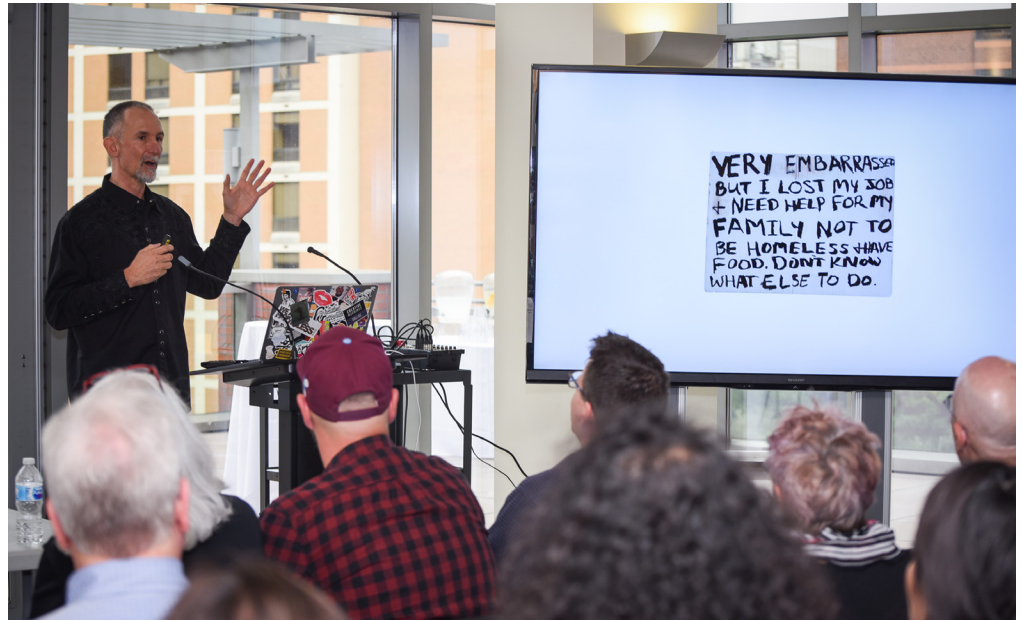


## Signs of Humanity: A Qualitative Exploration of the Panhandling Experience

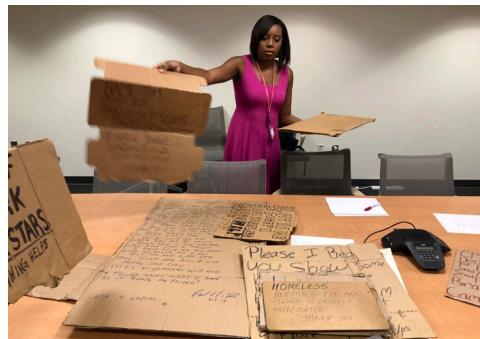
"Homeless, Anything Helps." It is nearly impossible to walk down Walnut Street without seeing someone in need. The signs are many and these situations are complicated. Poverty, food insecurity, mental health and addiction underlie the complex reality of need in our city. Many of us have trained our eyes, minds and hearts to look away, cross the street and move on. But, Willie Baronet, MFA realized that as a collection, these cardboard signs provide a glimpse into a phenomenon greater than each individual's plea for assistance. Baronet, in response to his own discomfort with people and the signs he passed by each day, began to stop, engage and ultimately purchase signs from people around the country nearly 20 years ago. Baronet carefully curates these signs and creates moving and powerful art exhibits to get people talking about poverty and homelessness. The work is provocative, controversial, and gripping.

Art, I admit, is out of my wheelhouse but when I heard Baronet on the radio some years ago I was affected and drawn to the opportunity to mingle art and research. Willie spoke about the informal conversations he had with "sign flyers" as he purchased the cardboard artifacts of poverty, deprivation, and addiction. I wondered if a formal analysis of the signs would yield deeper insight into the lived experience of those in need. I reached out to Willie and we soon became collaborators and friends. Willie was open and generous with time, energy, and his sign collection.

Our first collaboration led to a publication in the *American Journal of Public Health*<sup>1</sup> and, as soon as that paper was done, we began to think about future ways to work together. In July of 2018 we did just that.



Artist Willie Baronet discusses Signs of Humanity project.



MPH Student Kaëla Edwards organizes for Signs of Humanity Exhibition.

The Signs of Humanity (SOH) Project is a researcher-artist collaboration. This joint venture was designed to artistically and qualitatively explore the experience of the lives behind the signs with the goal of starting a conversation and reducing the dehumanization of this community. The work led to an installation made up solely of signs from Philadelphia. This is the first time Baronet's work focused solely on one



Signs of Humanity Exhibition

city. Second, a student generated display of preliminary research findings.

Working with an amazing group of dedicated MPH and SKMC students, Willie and I hit the streets in July. Willie purchased signs and the research team followed, inviting sign flyers to participate in the project and share their stories. We invited 42 people to participate and all but one agreed. Our research questions explored the lived experiences,

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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. We collected demographic and geographic data and presented preliminary findings along side Willie's exhibit at Jefferson (hosted by [Jefferson Humanities and Health](#)) where nearly 100 signs hung from the ceiling for a week on our campus. Students, staff, faculty and visitors passing through the space could not really look away. They had to look, process, and engage. The exhibit included a screening of Baronet's documentary, *Signs of Humanity* and a panel discussion with Dave Malloy and Eddie Dunn, two Philadelphians, who shared their moving experiences of prior homelessness, addiction and recovery as well as reflections on their current work, family life, friendships and hope.

A comprehensive analysis of the project, in collaboration with JCPH Faculty, Drs. Amy Cunningham and Russ McIntire, and several students, is underway. Preliminary findings underscore an overwhelming desire to be seen.

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Emily Wei, MD candidate

Jenna Garret, MPH (alum)  
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Josephine Hwang, MPH-MD candidate  
Katherine Brierley, MPH candidate  
Amy Cunningham, PhD, MPH, CPH  
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