



Group Aims To Dispel Misconceptions About, Assist Cape's Homeless



The sun beamed down on the gleaming Hyannisport Sea Street Beach, casting a warm glow on those enjoying a recent cloudless Sunday morning. Sailboats cut across the choppy waters offshore, while on the beach a rowdy game of volleyball was getting underway. Parking attendants sat quietly in folding chairs, rising only when a car, truck or van pulled up, their occupants eagerly awaiting the beach day ahead of them.

A short distance away, in a shady park off the beach, volunteers mingled with members of the local homeless community, helping them fill their backpacks with clean socks and first aid kits and serving them what might be their only reliable meal that day.

Old friends, both homeless and housed, greeted each other, offering a hug and a helping hand. Light blue T-shirts emblazoned with the words "Making a Difference One at a Time" adorned the backs of many who were grilling hamburgers and serving up heaping spoonfuls of pasta salad.

This scene is not an unfamiliar one for Sea Street. In fact, it is an annual event hosted by Youth StreetReach, an organization formed with the intent of softening misconceptions surrounding homelessness through connections made between the homeless and the youth volunteers on Cape Cod.

For Deborah A. Golden, a Sandwich resident and coordinator of StreetReach, involving teenagers in this community service is a key aspect of fostering acceptance and understanding of the homeless community. “We come from a town that’s very fortunate; there’s not a lot of homeless people,” said Ms. Golden, referring to many Sandwich students’ lack of exposure to extreme poverty, “[StreetReach] makes them a different adult. It makes them an adult that’s aware of homeless people.”

Ms. Golden helped form the organization in 2007 along with Marilyn J. Lariviere, a Barnstable resident and former youth ministry leader at St. John the Evangelist Church in Pocasset. However, the idea came from the St. John’s youth, who were inspired to start the program after hearing a presentation from the Housing Assistance Corporation about homelessness on Cape Cod. The issue of homelessness was something the students were already familiar with; they had participated in a homeless immersion experience for several years in Boston, called CityReach, to which Ms. Golden and Ms. Lariviere had brought St. John’s youth as well as some Sandwich students.

Modeled after the CityReach experience, StreetReach seeks to give a hand to the homeless while also offering youth a glimpse into life living on the streets. This is done through overnights hosted six times a year at the Federated Church in Hyannis, in addition to the annual summer cookouts. The overnights are designed to be an immersive experience, beginning with stories from community members about their experiences with homelessness. After sharing their stories, these community members then lead volunteers through different spots around Hyannis where the homeless often sleep or camp. Once the tour is over, volunteers then return to the Federated Church to spend the night on the cold, concrete floor and rise early in the morning to prepare a breakfast for the community whose lives they had just seen a glimpse of.

Ms. Lariviere said that she tries to impart the fact that the homeless can be men, women, or children, young or old.

“Anyone can be homeless, and people who are homeless aren’t all necessarily addicts.”

The organization has seen longstanding success, often drawing large groups of high school students who return each time with new people. Vincent G. Tanguilig, a recent Sandwich High School graduate, is an example of this continued dedication. He started as a freshman, following his older sister, who also participated in StreetReach through her years at Sandwich High School. Since then he has brought various groups of Sandwich students with him to overnights and Saturday morning breakfasts, including a group of National Honor Society students. However, for Vincent, StreetReach has become more than a community service opportunity; it has become an important fixture in his life and something he hopes to continue even as he leaves for college.

“[My favorite part is] how friendly everyone is when you go,” Vincent said of both the volunteers and the homeless community, “It’s like a big family.”



It is this family that the coordinators of StreetReach hope to nurture even as groups of Sandwich students continue to graduate and move on. Ms. Lariviere said that they hope to continue the program's work in order to connect future groups of students with the reality of homelessness on Cape Cod, a reality that she said many people are not exposed to. As of January 24, 2017, there are 324 homeless people on Cape Cod. This number, according to a census taken every January as part of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Annual Point-In-Time Count for the Homeless, is based on the amount of individuals living in shelters or on the streets. Although the data is not broken down by town, the majority of the homeless population on the Cape is concentrated in Hyannis, where many services, such as shelters and group homes, are located.

However, poverty still exists across the Cape and for towns such as Sandwich, the majority of individuals in need of services are not living on the streets but rather struggling to make ends meet or living in unstable conditions, said Paula K. Schnepf, the coordinator of Cape and Islands Regional Network to Address Homelessness.

"You have to take a step beyond what those numbers say," said Ms. Schnepf, referring to the Point-In-Time Count showing a decrease in number of homeless persons on Cape Cod this year. "People often don't disclose their homelessness. [They] can be overcrowded, doubled up in family homes, which is probably a bigger problem in Sandwich."

For those involved in homeless services, the complexities of the issue can sometimes be disheartening as a solution to the problem often seems unattainable. However for the the volunteers at StreetReach, a different principle guides them: Making a Difference One at a Time.

This slogan is based on the story of a young boy seemingly wasting his time by throwing a beach full of dying starfishes back into the water, one at a time. When confronted about the futility of his actions the boy responds with the affirmation that a difference to even one starfish was enough for him.

“We’re not going to solve the homeless issue,” said Ms. Lariviere, reflecting on the many successes and failures she has seen through her 10 years of work. “We’re not going to change the world but we are changing people’s hearts and minds one at a time.”