

After walking a short distance on the city streets and trudging through mud in an field, we come to an old abandoned railroad bridge most Houstonians probably don't even know exists. We climb the stairs, which have rusted over time. My friend Robert points out the sights as we pass. "That's Sam," he says, pointing to a covered lump lying on what was once the tracks. "He sleeps there most nights." He dusts off a plaque and motions for us to come closer to read it. It proclaims the dilapidated bridge a historical landmark.

Chicken wire wraps around the bridge where the support walls have given way. About halfway down, we stop at a manmade break in the chicken wire. Robert pries it open a bit wider, then disappears. I look down and there's a skinny ladder that was once used by maintenance men in the bridge's heyday. Robert has scurried down the bridge. I take it a bit slower.

At the bottom of the bridge is a ledge, not more than two or three feet wide. Robert sits, feet dangling, the Buffalo Bayou at least 30 feet below. Behind Robert is our destination. He calls it the Bat Cave. To the world, Robert is a 46-year-old homeless man. Robert disagrees. He feels lucky to have shelter each night, even if it is a hollowed out hole below a bridge. He has a home. We've brought a couple of battery operated lights. The cave is without electricity and Robert likes to read. His most prized possessions in his cave are some paperback books that we have brought him. The cave is about 10 feet deep and lined with sleeping bags to form a floor. A clothing line at the mouth of the cave doubles both as a way to dry his clothing at the end of the night, as well as a thin shelter from the elements.

I began working with the homeless during high school. My mother and a few friends formed an organization called [REDACTED] and I began working with them from the start. Each Sunday, we took food and clothing out to the streets of downtown Houston. We saw many of the same people each week. We got to know their names and stories. They got to know and trust us. My school did a coat drive and I was able to take the coats out one Sunday. My school had a garage sale and donated all of the unsold items to us. I took those items out on multiple Sundays.

The best part of the day was getting a chance to talk to people. Many loved to tell their stories, especially to young people. The moral was always the same: don't do drugs and get an education. Robert's story was typical. The product of a dysfunctional home, Robert turned to drugs and then to petty crime. Like most of the men on the street, he'd served time in prison. And though Robert had an associates degree and carpentry skills, he found it impossible to find work with a prison record.

Many of the homeless were ephemeral; we'd see them one week and they'd be gone the next. It was clear that many suffered from mental illness. Many were still using drugs. But we met many like Robert, people who had served their time, had gotten off drugs and simply wanted to make an honest living.

Like many cities, Houston has an ordinance that limits who can feed the homeless, as well as restricting locations and times. The summer after my sophomore year, I was able to get on the agenda and make a presentation to the Houston City Council in an attempt to change the ordinance. That battle is still ongoing.

But my most rewarding accomplishment has been working with Robert. After Robert did some handyman work at our house and for several friends, we found him a full time job renovating a home. He lives in the home while he does the work. He has a mattress to sleep on, running water and electricity, all the things I'd always taken for granted before my work with the homeless.

The Bat Cave sits empty now, a stark reminder that even one person can change a life.