

2005

The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Jan Cartledge



Seeing the world through the eyes of a child

My son Samuel and I were on our way to visit my mother at the assisted living facility where she resides in Raleigh, N.C. Homeless men and women are sometimes standing on the side of the road near the exit ramp we take off the beltline. These individuals are often holding signs indicating they need food, money or work. On this particular day, a lone man stood by the road holding his homemade sign. Our car was no more than five feet away from him.

As I waited for the light to turn green, I silently read the sign he held: "Homeless. Vietnam veteran. Need help." I'm not in the habit of rolling down my window and giving homeless individuals money. I've often thought that if I give homeless people money, they will only use it to buy drugs or alcohol — and I don't want to support their addictions. On this day, I made the same quick judgment about this man without knowing all the facts about his life.

I looked at Samuel in the rear-view mirror as we sat waiting for the stoplight to turn green. I noticed he was staring out the window at the man. I didn't say anything, and Samuel also remained silent. The light finally turned green, and we were on our way.

A block away, Samuel broke the silence. He told me he had read the man's sign. He asked me what it meant to be homeless. I explained to him that the man did not have a house to live in and he probably lived on the streets or under a bridge. Samuel asked me what a Vietnam veteran was. We had a short conversation about the war and this man's service to our country. I went on to explain to Samuel my reasons for not giving money to homeless people. I thought I had provided adequate answers to his questions and the conversation would end there.

Samuel then said, "Mommy, that man's sign said he needed help. Why didn't you help him?"

My feeble explanations of this man's plight and my lack of response were not sufficient for

my son. Samuel saw a need and wanted to do something to help. He also realized that his mother had seen a need and passed by without responding. I had missed a teachable moment that could have made a lasting impression on my child. I didn't want my lack of response to be the lesson he learned that day.

Samuel's question haunted me for days. Why didn't I help this man? I realized that all of my judgments and explanations fell short. I felt that nothing I could say to Samuel would ever excuse me from not helping the man in a time of need.

Samuel's question also moved me to action. A few days later, Samuel and I had another conversation about the homeless man and how we could help others in similar situations. We made a list of things homeless individuals might need or wish for as they live on the streets each day and night. We decided to prepare food and toiletry bags. We compiled a list of items to put in the bags and then went shopping together.

We returned home and filled gallon-size Ziploc bags with the items. We also included in each bag a card listing local shelters and soup kitchens where the individuals could find a warm bed and a meal. We now keep the bags in our car and each time we see a homeless person asking for help, we have something to offer him or her.

But the story doesn't end there. We shared our experience with our church members, and they decided to join our effort to help the homeless in our area. Adults purchased the needed items, and Samuel and his friend John Luke made one food bag and one toiletry bag for each church member to place in his or her automobile. The church members would then make their own replacement bags after they gave away the original bags.

But the story didn't end there, either. A member of our church group is a teacher at a local high school. She shared the story about the bags for the homeless with her Key Club members. The Key Club made hundreds of bags

for distribution to faculty and students at the school. Now there are many others who have joined the effort to help the "least of these" in our community.

One question from a little child was the driving force behind an effort to make a difference in our community. Samuel and I did not know this idea would spread and that others would also join us to help the homeless. I'm grateful for those who have contributed to this project and the many lives that are being touched as a result. I'm even more grateful for the little boy who taught me to see a need and to respond with action.

Following is a list of suggested items for the care bags.

Food bag

- canned fruit (pop-top lid)
- canned pork and beans (pop-top lid)
- canned meat (pop-top lid)
- packaged crackers (peanut butter, cheese, etc.)
- trail mix bars
- snack size cookies, crackers
- juice box
- bottled water (or a plastic water bottle)
- plastic eating utensils
- napkin
- small Bible



Toiletry bag

- lip balm
- comb
- tissues
- toothbrush
- toothpaste
- hand sanitizer
- adhesive bandages
- acetaminophen
- razor
- deodorant
- lotion
- small Bible



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