



ART FROM THE STREETS

Let me introduce you to Calvin, Bill, John, Kevin, Janet...Some call them "homeless." They are not "homeless;" rather, they make their homes on the streets. These portraits work to portray not only their facial features, but also their emotions, characters, and human qualities. My eyes have always sought beauty, and I have found it here on the streets, in these people.



After three years of making friends with the street people of Philadelphia, I decided to dedicate my senior fine art thesis to these men and women who had so affected my life, and in whose lives I was so curious. Using a variety of media, I attempt to tell pieces of their stories, pieces of their personalities, pieces of their lives—because it is they who have added such depth to my own. My process was one of outreach: I took my paints, easel, canvas, and brushes and met people in center city who made the outdoors, the train station, or simply a park bench their home. First, I listened. I made friends before I made paintings. I always began by working from life; the relationships I form on the streets inspire me, and are in fact the essence of my work. I learned it was not about the painting itself, but about the communication that this moment opened for us.

As I gathered portraits,
I gathered stories.



Here is Janet. She is one of the strongest women I know. I met Janet on the “jail trail” in Pittsburgh, where she’d made a camp behind the Greyhound station parking lot. She was on the streets for 8 months, having survived most of the winter under some tarp-covered bushes that she had come to call “home.” She refused to leave her spot, fearing, legitimately, that people would take her belongings if she left. A shower was all she wanted initially, but no matter how hard we tried to help her, she wouldn’t leave her camp. Her health was suffering as the winter continued to bring wet, frigid weather. Her stubbornness was admirable, though—she would not give in to living a life under the constraints of a shelter or a miserable job. Despite her discomfort, she would not accept housing. She refused to move indoors, having become used to a life outside that, in some respects, gave her a sense of freedom. She could live



a life almost independent from society, a life that is, arguably, enviable. After talking with her over the course of several days, and sketching her face a few times, I really got a sense of what this woman had gone through, and what she was doing out here. It took a few more months before Janet was ready for life indoors. In March, she had finally left her camp and we found her stranded on the opposite side of town, as if making a statement that she was ready for change. Although it was a tough transition, we brought her to her new room in a permanent housing facility. She has since moved to a place near her family. I will always respect her perseverance and insistence on being treated with dignity.



Kevin is a photographer and a writer, so we immediately clicked. This collage takes pieces of his stories, his photographs, my photographs of center city Philadelphia, and other small pieces of material that represent Kevin for me. Kevin insists that he chooses to be homeless. When he holds a job in construction or another trade, as he has in the past, he feels constrained and unhappy. People treat him like an inferior, and he struggles to earn rent. More importantly, he cannot focus on his writing. Instead, he chooses to spend all of his time "working," that is, writing creatively, reading, taking pictures, and observing people.



His sense of character is fantastic, and each of his stories expresses a truth about humanity. Despite his talent, he rejects trying to be published, because that would mean submitting himself to a higher control. He sees a depth of meaning in everyday life, a beauty that he feels he can only capture living a nomadic lifestyle, living outdoors where he is not forced to fit into any sort of category. He carries around his camera to document people he meets, and enjoys capturing the beauty he sees in them. When he is not writing or taking pictures, he reads. Spending hours in the library, he is incredibly educated and well versed. Our conversations span topics from Faulkner to Freud, religion to philosophy. How does he get by? I may never understand fully, but one hero of his gives me an idea. He constantly speaks of Maharji, in whose words he finds deep meaning. Maharji preaches about Knowledge, which Kevin interprets as a spiritual understanding of the world. He makes himself immune to outside disturbances and abuse by finding an inner peace, calmly removing himself, and rejecting the inconsequential materiality of the world around him. Kevin continues to write fascinating stories to me via e-mail.



They called him Cuban. Perhaps because he was from Cuba, and they couldn't understand his real name. I tried to talk with him, but both his English and Spanish was nearly impossible to understand. Instead, he would write words to me on pieces of newspaper and scraps to express himself. Mostly, they were words about his past, wars, names, and numbers. He would record anything I said, my answers to his questions. As he wrote, I slowly began to understand how removed he was from society. Nothing seemed to make sense, and everything began to make sense. In this way, we communicated. I included pieces of his writing in this collage, which also is composed of photographs and sketches from the train station in which he lived. He had immigrated to the United States, but that is all I could really gather from his broken Spanish. He seemed happy enough simply spending his days in Suburban Station, sitting on the floor while the entire world passed by on their way to work. This man seemed to have nothing, but ev-



ery time I visited, he would offer me the bag of crumbly stale pastries that a stranger had given him.

When visitors view the work, I want them to wonder who these people are. To seek to understand their realities. To reevaluate who and what is beautiful. To question their preconceived notions. Not to see homeless people, but fellow human beings.

Now, you may ask, why is this article in a journal about medicine? What does my art major have to do with my pre-med curriculum? I will always be in the process of answering these questions, but I have come to believe in a profound connection between these two seemingly disparate disciplines. I believe that what medicine lacks these days is a sense of the patient as a person. Medicine has become a business, too often about money and efficiency. People become bodies, which are reduced to organs, parts, and diseases. I hope that art can play a role in slow-

ing down medicine, reminding us that these bodies are living people. Painting a face challenges me to capture the details of a person's character; while I listen to them, the lines work to delineate who they are. I attempt to capture their beauty, their humanity. Healing requires the formation and nurturing of that fundamental connection between ourselves that allows us to understand one another. It requires us to take the time to listen, to see, to feel the person in order to truly understand their reality, in order to empathize. I believe that the intimacy I have felt between artist and subject parallels the necessary relationship between doctor and patient. Perhaps, both medicine and art can gain from focusing less on the homeless condition, and more on the human condition.

Emma Lo is a 2008 graduate from Haverford College with a degree in Fine Art. She is pursuing a career that merges art with medicine. Currently, she works as an Americorps member at Operation Safety Net in Pittsburgh, which gives free medical care to the unsheltered homeless through street outreach. More of her work can be seen at: eloart.blogspot.com. Please contact her with comments at: emmaavalo@gmail.com