

On Volunteering

by Nick Dominguez

I recently attended the Ten Feet Away homelessness arts festival in London where I bumped into a couple of people whom I'd known in the 1990's whilst living rough on the streets of London. Eddie and Sue McCann were two of the nicest and most down to earth people that I met during my years of homelessness, when they were volunteers for the West London churches nightshelter project. Several churches in West London had got together and provided nightshelter accomodation for homeless people in their church halls, with an evening meal and a breakfast thrown in for good measure. These nightshelters were staffed by volunteers from the churches themselves and after spending all day on the streets, provided a little warmth and comfort to the weary homeless person like myself. Eddie McCann, a former market trader from Glasgow knew exactly how to talk to and treat people and that's probably why there was never any trouble at these shelters, he and the others just seemed to have a natural rapport with the people that they worked with. We were always treated like human beings and equals, which doesn't happen often when you're homeless, and at a time when I'd just about given up on the human race, helped to restore my confidence in them some what. Without the likes of Eddie and Sue the plight of the homeless would be even harder than it is and thank God that there are people like them around, who actually DO care and who are not in it for the money.

Eddie, who still works with the homeless as a volunteer in Islington, sent me a piece that he'd written on the subject of volunteering. While I personally wouldn't want to volunteer for anything, as its not a part of my philosophy, I can at least acknowledge the important work that volunteers do. The reason that I have my reservations about volunteering is because in so many cases it just gives the politicians an excuse to do nothing about a problem, i.e. 'the more who volunteer the better, so we won't have to do anything about it or pay anyone for doing it'. I have often thought that volunteering, at least in some cases actually destroys jobs and that is why I have never advocated it. However, without volunteers many charities and institutions simply wouldn't survive and its only the likes of Eddie and Sue McCann that keep them going, doing the work that the rest of society for the most part never even thinks about or acknowledges.

They are the unsung heroes of the modern age and without going on too much here's Eddie's article:

Never say never.....

I was dragged into homelessness work kicking and screaming all the way; my friend was a volunteer on the emergency winter night shelter project and every time I saw him he would speak of nothing else, whilst insisting that I got involved. I was sick hearing about it; this volunteering malarkey was changing him – he had become obsessed. Finally, I gave him the ultimatum; 'Look pal', I said; 'I'm fed up hearing about it, I'm not interested in homeless people and I'm certainly not going to volunteer to help them, so I'd appreciate it if you gave me a break and spoke of something else'. I had resisted taking such a strong line with my friend, as I knew it would hurt him and although I was fed up with his badgering me, I had a deep respect for the work he was doing, but volunteering wasn't for

me.

One Tuesday night in mid February I was at home watching telly when the phone rang – it was my friend, I knew where he was as Tuesday's were when he did the overnight shift in the shelter. 'Hi. How are things.' he enquired. 'Yeah good thanks, how are things with you.' Well, it's an early night for me,' he retorted, 'I'm just getting ready to go home.' I was quite surprised to hear this and enquired, 'Oh, I thought you would be doing the overnight shift at the shelter.' 'Ah, well, that was my plan; all the guests are waiting outside but I'm just about to go out and announce that we will not be opening due to lack of staff. I can't get anyone to overnight with me and I'm not allowed to do it alone – the boys will just have to sleep rough tonight.' We were going through a particularly bad bout of cold weather; the ice was lying in the street and the telly had just warned that overnight temperatures were again set to plummet.

My friend was a clever chap, I was still feeling pangs of guilt at having spoken to him so harshly, and here he was trying to break my swinging brick, but smart enough not to ask me to come over and help. 'Anyway,' he continued, 'don't worry about it, it won't kill them, well at least not all of them; just make sure you screw your central heating up because its going to be freezing tonight.'

'Alright, alright, you win,' I exclaimed, 'you've done everything but ask me to help, and we both know that's why you phoned, so in the circumstances and only because you didn't ask, I'll come over and help.' On arrival I was inducted into the role of welcomer. The coordinator advised me that getting the welcome right was the most important part of running the shelter as it set the tone for the rest of the evening. 'If guests trust us and feel safe as they come in, then it's unlikely they will cause any problems for the rest of the night.' I was nervous but the coordinator reassured me; 'Just be yourself, give the guests a warm welcome and everything will be fine.'

The emergency accommodation night shelter was hosted in a West London church, there were around six or seven other volunteers on the early evening team and they were all nice, gentle, Christian people who gave me a warm and genuine welcome. At 8pm we opened the doors; Graham, a softly spoken gentleman of my own

age took the guests names and I read the common sense rules: 'No racist, sexist or aggressive language or behaviour,' and welcomed the guests with a warm handshake. All went well; the guests were fed, the evening shift went home and my friend and I had a quiet night as the forty or so guests enjoyed a peaceful nights sleep. The coordinator was the first to arrive in the morning and he was very interested to know how the night went and what I thought of my first stint as a volunteer. 'Yeah, I really enjoyed it', I said. 'Quite a contrast between guests and volunteers, but no problems. It's a really good project and I'm glad to help you out.' 'Well, Eddie,' he continued, 'I've been doing this work for a long time; I was watching you last night and noticed you have a very natural way with the guests and the volunteers. You're exactly the kind of person we need on this team and I'd be glad if you would think about helping out next week.' Hmm, Ok, I thought, and said; 'Well I did enjoy it and I will come and help next week.'

I worked out the last four or five Tuesday nights of the shelter which finished at the end of March and enjoyed every minute of it. My confidence grew stronger every week as I gained experience and got to know the team who offered much by way of encouragement for my abilities on the door. Working in a church was a new experience for me, I was never interested in church and held some scepticism towards the rest of the team; working with and relating to the guests became as second nature. I had been told to... 'meet the boys where they're at and make them feel safe and welcome as they come into the shelter'; that was the easy part, I had worked in the market in Glasgow since I was a kid and was well versed in encouraging a positive response.

One night, just a few minutes before we opened a lady member of the team approached me with more compliments; 'Your very good at welcoming the guests,' she said, 'we are all very impressed at the way you relate and we're so pleased you have joined the team.' I could feel my temperature rising as I began to blush at these compliments. She continued, 'If I were to say anything else, however, it might be about watching your P's and Q's, but that's all.' 'Oh right', I laughed nervously and with all the subtlety of a lead balloon, continued; 'Your talking about swearing aren't you.' 'Oh well, um, that's right', she had become embarrassed at my directness and added, 'You see, we must always remember that this is the church and we shouldn't really swear in the church.' 'Of

course you're right I replied, 'but the thing is, a lot of the boys come in swearing and sometimes the best thing to do is to meet fire with fire and then begin to talk them down.' 'Well there might be something in that' she replied, 'but we shouldn't really swear in front of the minister'. 'Well, look,' I said, 'I might have sworn a few times in the church and I'm sorry about that, but I can assure you of one thing, I would never swear in front of the minister.' 'Hmmm' she said, 'what about Graham.' I immediately became defensive of my mild mannered colleague. 'No, no, you've got it all wrong, Graham's a gentleman, he doesn't swear and he would certainly not swear in front of the min...min.....Oh Naw', my face glowed like a beetroot as I turned to Graham, 'Oh Naw Graham, don't tell me you're the Minister. Graham nodded a wry smile and there was a twinkle in his eye as he said, 'Yes, I'm afraid so Eddie.' I was so embarrassed as I tried to remember all the other conversations I had with the Minister. 'Oh well Reverend,' I exclaimed, 'point taken madam; I guess we had better just start all over again.' 'Just forget about it,' interjected Graham, everybody gets a second chance here!'

These events took place almost ten years ago; I moved on to manage that project for a further three years and got married to one of the volunteers I met on that first night. The Christians were after me for a long time too, and again it was a few years before I finally gave in and accepted my role as a Christian in the practical ministries. I have since run day centres, night shelters, been a team leader, coordinator and volunteer on innumerable homeless projects. I learn much about homelessness and begin to understand how important a little support is to those who are trying to pick up the pieces and move on with their lives.

Just the other day I met a guest from those early days – he is no longer homeless and works on the editorial staff of a Cambridge magazine where he remains a strong supporter of homeless persons rights; over the years I have recruited and trained dozens of volunteers and have watched as several moved on to become full time professional workers in the field. These days I work full time in the recycling industry and write this article having just finished a voluntary shift as welcomer at our local day centre. At the risk of becoming slightly overbearing, I would like to strongly encourage you to think about volunteering, it's worth it, and you could change a life – maybe even your own!