

a Seat at the Table



By Alice Colegrove

Arthur*, 19, sits down at our kitchen table as we prepare for dinner. His two years of homelessness have aged him. His hair and nails are long and wild; his skin tanned and chapped. He wears a long overcoat and several layers of clothes. It is hard to find the youth in this young man, but as I pull the homemade pizza out of the oven, he shares a memory and his youth begins to shine through again: “Wow, my mom made little home-made pizzas once, and she let us choose our own toppings. It was so awesome: She had tons of bowls with toppings, and we could put whatever we wanted onto our pizzas.”

I study his face; he practically glows as he shares this memory. For many of us, this may sound like a normal family experience, but for Arthur – who was removed from his home years ago due to violence – such memories are scarce.

Soon after dinner Arthur expresses how tired he is, and so we ready our sofa bed. We lay out our softest sheets and warmest blankets, and I ask his preference of pillow: “Fluffy or flat?”

He looks perplexed. “I’ve been sleeping on concrete with my backpack for a pillow for so long now, that I don’t remember.” I give him one of each. Tim and I ask if we can pray a short prayer over him before he sleeps. He gladly agrees, but falls asleep mid-prayer. We turn out the lights and head upstairs.

My own involvement with the homeless started when I was 14. A man from my church picked up on my heart for

the poor, and he invited me to serve with a few others at a little roadside soup kitchen in nearby Washington, DC. We set up tables and large pots of food alongside a park that was a popular gathering place for individuals who are homeless. People stood in long lines for this free meal.

However, after a few weeks of volunteering, my eyes were quickly opened to the “us” and “them” phenomenon. We stood behind a table dishing out food, while they waited in lines, ate, and talked among themselves. After a couple of weeks of feeling trapped in my behind-the-table “us-vs-them” volunteer role, I asked if I could be on “socialization duty.” I then walked around the table and joined them, the homeless. That walk to the other side of the table changed the rest of my life. I soon began to form friendships with wonderful people who were formerly just known as “the homeless.” There were names and stories connected to the faces I had previously only served as “customers.” I began to learn from and laugh with this diverse group of people . . . all because I chose to step around the table.

My husband Timothy and I have built relationships with hundreds of young people who call the streets of Boston “home.” After years of formal and informal ministry we have often been left feeling deeply frustrated. At the end of a day of street ministry we go home, often leaving our friends behind to endure violence, cold nights, and heartless shelters. We lament the lack of churches and communities that can connect



Photos of homeless youth in Boston. Photo credits: Courtesy of Tim and Alice Colegrove

with our friends from the street. As the number of funerals we attend grows, so does our ache to find church communities who will take in these fragile sojourners. We yearn for more people willing to invite homeless individuals to share a meal that isn't being served at a shelter.

Many of us are familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. After several people pass by a wounded man on the streets, a Samaritan finally stops, tends to the stranger's wounds, and takes him to an inn where he can be looked after and receive healing. Many churches understand the need for "Good Samaritans" and even form outreach programs to individuals who are homeless. But then what? Where are the inns to take these vulnerable people to where they can receive healing and long-term care?

A 2013 study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* examined records from 28,000 clients seen at the Boston Healthcare for the Homeless clinic. One of the most striking findings of the study was that the mortality rate of homeless individuals ages 18-44 was nine times higher than that of housed adults in the region. Put simply: being homeless meant you were nine times more likely to die. Such a dramatic disparity warrants strategic interventions that must include ways to help people exit homelessness. Homeless people need an inn. The Church can be that inn.

An inn may be a temporary or permanent roof over one's head, but it also might be a place to spend time with a group of people who allow you to let your guard down, feel safe, laugh, and rejuvenate. In addition to Sunday worship, it might also be a regular coffee-date or regular invites to watch basketball games. Such inns are places of community where hope and healing may begin.

Community is also a place where both giving and receiving happen. By extending your community to include "the least of these," you may be shocked at the unexpected blessings. In my own life there are countless examples: A friend from the streets played the processional music at my wedding. One young homeless woman selflessly gave me \$20

to help with vet bills when my dog was deathly ill. Brilliant artwork from another street friend hangs in our living room. A girl I got to know ten years ago when she was homeless is now hosting a baby shower for me.

Mennonites are often good at acts of mercy and generosity, but all too often this mercy is belittling, reaching down but not across, keeping its distance. Are there more ways in which we can intimately extend our families and community into the day-to-day lives of some of the most vulnerable? Would you be willing to invite someone like Arthur in as your honored guest, giving him a place of rest and rejuvenation and encouraging him to be who God made him to be?

The next morning, while Arthur is still sleeping, I quietly go downstairs to prepare breakfast. I make coffee and waffle batter. Then I take out several little wooden bowls and fill them with various toppings and add-ins for the waffles. Arthur eventually wakes up, stumbles over to the counter, and assesses the bowls. "Oh cool! Make your own waffles!" He jams so many toppings into his first waffle that the waffle maker is overloaded; toppings and batter start leaking out the sides. My heart is as full as his waffle. He can be a kid again.

"If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:17-18)."

Alice and her husband Tim are starting an evangelical Anabaptist church in metro Boston (see sidebar and also the November 2013 Beacon article "Eppes neues in Boston"). She has a Doctorate in Public Health from Boston University and has been working with homeless young adults for over ten years. In addition to presenting lectures and workshops on homeless youth issues at several national and international forums, Alice is well connected locally to Boston's street community, academia, community organizations, and churches. She and Tim are expecting their third child this spring.

*Names have been changed to protect identities



Scholarship & Church Planting Opportunities

Do you resonate with Alice's call to radical hospitality? Does the idea of starting a church community that seeks and includes the homeless and marginalized energize you? Would you ever consider moving to the Boston area? Alice and Tim are seeking individuals from the CMC to assist them in planting an evangelical Anabaptist church in metro Boston. If so, email Tim Colegrove at timothy.colegrove@gmail.com.

Considering seminary? In support of this church planting effort, the CMC has opened a scholarship fund for persons interested in relocating to the Boston area to study part-time at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary while supporting the work of the conference in this church plant. To apply, please request an application by emailing office@cmcrosedale.org.

Heart Art (above)

Alice explains about the artwork: "It's called 'broken hearts mended' by 'Ollie,' a formerly homeless kid we know and love. He was 21 when he made these paintings. They are one of the first things a person sees when entering our home."