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Signs of Humanity

A team of Jefferson students, alumni and faculty in collaboration with artist Willie Baronet, employed qualitative methods to explore poverty in Philadelphia.

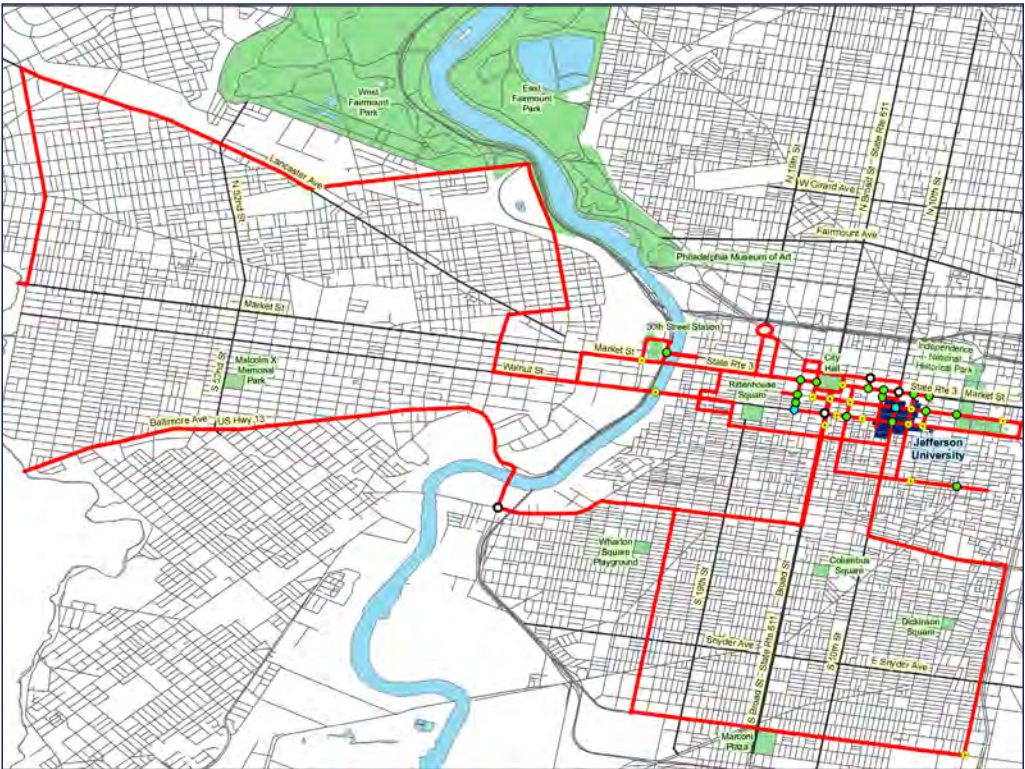
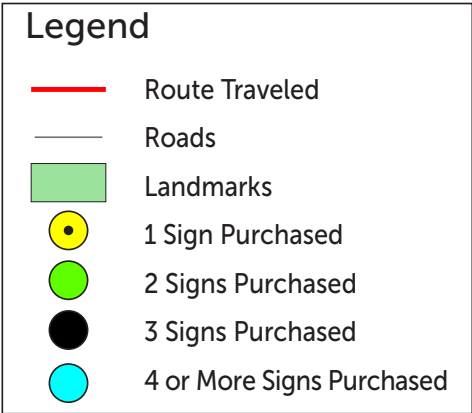
BACKGROUND

The Signs of Humanity (SOH) Project is a researcher-artist collaboration. This joint venture was designed to explore the interactions between people using signs to ask for help and those who pass by with the goal of reducing the dehumanization of this community. The research arm was designed to qualitatively explore the experiences of people who seek financial support or in-kind help from passersby. This is referred to as “panhandling” in the literature and that term will be used going forward. While not everyone who panhandles is experiencing homelessness, these situations frequently co-occur in Philadelphia. People who panhandle are a very visible fraction of a city’s homeless population and while they are often “counted” there are few opportunities to hear from them about their lived experiences. The signs they carry point to common hardships such as housing and food insecurity and substance abuse disorders: however, they do not tell the complete story.

A team of Jefferson researchers, MPH and MD students (and alumni) along with Willie Baronet, a Dallas Artist, conducted interviews with 41 people over the course of 1 week. Questions explored the lived experience of people in need here in Philadelphia, including their interactions with passersby, their opinions about how money collected is used by their counterparts, their experiences with housing insecurity and their perception of how the opioid crisis has affected them. The research team performed intercept interviews that included freelisting and open-ended questions.

WHERE DID WE GO?

The study team accompanied Willie Baronet, by foot and by car, between July 23, and July 28th 2018. The team purchased over 80 signs and interviewed 41 people.



RESEARCHERS

Students and Alumni

Katherine Brierley
Steven Buffer
Kaéla Edwards
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Jenna Garret
Nisha George
Katie Holland
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Josephine Hwang
Alyssa Tate
Emily Wei

Faculty

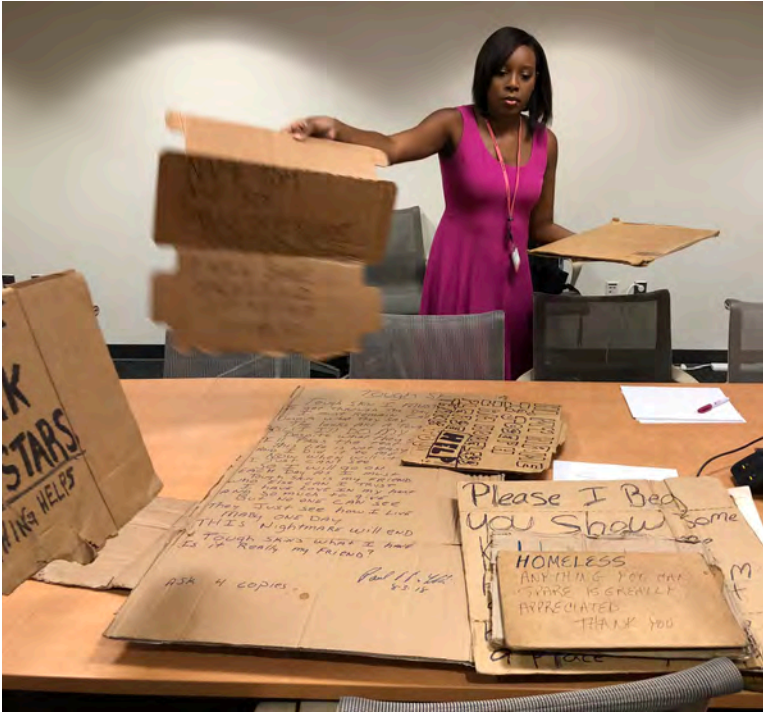
Rosemary Frasso

Artist

Willie Baronet

SELECTED PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The research team conducted a preliminary assessment of each interview and selected participant quotes and images to share in this exhibit. The formal data analysis will be conducted in the fall of 2018 and will include a systematic analysis of interview transcripts, freelist data, and sign content which will inform the development of both a report to stakeholders and manuscripts for publication.



Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs



"Don't be afraid to, like, leave your comfort zone, and, like, experience new stuff. And you know, You ain't gotta be on the streets being dirty like we are, but you know, just like **sometimes sit down and talk to me**. It ain't about the money."

"Yeah that we're still human. We're still breathing and eating. They don't have to be scared of us. You know the other day I had a group of kids, they were passing a water bottle around cause they were scared to bring it to me. Why? **I'm a person.**"

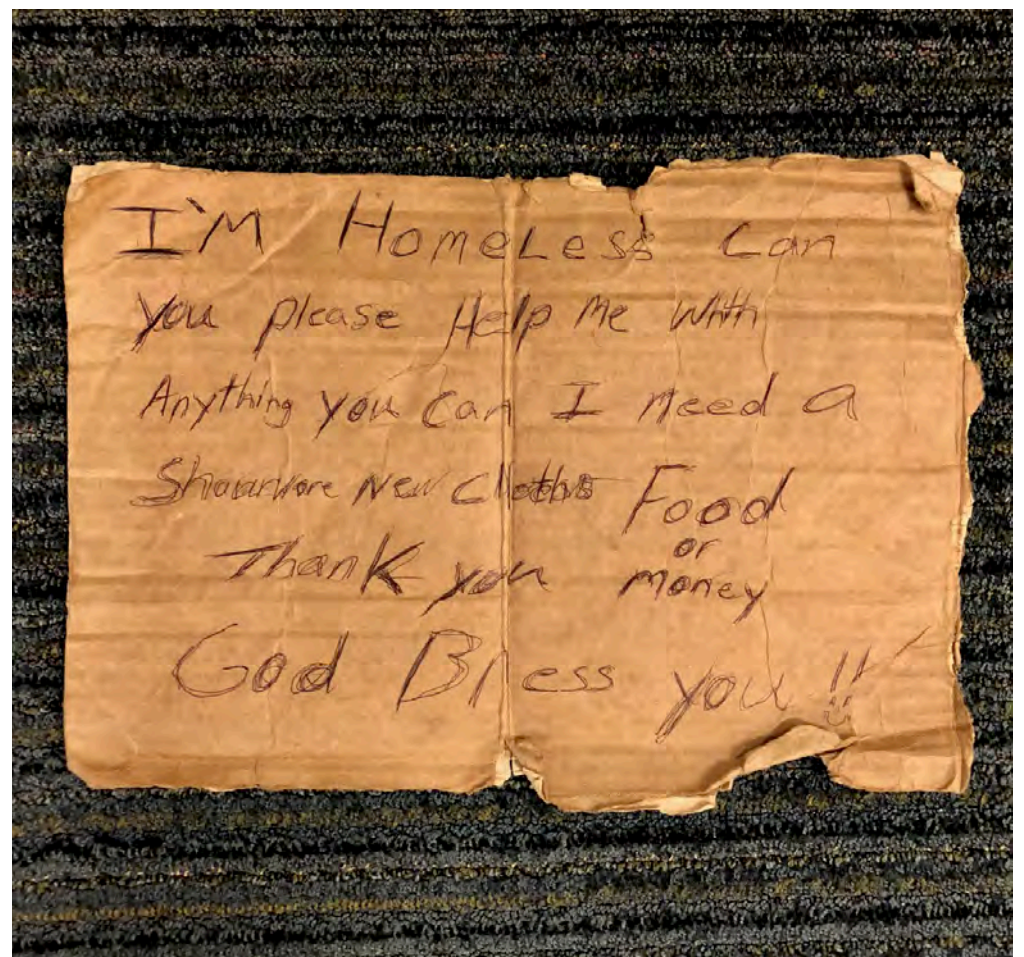


Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs

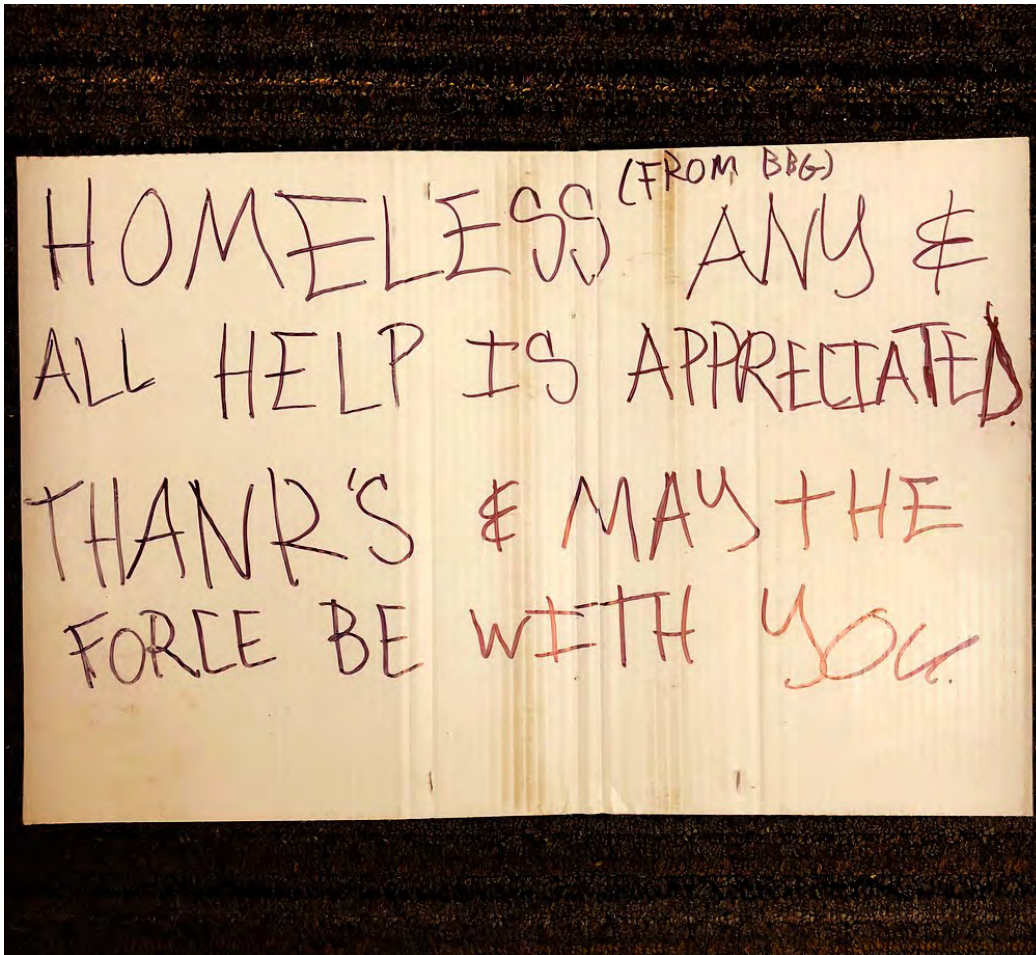


"Yeah just like be more open minded about it. **Think of the worst thing that could happen to you and then you'd understand.** Because I never thought I'd be homeless. I never thought my family would let me be homeless. And they did."

"I was telling one of my friends that you can tell how rich someone is by if you're panhandling and they trip over you, usually most people apologize and give you a couple bucks or something. **Well, if they're really rich they'll trip over you and kick you, tell you – 'you shouldn't be standing there and tell you to get a job'.** That's how you can tell that they're really rich."

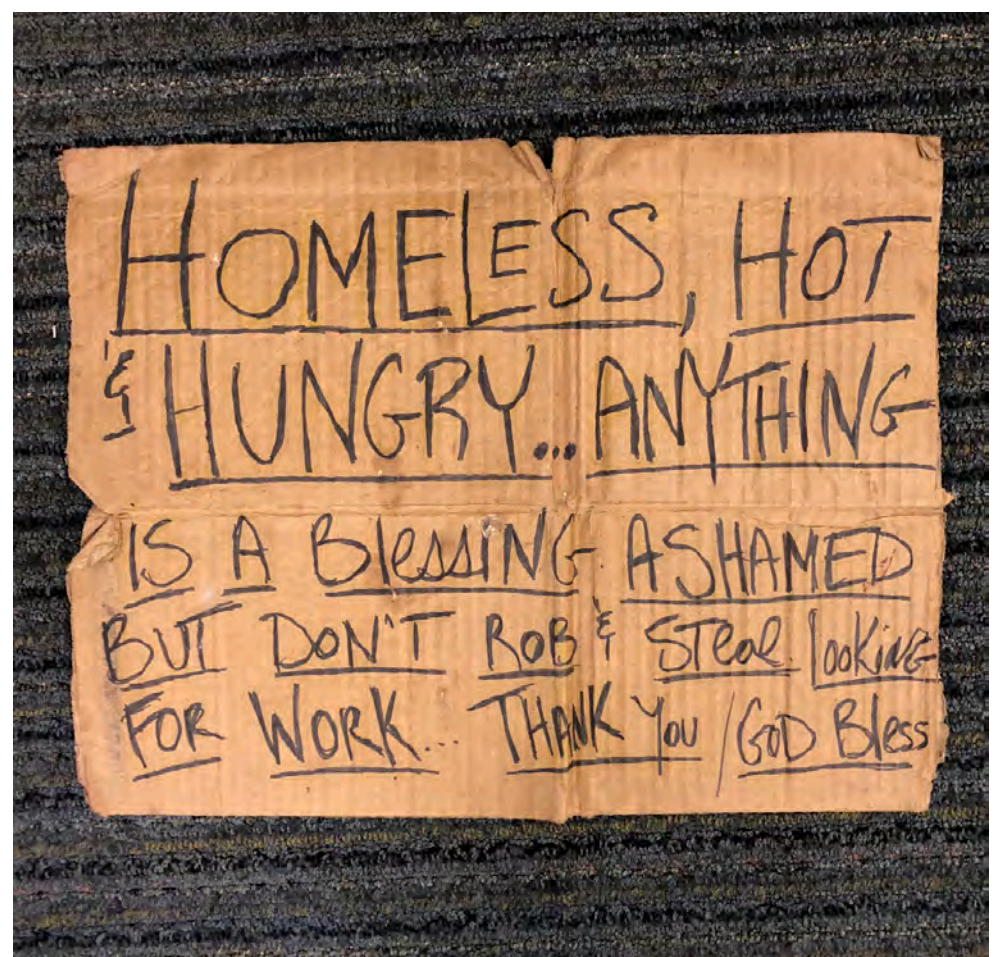


Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs

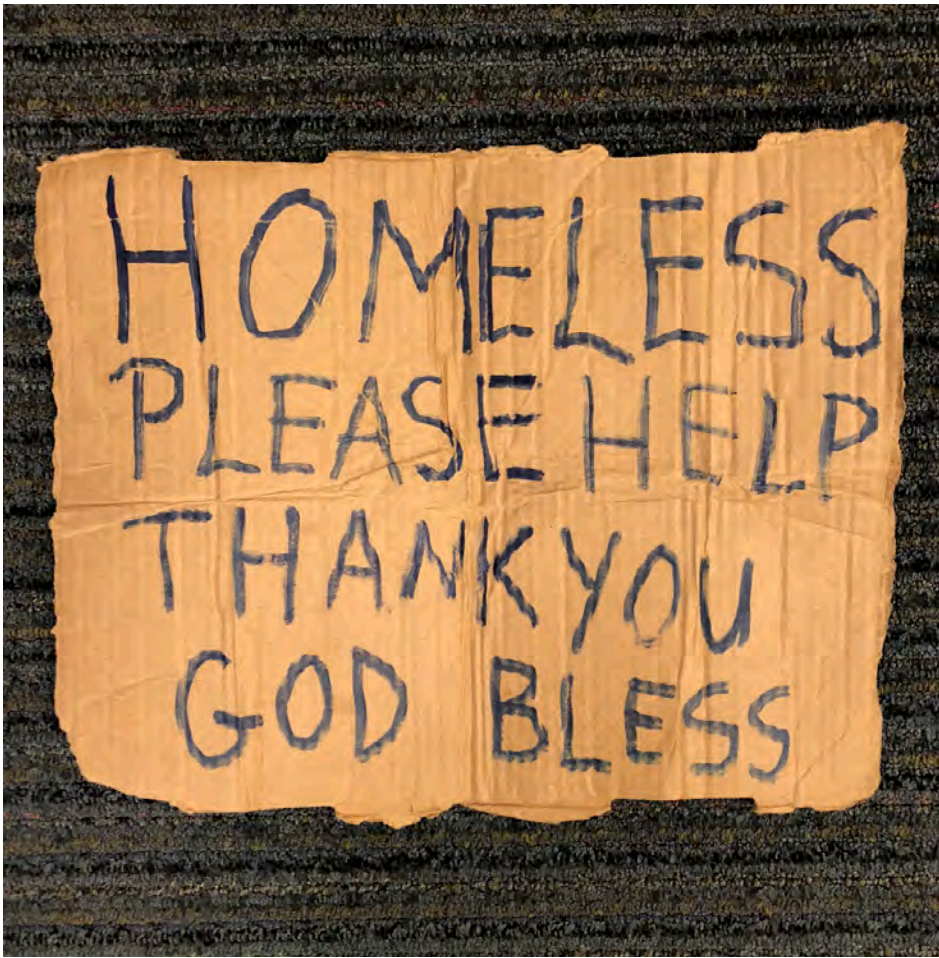


"Yea the streets raised me. **Jail made me a man. But the streets did mature me more.** And it has humbled me a lot. And I will be a much better person after this."

"So what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I will overcome this. I'll get another job. I'll buy another house. I'll buy another truck. And **maybe I'll be you one day walking down the street with a recorder helping somebody else out.**"

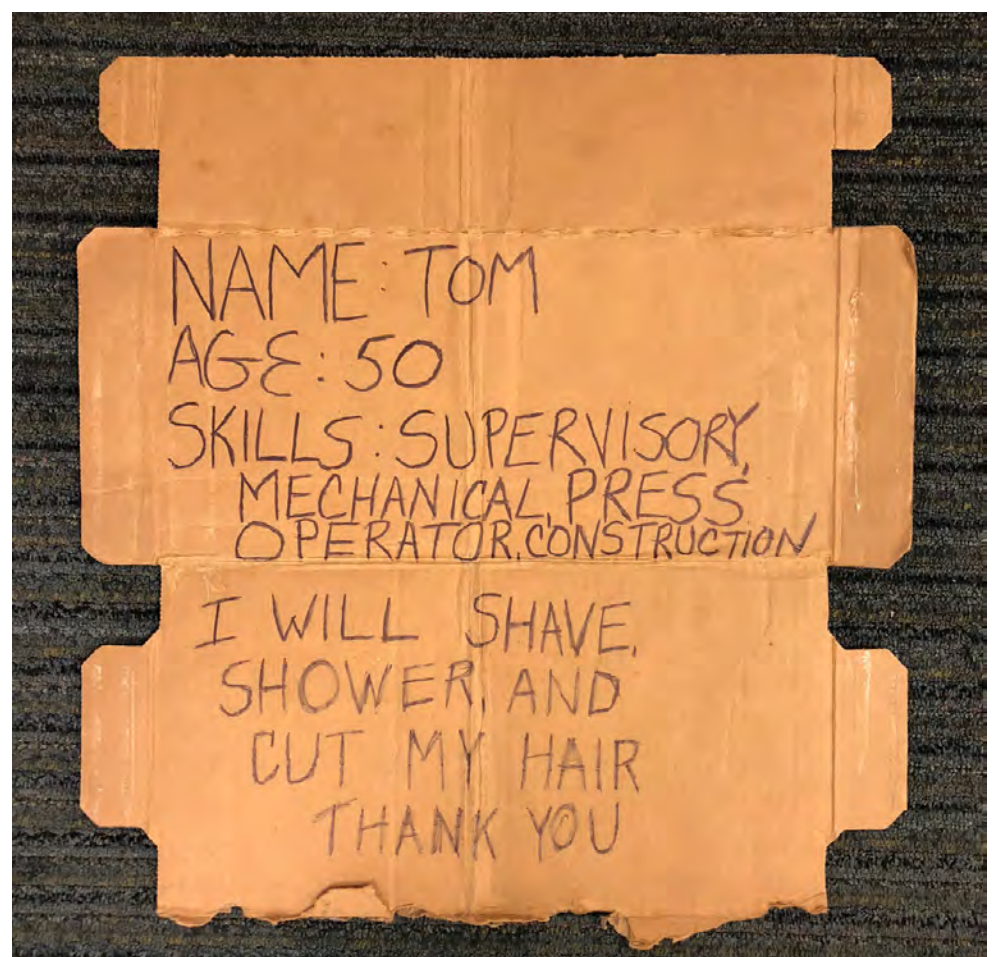


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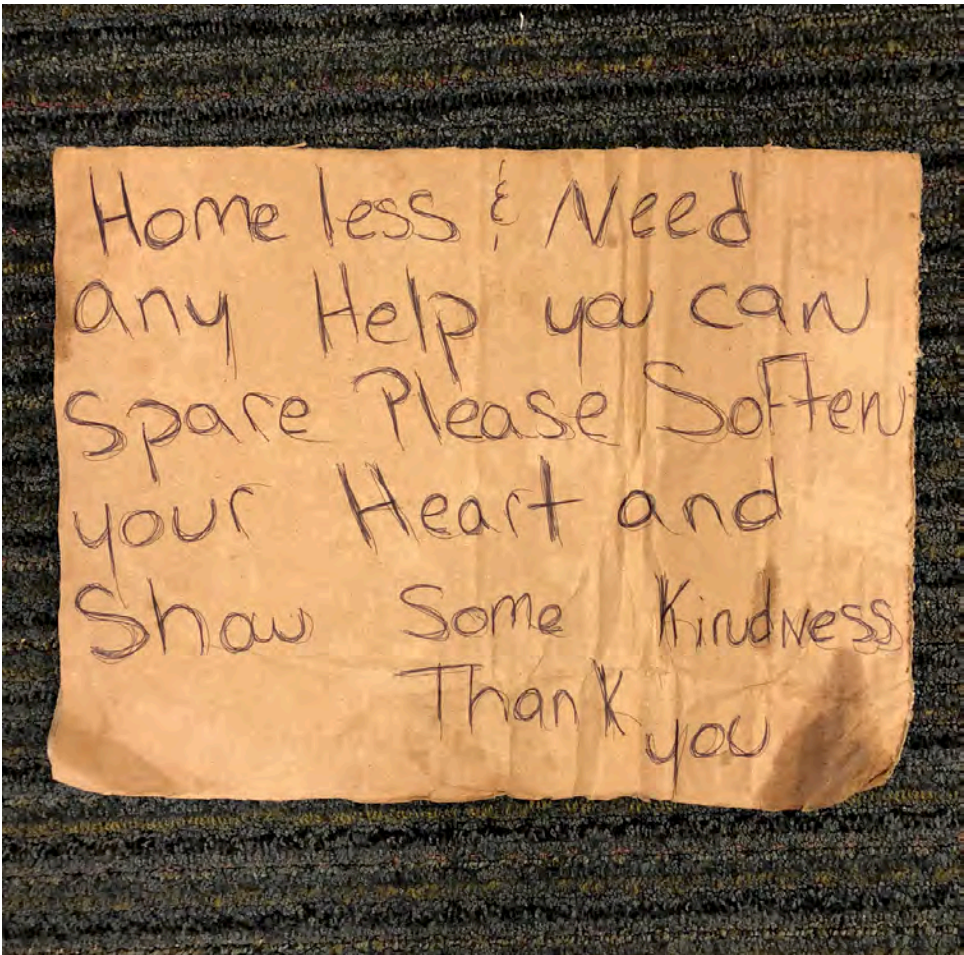


"I mean, if they could just understand what it's like for somebody that's out here, **you know, put themselves in their shoes and understand that we're human.** We're human and we're not bad people because we're out or we're just less fortunate."

"That's home. Like, that comfortable, you know, safe feeling, and--to tell you the truth – **I think sometimes being out here for a while makes you a little...I don't wanna, the only word I can really use is like, crazy.** Like, a little, because you almost start feeling comfortable."



Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs



"Home would be a nice house, a nice comfortable bed, and to watch me TV again. Like I used to be able to. **Like my football season is coming up and I won't be able to watch that right now so it's hard.**"

"Like we said, addiction is a disease. **It's just like cancer or any other disease that people have.** It's just that people think it's a disease that you can —snap, snap— and okay, I'm done. I'll just stop using. Yeah, it's not that... it's not that easy. "



Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs



"Like if I were to walk in Starbucks right now and sit down, say if you were to go in and sit down it'd be fine, **but if I were to they would tell me to leave.**"

"Ya know, I still have to wake up every day and go to a clinic every morning to get my doses and everything but **it's much better than having to stick a needle in your arm or sit and try to make money sick..** because it was leading to other stuff. It's just. It's much better this way."

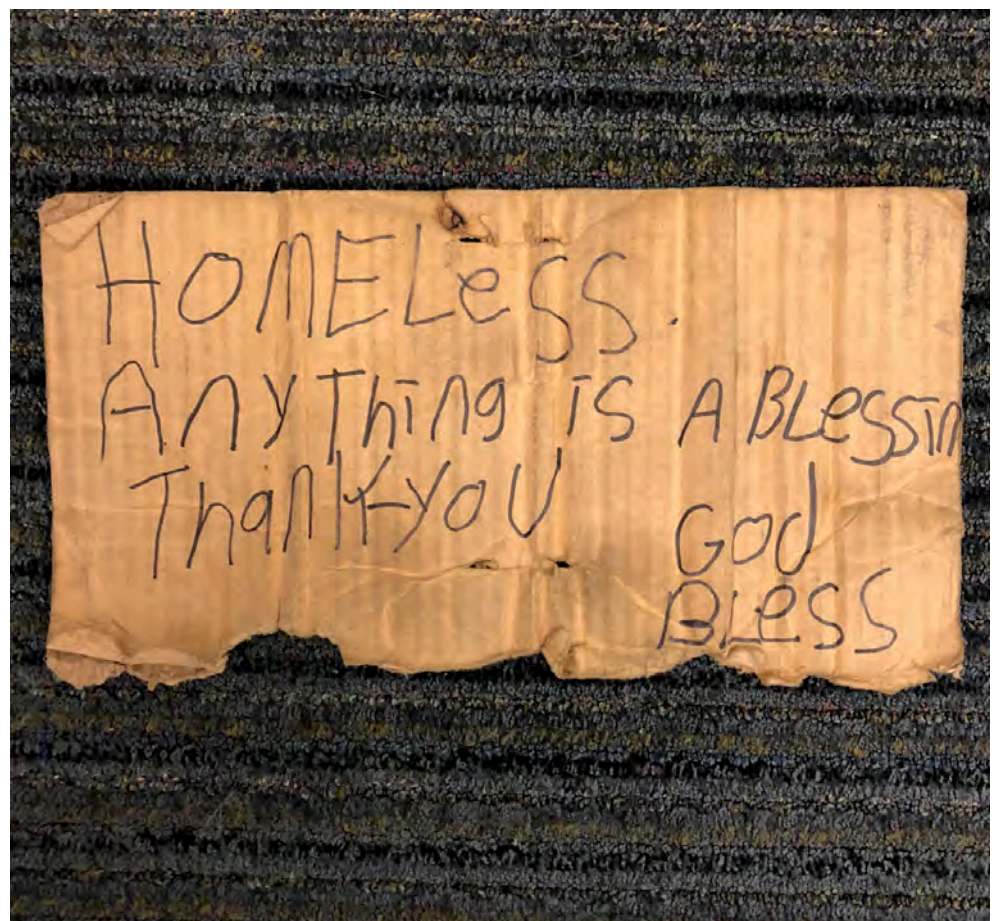


Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs



"I put all my eggs in one basket and... now I have to weave a new basket... just put yourself in our shoes. **Think about, I mean, actually think about how hard it would be to be out here....** You know, I mean, think about it. People don't think about when it rains. People don't think about it when it snows. People don't think about that"

"I wanna go get help. I wanna get clean. I want to get off these streets...there is no reason I should be livin' like this, at all. I'm a very intelligent person. I'm hardworking**I am a human being.** Um, so I think I do deserve respect because I'm a very honest and loyal person"

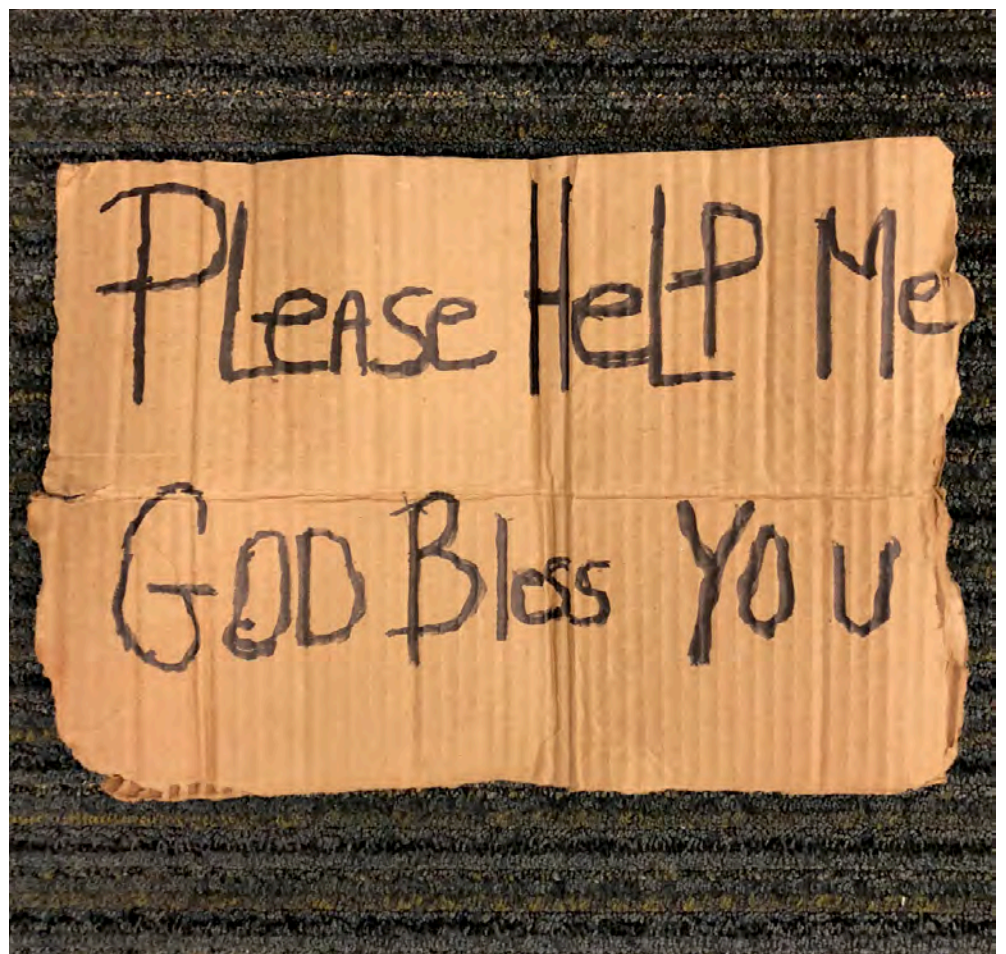


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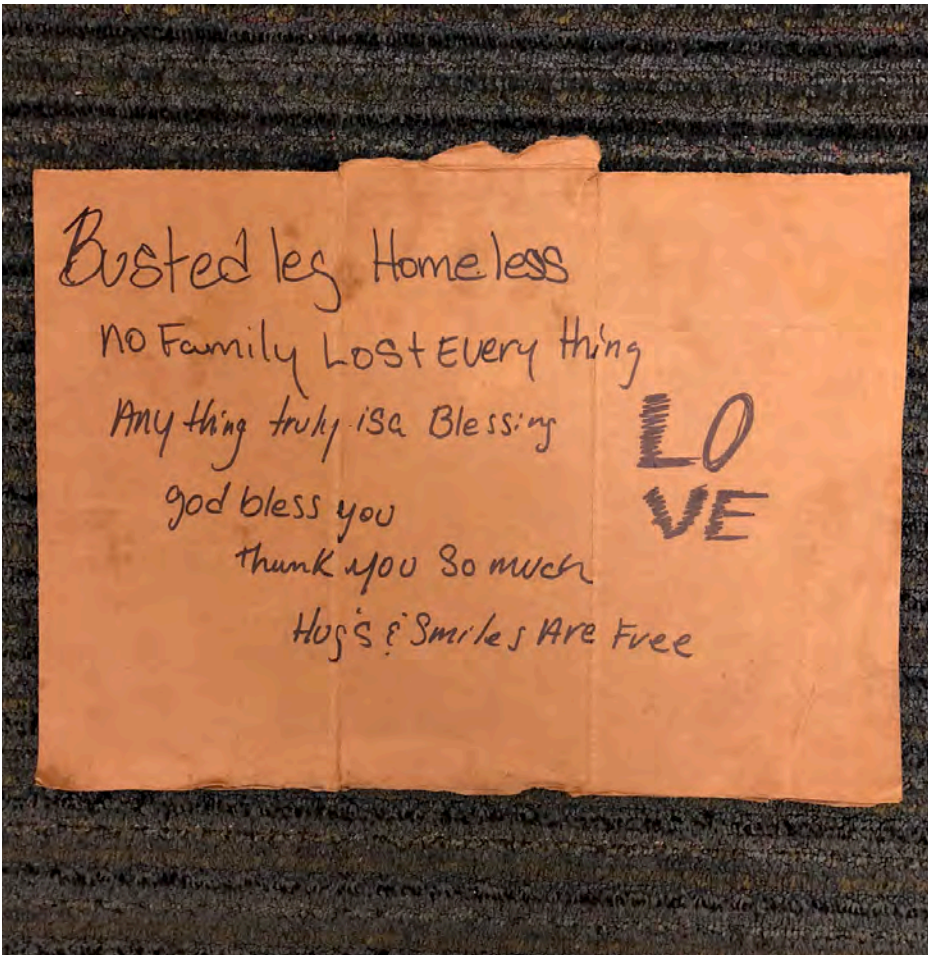


"...now that everybody is aware of the opioid epidemic, **they just assume that every homeless person is an addict.** Um, and it's – it's very hard for homeless people like myself who don't get high"

"...using heroin because you know it helps. Like it helps with the pain, it helps with the aches, and **sleeping on the concrete and stuff that hurts.**"

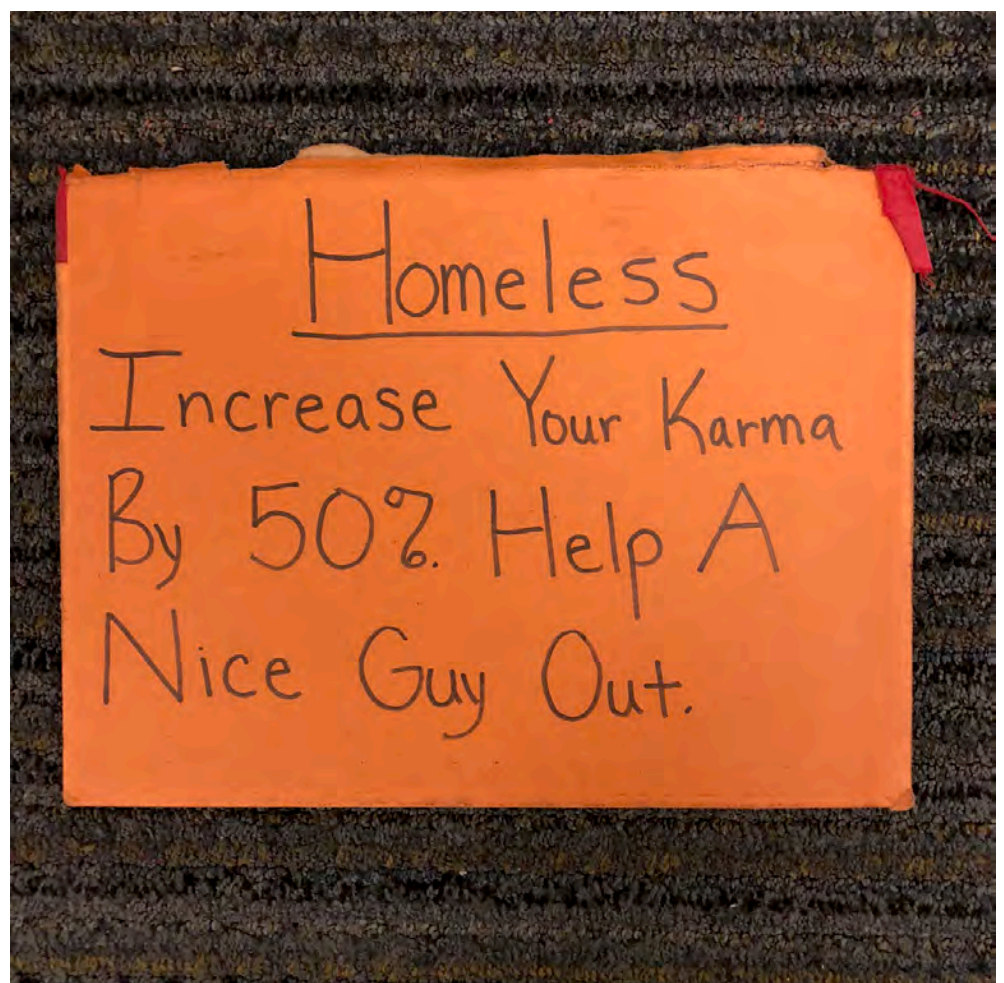


Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs



"We're living on basically the out fringes of society and we expect people to feel bad for us, you know, and that's how we're able to live and it sucks, it's really not life, it's not life I suggest anyone should have to live.... **I prefer to sleep in a bed like a normal human being.** Human beings aren't meant to live like this, you know what I mean? We're really not."

"I mean just, yeah, just **don't judge a book by it's cover** like don't assume that because one person's one way that everyone is that way"



Student Selected Quotes and Accompanying Signs



"A lot of the homeless people out here are homeless for a reason. Whatever it may be, but somewhere along the line, I guess they just...I don't—you can still be a homeless person and not be... ya know... **you can have dignity, you can have morals, you can have a bottom line!**"

Yeah like they think they're better than you just because you know, where, where you're at ya know...I mean like that age groups always been like that, but like, it seems like this generation- and they just seem **like they-they're just superior than anybody else**, and they do whatever they want ya know... like..."



We Asked – What would you like passersby to know?

“I’m no less than or any better than anybody that walks past me.”

“I was in the military, then, I-I went to school for, I got an associate’s degree in electromechanical engineering.”

“We’re still people, and this could happen to anybody. I was a stay at home wife with two businesses. I owned a house and two cars. A divorce put me here.”

“Not just look at us like we’re pieces of crap on the street.”

“So, uhm, I just wish people know how good I would be as an employee. You know? That’s what, you know, I really wish.”

“They’re afraid of me. I was trusted enough to defend their country, and now people, they grab their kid. I can’t even take care of myself I don’t want your kid. Like what the hell. Plus, your kid is screaming.”

“And you live, please take my advice and second think things, second guess things, before you make decisions in life because it could happen so quick.”

We Asked – What would you like passersby to know?

“Um, again I just don’t wish this on my worst enemy. It’s just sad its depressing. Sometimes I walk around with no hope. If I wasn’t scared to kill myself I probably would have done it by now but uh, I’m not gonna go out like that.”

“Um, yeah, I mean don’t knock the people doing it cause you’re only one step away from being there yourself.”

“Like I said, the only thing that would help me or I think a lot of homeless people that would want it is work. Once they get housing.”

“You know like I don’t want to be here. I want to be normal just like them. I want to go to work and have a job. A lot of people come by and say oh get a job but nobody wants to hire the homeless.”

“Um maybe not to be so judgmental and um you know just help somebody out when they need it. Like it, it sucks really bad.”

“I mean, if they could just understand what it’s like for somebody that’s out here, you know, put themselves in their shoes and understand that we’re human.”

We Asked – What would you like passersby to know?

“Socks come in handy. And there is a man named Josh Santiago that is down at empowering cuts. Haircuts for the homeless and less fortunate. If they can look him up on Facebook Instagram and help him with his gofundme to help him get the mobile barbershop for the homeless.”

“It doesn’t have to always be money or something. Just recognizing that somebody’s there. Because they really don’t know what anybody out here goes through. Really.”

“I have a heart. I’m a person too, ya know. I have feelings too. Just because I don’t have as much money as you do or because my clothes aren’t as clean as yours are... I still have a heart. I still care.”

“You know like I don’t want to be here. I want to be normal just like them. I want to go to work and have a job. A lot of people come by and say oh get a job but nobody wants to hire the homeless.”

“Everybody wants to say go get a job but nobody wants to say hey I got a job for you.”

“Yea, we are human beings. Just ‘cause we’re homeless, we’re still human beings—that’s it.”

Artist Statement

For 25 years I've been buying and collecting signs from people on the streets.

The **WE ARE ALL HOMELESS** project began in 1993 due to the awkwardness I felt when I saw a person holding a sign, asking for help. Like many, I wrestled with whether or not I was doing good by giving them money. I struggled with my moral obligations, and the unfairness of the lives people are born into. By not looking at them I avoided seeing parts of myself. My relationship to the homeless has been powerfully and permanently altered. The conversations and connections have left an indelible mark on my heart. I still wrestle with personal questions regarding generosity, goodness, compassion and guilt, and what it means to be homeless: practically, spiritually, emotionally. And what is home? Is it a state of being, a sense of safety, of being provided for, of identity? These signs are signposts of my own journey, inward and outward, of reconciling my own life with my judgments about those experiencing homelessness.

Willie Baronet is an artist and teaches creativity and portfolio development in the advertising program at SMU in Dallas.

HOMELESS
LOST
EVERYTHING