do you think when you see someone standing on the side of the road? There are many common ideas that pop into our heads when we see someone and label them as homeless. Even if we are correct about the current housing status of someone, there is still a wide range of misconceptions regarding who makes up our nation’s unhoused population. Homelessness is an issue we are all aware of, yet an increasing number of families find themselves unhoused. According to the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report, done by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 582,462 U.S. citizens endure the challenges of losing their homes and permanent shelter (HUD, 2022). That same source found that in the state of Idaho alone just under 2,000 individuals experienced homelessness as of 2020. The problem is that unhoused people are amassed into one set of traits and experiences. Although some of their stories are the same, they are still individuals with unique struggles and do not receive the recognition they deserve. As of 2022, only about 60% of people without homes are able to find shelter on any given night (HUD, 2022).

Fortunately, members of Boise’s community like Jodi Peterson-Stigers are creating safe spaces and productive conversations for those in need. Since 2017, Peterson-Stigers has been the executive director in charge of one of Boise’s busiest shelters, the Interfaith Sanctuary. As the executive director, Jodi oversees fundraising, program development, advocacy, and balances the needs of the staff and those using the shelter. She described Interfaith as a “low barrier shelter.” This entails that anyone, no matter their identity or sobriety status, are permitted to stay at the shelter as long as there is room. Her primary goal is to “...keep families together, no matter how you define your family.”

The main question I have grappled with when considering the subject of homelessness is, “Why is it anyone’s responsibility to provide support beyond those who are homeless?” My answer to this lies in the morality of our community. There is a recurring myth that people lose their homes due to their own choices. However, many reports show that circumstances beyond the control of an individual or family are the primary routes to homelessness. These circumstances could be medical emergencies, eviction, or loss of a job. Finance writer, Jane Tumar, shared in an article, “63% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck” (LendingClub, 2022). This means that upon one layoff, an entire family could lose their access to permanent shelter. There seems to be a high amount of confidence when it comes to labeling who is homeless and who is not, however, the population may look very different than we presume.

Many believe that all persons without homes do not have jobs, and are incapable of obtaining one. However, according to estimations from the National Coalition for the Homeless, 44% of homeless people do maintain jobs (National Coalition, 2023). The problem comes from the inability to catch up with financial burdens and collect enough to purchase or rent a place to live. Even people who exist outside of that 44% still attempt to find jobs, but the assumptions and stereotypes they face prevent them from successfully reintegrating into life through the workforce or other forms of socialization.

A New York University (NYU) news story by Robert Polner explains how homeless people are typically blamed for their situation and viewed as someone prone to criminal or violent behavior. “Homeless persons are more likely to have criminal justice intervention. However, this is primarily because many of their daily survival activities are criminalized—meaning they might be given a summons or arrested for minor offenses such as trespassing, littering, or loitering” (Polner, 2019). It is nearly impossible to escape the law, and the implications that follow being a criminal, when your daily way of living is wrong. As defined by Kaitlyn Dey in her Portland State University research thesis, criminalization of the unhoused population is “policies and practices which make acts of survival illegal or banned as a means to exclude homeless people and people perceived as homeless from public spaces and community” (Dey, 2019). It is obvious that the barriers which prevent homeless people from advancing come from unfair written and silent perceptions against the community as a whole. The grouping of the population makes it difficult for individuals to thrive because we really don’t know the story behind every unhoused person, and hardly anyone cares to listen.

When I asked Jodi which groups made up Interfaith’s population, I expected a series of statistics that detailed the different demographics they serve. However, that is not how Jodi described it. She emphasized the fact that who they serve changes on a daily basis, because it is an “as-needed” and temporary shelter. Peterson also pointed out that each person staying there is an individual so it is unfair to confine them with labels. All the community needs to know is that, “100% of the people don’t have a home.”

Since the year 2018, Boise is one of America’s fastest growing cities (Dey, 2019). With an increase to our general population, the competition for adequate housing will only get tougher, forcing more community members to try and survive without consistent or quality shelter. Advocates for the homeless have declared that now is the time to begin the reversal of this growing housing crisis. An article from the Idaho Statesman by Jerri-Lynn Gravas shares the touching story of a single mother in Boise who simplifies that she became homeless after her “...life [had] been blown right up over health issues — while being poor, the ultimate crime. How much worse can it get?” (Graves, 2023). The mother goes on to express her frustrations regarding the harsh assumptions that are thrown at her everyday. She was even surprised to learn that only 30-35% of homeless people have a dependency on drugs (Lautieri, 2023). This shows that inaccurate criticism of people without homes seeps into the population and can become internalized. Other cities across the states have faced homelessness, but their numbers are much higher than Boise’s. There is a widespread fear that Boise will become like Portland, Oregon or Spokane, Washington, and others. In my interview with Jodi Peterson, she asserted that something could have been done for the homeless in those cities, and something can still be done for Boise. “I think that they [other cities] had a chance, but they sat around waiting too long [...] because no one wanted to do anything.” Unfortunately she sees a similar pattern unfolding in Boise, but still strives to find solutions because she is certain that committing to an act will make
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Absolutely.

I love the song “Where is My Mind?” by the Pixies. It feels like the end of a sappy coming of age movie to me, but in the best way. Describing how you have been struggling to find your place in whatever reality you believe yourself to be living in is something that I feel like everyone at my age thinks about in one extent or another. What I have begun to realize is that the song has seeped into another crevice of my mind, no pun intended. When my dad was diagnosed with early onset dementia/Alzheimer's disease earlier this year, I connected the song to my dad's evident loss of what he thinks to be his reality, and it is an incredibly sobering and horrifying experience at the exact same time. Will I ever be able to fully understand what is going inside that decaying mind of his? Never. Do I see how this fading away of his mind has affected his perception of himself? Absolutely.

In seeing my dad's view of himself and what he provides to others around him that he loves and cares about the most change, I have been able to find an incredibly difficult and jagged reality to wrap my head around. My mom and dad have always been my rock. Through every anxiety attack and every worried moment throughout my time growing up, they have been there for me. One of the biggest struggles for me is seeing how the ways in which they used to support me are no longer realistic, especially with my dad. Earlier this year, my dad, after significant memory and cognitive losses following his cardiomyopathy in December of 2019, was diagnosed with early onset dementia/Alzheimer's Disease. Seeing someone who I love and admire so much begin to fade away, not only in my eyes through my perception of him in the way he used to be, but his own perception of himself and his self worth as time goes on has taken a huge toll on me. I want to be able to help my dad through his everyday struggles that used to be a walk in the park, like putting the dishes back in the right place in the kitchen cabinets or remembering how to turn the

unimaginable. Guests can express themselves through various mediums and even earn from what they create, as pictured on the left. The connections made at the Interfaith Sanctuary, between all of those involved, are also difficult to come by. "In a strange way we're the most fun shelter in town,. . . It's not fun to be homeless, but we provide a lot of distraction and a lot of success," Jodi Peterson-Stigers and her team are paying the way for advocacy and effective support, but even they cannot do it alone. Peterson emphasized the importance of the role that the community plays. "We have a lot of work to do when it comes to understanding the communities' responsibility with the whole community.

Members of Boise can support Interfaith's mission by making financial and material donations to the Sanctuary. With the recent approval of a new building, Interfaith needs help now more than ever to renovate the new space and give shelter to those in need.

Art and music are both provided as key ways to brighten the lives of people who have been through the
I still want to save the world. I do. I don't tell anyone, because it seems all too impossible and impractical... but I still have a wee pilot light inside that hopes for it. Neat thing about keeping in touch with your gentle side, we recognize our kin. We see ourselves in others.

I'm drawn to people like me, no matter what package they come in. It's a sort of... silent understanding. An invisible handshake. The secret club no one really wants to belong to.

Too soft for this mean world, we surround ourselves with vitriol and brash puffy arrogance. Purely, for self preservation. We know from experience, we break too easily. It's complicated. Not for the weak, not for the faint of heart.

I approached him softly, with a bit of trepidation. Like I said...he was kin. He just didn't know it yet. Lol. His eyes are that of Paul Newman, lady killer blue. His hair, Einstein chic. His face, kind..... but wary. He has that leathered look of waltz when you amuse him. His eyes are that of Paul Newman, lady killer blue. Like I said.....he was kin. He just didn't know it yet. Lol. His eyes are that of Paul Newman, lady killer blue. His face, kind..... but wary. He has that leathered look of waltz when you amuse him. His eyes are that of Paul Newman, lady killer blue.
My Homeless Journey: Day One

By Ashley Parks

My homeless journey began in February 2008. I remember plain as day, like it was yesterday. While a ward of the state in Kansas foster care system, my family relocated to a small town called Kuna, ID. Come my 18th birthday, my case worker presented me with a choice:

1. I could go into independent living. In this program, I would’ve been supported until my early 20s with a $500 stipend per month. They would have also been able to help with a job, an apartment, and a car. OR
2. My parents would buy a plane ticket to move me to their home in Kuna. This meant the opportunity to be with my two little sisters again. The same sisters who needed protection from our father. Sisters I painfully missed and had not seen since the year before.

Little did I know, this one decision was going to affect my life for the next 15 years. This is one of numerous testimonies I could story about, however, this particular one is a rarity. At 33 years of age, over half of my life trauma transformed into hope.

Naturally, my choice was to go back to any resemblance of a home to be reunited with my sisters. In February 2008, my case worker brought me to the airport for my big day. Going home! With me were two bags of luggage and all of my clothes, KU gear, photos, journals, & more; one carry-on bag; and two cardboard moving boxes containing all my memories including my keepsakes from living in Okinawa, Japan, and from all the foster homes, group homes, and growing up in Kansas. My case worker was able to check in all of my luggage, but had to pay per pound on the boxes of memories. As I was no longer a ward of the state, her hands were tied on being able to pay for the memories that came with me. This would be the first of many times I would lose my stuff and have to try to start over. Though the first time was the most traumatic.

After a six hour flight and one layover I almost missed, 18th birthday, I’m in a new state, in a city I don’t know, and on my own for the first time in my young life. I arrived at the Boise airport. It’s pretty late at night and I’m nervous, anxious, and terrified. Mom and dad met me at luggage claim with glares, then dad helped me carry and load it into the family Suburban. The whole 25-30 minute drive could cut the tension with a knife. The next morning, my sisters and I are finishing breakfast. Dad asks them to go to their rooms. I remember clear as day his words, “You are a danger to the family and your sisters. You are not our daughter or a member of this family and you haven’t been for years.” Dad then hands me a packet called the “Self-Rescue Manual” and told me to flip to the homeless shelter page. His instructions were to start calling the shelters and pick one.

City Light women’s shelter is what I chose. In the mornings, there’s breakfast, but all guests must leave for the day shortly after. Guests can come back for lunch and leave again, until 4:00 p.m. Come Monday, my dad dropped me off, gave me $20, and said “good luck.” The official start of my homeless life. Eight days after my 18th birthday, I'm in a new state, in a city I don't know, snow up to my knees and I'm utterly alone, truly alone, and on my own for the first time in my young life.

I remember my first full day as a homeless person. All I knew was my dad had pointed out the Towne Square Mall on the way to City Light the night before. He said there were city buses that would take me there. He also said if I were to look for work, it’d be there or in the area. I was so lost. I said it was too far. He then said if I were to look for work, it’d be there. The area. I was so lost. I said it was too far. He then said if I were to look for work, it’d be there. One of my friends and I would go there. The area. I was so lost. I said it was too far. He then said if I were to look for work, it’d be there. One of my friends and I would go there.

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