

Local volunteers experience life with the homeless in the 'Urban Plunge'

"But I, being poor, have only my dreams. I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly, because you tread on my dreams." - William Butler Yeats

Omaha. Home to five of the world's Fortune 500 corporations, more than any city its size. Glittering new arena and convention center developments. Affluent suburbs with vast multi-million-dollar homes. It's been called "The Midwest Mecca for Millionaires." Yet amid all these riches, there are countless anonymous people living on the streets, hungry and cold and desperate. It is deep into this sometimes frightening, always eye-opening society of poverty that Urban Plunge takes its neophyte midwestern missionaries.

By **DANA LARSEN** / Pilot-Tribune Editor

"When we pull up to a bunch of homeless guys on the street at night, these people don't even want to get out of that van.

"But when 10 o'clock comes, and they are still out there talking to the homeless people they have met, we can't get them back on the bus."

So says Michael Ross, a successful former area businessman who left his career several years ago to join the Christ For The City urban ministry in Omaha. In the organization's "Urban Plunge," he invites area church groups - teens and adults - to enter the world of the homeless for a couple of hard-hitting days.

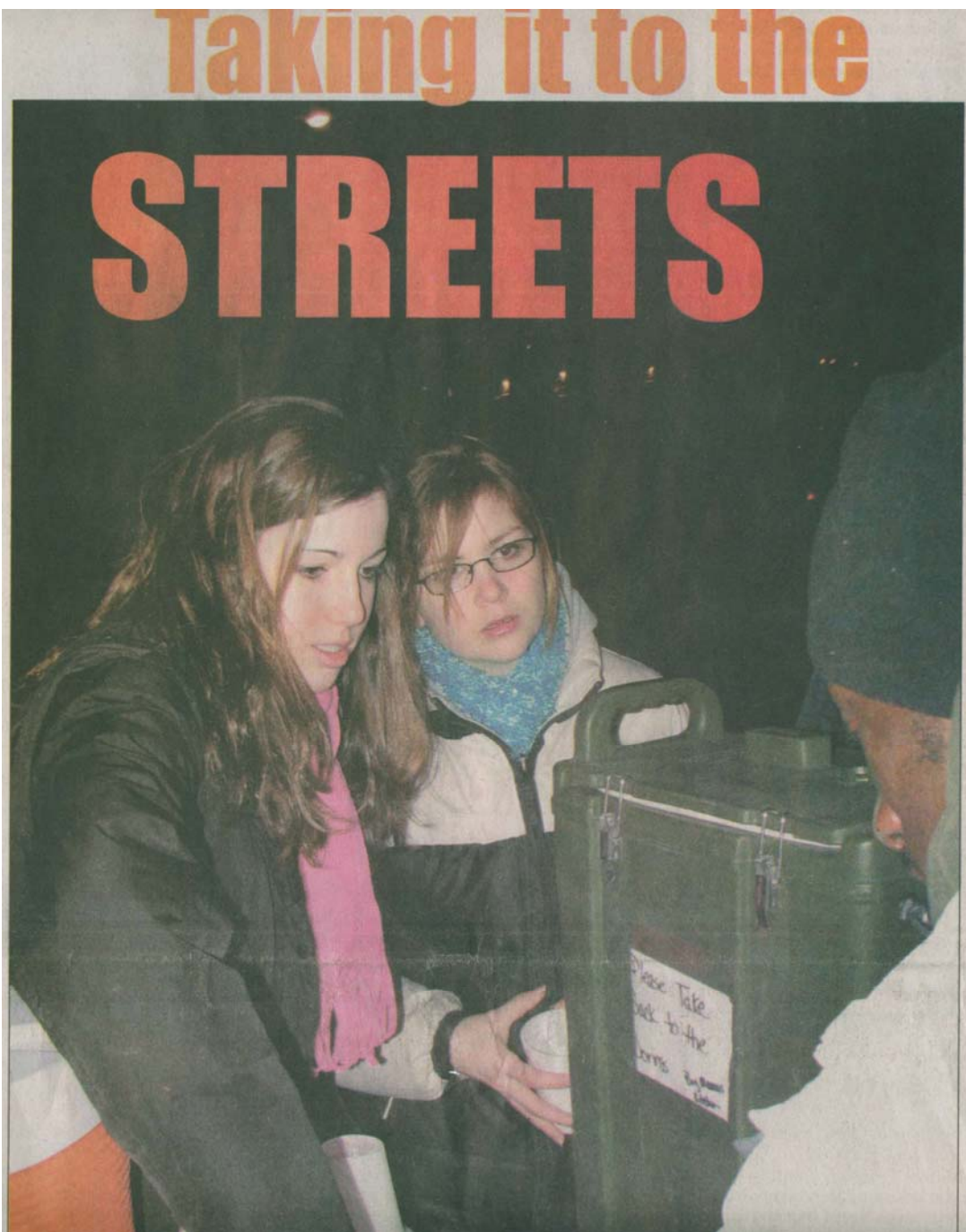
The volunteers help feed and clothe the needy by working at shelters and other programs, they go into the jails, they attend church services with the homeless, and they meet them on their turf - the streets - to hear the stories of poverty first-hand.

Twenty-five people from Albert City Evangelical Free Church were the latest to take the Plunge on a cold weekend at the end of January. Other groups from Albert City, Newell and Alta have had the experience, and churches in Storm Lake and Sioux Rapids are working on arranging trips.

For most, it is a startling culture shock.

"The most shocking thing to me was when we saw where the homeless people slept. Most of them only had a mat on the hard floor of a shelter. I had never seen people living like that," said Madison Ehler, 13, who went on the Urban Plunge trip with his parents and older sister.

"It made me feel - well, I felt that I should be very grateful that I have a home," Madison said.



Janae Smith and Britta Ehlers serve coffee to the homeless on the streets of North Omaha. Below, John Wanell befriends a homeless person at Open Door Mission, and Susie Mayou spends time with children in the after-school Hope Center - part of Urban Plunge.



Photos: Janae Smith helps a newly blind find needed items at a mission in Omaha. Below - Ally Willis and Britta Ehlers bring up huge bags of donations to sort at a homeless shelter. All Carlson, Madison Ehlers, Stacie Mayo, Brad Carlson and Shiraz Carlson carry bags of donated clothing to give to the poor. Linia Kinoshita Ehlers, Dawn Sorrenstam and other volunteers bag up groceries for a long line of hungry people who are able to receive a week's worth of food once a month. Photos courtesy of Allie Adams, Christ For the City



Urban Plunge: Amid plenty, volunteers find startling poverty

Continued from page 1A

He was able to serve nachos to the hungry on the street, and hand out coats to people who needed them, as well as work with children in a Hope's Gate center where they can go to be safe after school hours. And, he said, it sure doesn't feel like enough.

"It was almost like we were on a field trip rather than a mission, being taken to see all these places - I felt like we could have done more, we should have done more."

He wasn't afraid of the street exposure, he said. "Most of the homeless people we got to meet were very nice, and they were happy to get any help. We had taken along some bags we had made up with common stuff like soap and toothpastes and things, and they seemed happy to get even a little thing like that," Madison said.

His most memorable experience was working at the Mission for all Nations program, where the Albert City visitors sacked up groceries for needy families who would stand in line for a chance at the food.

They got a week's worth of groceries - once a month, Madison said, in order to make the supply go around. The rest of the time, they were on their own.

"I got to help carry stuff out for people, and I enjoyed that most," he said.

Madison vividly recalls getting to know a homeless man named Percy. "I think I will remember him the most. The main thing was the desperation - how desperate they are to find a job, anything," the rural Newell teen said.

With all of its wealth - Omaha is after all home to billionaire Warren Buffett, second in riches only to Bill Gates - the area city also ranks worst in the United States in poverty rates for minority children. Nearly six of every 10 black children alone live below the poverty level, not so far removed from the gleaming uptown skyline.

"Our objective is not to provide a 'tour of poverty,' but to help participants grasp how they can use their talents and passions to assist a social service agency, or even start something similar back in their neighborhoods," says Sara Harris, Urban Plunge Director.

The success of the program has even surprised its mastermind.

"When we had 50 groups come down last year, it shocked us. We think we'll have 100 this year - enough that we will need two different tracks to host two groups each weekend," said Michael Ross. "If we have even more people who want to come, we'll add a third track - just don't tell that to the staff just yet," he laughs.

The more people his program can attract to the streets of the urban area, the more awareness they will take back to their communities around Iowa and Nebraska, he feels.

"This is the opportunity to come outside your comfort zone - it's still close to home, but for most of these people, it is a whole different world than what they may experience."

For some, it can be overwhelming.

"At 10 at night, they are on the streets with the homeless - the next morning at 7:30, they are inside the jail. On Sunday they are in a church service with the homeless, then they are in an African-American church. It is a real immersion," Ross said.

In part, the flow of visitors add important horsepower to nine different inner-city mission programs, energetic fresh bodies to sort and hand out clothing, relate to poor children and hit the cold streets to serve food. But that's only half the purpose here.

"It's not just about what it's like to be poor, it is also

about discovering your own passions, finding out what are your own gifts," Ross confides. "The hope is that after this, they will start thinking about what they can do to make things better back home."

If the program is to be ultimately successful, it will be because participants discover that they can do things they never realized were possible. "It's not as scary as

leaders.

Helping can be addictive. When a Newell church group came to take part for a weekend, some of the young people just started showing up on their own afterward.

"They would get in their cars Friday and drive all the way to Omaha to hang out on the street with the homeless people for a couple of hours, and then they would drive back home. I think some of those kids have done this for five or six straight weekends," Ross said.

Churches like the Albert City "E Free" have sent missionaries overseas, but for a small church, it can be satisfying to discover that there are needs they can respond to closer to home as well.

"This group just got out and got to it. They weren't nervous. I think it is much more dramatic to see how a rural Iowa group reacts face-to-face with the homeless than it is to see a group from Omaha who probably drive around and see these people on the streets every day," Ross said.

Even the youngest members of the Albert City group showed no fear, an impressed Ross said.

"Sometimes I wonder if they should be more nervous. This is reality on the streets, it isn't pretend. We do take steps to see that our participants are protected, but we have kids handing out coats and getting so involved in conversations with the homeless people that they in some cases wander right outside our circle with those people," Ross said.

"That's when we have to act and say what you are doing is all good, but do it inside the circle where we can protect you if something should happen.

Even with all of this help, Christ For The City has just scratched the surface in providing help to the large population in extreme poverty in a single city.

"One homeless shelter alone tells us they have to turn away 60-70 families a week that are homeless and seeking shelter, because there just isn't enough help to go around," he says.

"We're not fixing things, we're just doing what we can to help. You hope you make an impact on someone. If you don't keep it in perspective, you would wind up sitting with your head in your hands saying 'oh my gosh, this is overwhelming.' You'd get so discouraged."

The irony escapes no one - like elsewhere in the country, the city shows enormous wealth and prosperity in many areas, while the streets on the other side of the inner city tracks are populated with people in desperate need for even the most basic elements of life.

"It is probably the reality of most places in life. In Albert City or Storm Lake, you might not see people sleeping on the streets, but there are probably people who need someone's help just as much and are just as desperate. Maybe they are elderly people who are incredibly alone and lonely. They may be people with economic, mental health, substance abuse problems, transient people who may have a place to live for a while, then get thrown out and move in with someone else for a while and then get thrown out again," Ross said. "Rural communities may just do a better job of covering it up."

• For more information or to participate in Urban Plunge, see www.cfc.org, or contact Michael Ross at 402-592-8332.



they think," Ross says. "They will then have the ability to go try something else."

That's how many of the programs that partner with Christ in the City on the streets of Omaha got started, he notes - one person or a few people of faith who are moved to try something as "mom and pop ministries."

Urban Plunge continues to evolve, adding new experiences for its participants, and now looking to add college internship programs to help mold future social

people who may have a place to live for a while, then get thrown out and move in with someone else for a while and then get thrown out again," Ross said. "Rural communities may just do a better job of covering it up."