

THE GSO UNSEEN

A Social Experiment to Better Understand the Challenges People Face When Seeking Food and Shelter



East Washington Street in downtown Greensboro serves as a main thoroughfare for many seeking assistance.

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What Do You Think Poverty Looks Like?

Forget your stereotypes. There's no single way to visualize poverty. You walk and drive by people living in poverty all the time. You may notice a few of them. But did you know locally, 57,000 people wake up to the reality of poverty everyday? That's a lot of men, women, children and families. Some are homeless and hungry. Some are working and struggle to pay the bills.

The truth is, poverty impacts you whether you care about it or not. In fact, Greensboro's poverty rate is 31% above the national average. This means higher crime rates and slow economic growth. High poverty rates do not attract new businesses or young professionals who will shape our future.

United Way of Greater Greensboro does not accept this and it is our goal to eradicate generational poverty. With your help, we can do it one person, one family at a time.

Be a Part of the Solution – Share Your Ideas

After you read The GSO Unseen, we want to hear from you! Share your ideas how to address poverty by posting on your favorite social media using #GSOUnseen - Call us at 336-378-6600 or send an email to: Michael.Cottingham@UnitedWayGSO.org. Help us shed light on the unseen by sharing this report, posted at www.UnitedWayGSO.org/GSOUnseen with the people you know.

Origination

United Way of Greater Greensboro has been focused on breaking the cycle of poverty since 2015. An overview of our efforts can be found <http://www.unitedwaygso.org/our-impact/>. To gain a better understanding of the local community United Way serves, Frank McCain, Vice President, Community Impact & Investment conceived an idea. Frank shared the idea with his colleague Michael Cottingham, Vice President, Marketing & Communications. Together, they decided to immerse themselves into the Greensboro homeless and needy population. The following story reflects their shared experiences.

The Overview

On November 7, 2016, Frank McCain, Vice President, Community Impact & Investment and Michael Cottingham, Vice President, Marketing & Communications, of United Way of Greater Greensboro set out to gain a better understanding of what people in need of food and shelter face on a daily basis.

McCain and Cottingham had no expectation they could truly experience what it's like for the one out of five people in Greensboro who are living in poverty. But for a day, were dedicated to finding out what it takes to access services, find food and spend the night in a shelter or somewhere safe. As executive leaders of United Way of Greater Greensboro, they were all in – ready to spend 24 hours submersed in a different environment.

McCain carried a two-wheeled piece of luggage packed with bare necessities. Cottingham set out carrying a mesh bag containing much the same. Both men wore stained clothing and assumed roles of displaced people with no job, no place to call home, or local family to help. In these roles, they used their real names and were officially processed into the North Carolina Statewide Homeless Management Information System and Greensboro's Interactive Resource Center.

At 8 a.m. McCain and Cottingham set out to access basic needs and 13 hours later with the year's first frost approaching, found themselves on two benches in a park with no place to stay and no hope of finding shelter anytime soon.

A Narrative of the Day's Experiences

After parking our vehicles, we left our normal lives and started the day by walking to the Interactive Resource Center (IRC) with the expectation of sharing our needs and being offered access to food and shelter for the night. The IRC is a day shelter for anyone who needs a place to stay from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Onsite, the IRC offers an array of programs and services. The IRC's website describes itself as "an innovative day resource center for people experiencing homelessness or trying to keep from becoming homeless in Guilford County, North Carolina."

Most people in Greensboro who seek food and shelter are directed to the IRC to be assessed for severity of needs and to be entered into the North Carolina Statewide Homeless Management Information System, a database that allows local partners to track someone's overall case. If a registered person moves around the state, this system is able to offer important details to caseworkers who are unfamiliar with an individual's needs. People wishing to utilize the IRC's services must also sign a code of conduct to become members.

Upon arrival at the IRC, we split up acting as though we were strangers. At around 8:15 a.m., we were both greeted at separate desks, gave our names and expressed our need for food and shelter for the evening. The people at the front desks were very polite and pleasant. We were told to sit and wait to be called. While waiting to be seen, we initially sat at different tables across the room from one another.

Over the course of the next several hours, we observed a multitude of behaviors and were warmly welcomed by everyone we spoke to, both IRC employees and people in need.

While waiting, we had conversations with people who were there for initial intakes, services, and shelter in general. Many of them told us that Monday mornings are particularly busy. That morning, at least 80 people filled the room, many of them carrying bags of clothes and other belongings.

The demographics of people waiting were diverse in age and race and mainly male. Three children were among the crowd. The appearances of people were as equally diverse. Some carried with them many bags of belongings, while some were dressed in slacks and button up shirts appearing ready to walk into a work environment. Most people also carried and were using cell phones.

Some people arrived and departed the IRC on the city bus, which stopped across the street. Others arrived and departed in cabs, riding bikes, as passengers and drivers in cars and most people walked.

We individually asked people if they knew where we could eat and stay. Almost everyone we asked referred us to *The Little Green Book* and *The Little Blue Book*. The green book lists when, where and how to access free meal options in Greensboro. The blue book lists when, where and how to access free food pantries in Greensboro. We were familiar with these books, as they are offered as resources in the lobby of United Way of Greater Greensboro.

At one point in the morning, a verbal argument between a man and woman who were sitting together occurred and the man left the building aggressively. He later returned and rejoined her. No one at the center seemed phased by the outburst, and despite a few more arguments, they stayed together.

Overheard conversations included talks about college, the challenges of social services as related to custody of children.

A group of five men hung out in the IRC's locker room listening to music beside a man who slept on top of a table fully clothed with no pillow – all unaffected by a strong bathroom odor. Many people slept in chairs with their heads resting on top of round tables in the main waiting room. At one table multiple games of chess were played, as people continued to challenge a man who continued to win.

Throughout the morning, a few people showered in the locker room and took advantage of the IRC's laundry service. Showers and laundry service are very commendable offerings to people who often have very little clothing and are forced to wear the same clothes day after day.

Equally commendable, the IRC fills a critical need by offering members temporary access to a P.O. box. To receive government assistance, such as food stamps, people must have a permanent mailing address. Several people that morning were waiting for the first of two daily mail calls.

NOTE: A full listing of IRC programs can be found here – <http://gsodaycenter.org/take-action/guests>

After close to six hours of waiting, we told a person at our table how long we had been waiting and they told us to be sure that we had requested a caseworker. Frank checked with an IRC worker and discovered that when he arrived in the morning, he wasn't actually entered into the system for an assessment. They quickly scrambled and told him that they would add him to the list and that he would be seen by caseworker soon.

Since we had both put off walking miles away to get lunch in fear of missing our appointments, Frank told a worker that he'd missed lunch. The worker said that she'd get him something to eat. Frank requested that Michael also be given something to eat. We both received a bottle of water and "Blessing Bag" for lunch that was prepared by a local church and given to the IRC to hand out as needed.



Blessing bags, donated by a local church, contained two bags of chips, bread and cheese sandwich and a bite-size candy bar.

We quickly ate and after 30 minutes, Michael was called to the front desk to meet a case manager. After walking to a small office and signing a few pages of consent forms, the official assessment began. During the assessment, the case

manager quickly asked about a dozen questions while he filled out paperwork. Questions ranged from veteran status and personal information to location of overnight sleeping. To present an extreme situation, Michael informed the case manager he'd slept outside the night before, did not feel safe, was unemployed and that there was no local family he could reach out to for help.

After a quick five minute assessment, Michael was told to begin thinking about an "option B" since there was no room at any local overnight shelter. There was no option B offered. The case manager stated that there was no timeframe for being granted overnight shelter. It could be days or weeks. Since I had a cell phone, the case manager said he would call when a slot opened up. Michael then threw the caseworker a curveball and said he had a girlfriend and child who were in another city waiting to join him. The case manager said if they did indeed come, it would be best to stay at independent shelters, as opposed to waiting longer to access a functioning family shelter.

Frank was assessed by the same case manager a few minutes after Michael and experienced a similar intake process. Frank was not asked if he was a veteran. After Frank was informed that there was no place for him to stay overnight, the case manager told him that he could stay at the library until it closed and then try to find a 24-hour laundry mat thereafter.

We both decided that we would keep our names in the system to see how long it would take for us to both receive calls offering shelter.

After being assessed, we decided to walk to the Greensboro Urban Ministry to ask firsthand if we could secure a bed for the evening and to experience that facility's operation. Still hungry, we made the decision to purchase a small meal on the way.

While walking we passed a lady who had taken up shelter under an abandoned building's doorway. She was eating, covered with a blanket and we asked her if she knew anywhere we could get a good bite to eat and spend the night. She appeared to be mentally ill and was very hard to understand and didn't speak in coherent sentences. Still, her yearning to help us was apparent.

The only place to eat along the way was a small restaurant attached to a gas station that was beside the Salvation Army Center of Hope. The gas station's windows and doors were secured with steel bars.

The windows also displayed signs warning people from drinking alcohol on the property. Pictures of people who violated that rule, or who had stolen merchandise from the store were also displayed. The main entry door displayed signs stating EBT cards were accepted and that milk, eggs and bread were sold inside, making it clear that this gas station was a central shopping location for many people.



Oftentimes, gas stations are the closest option for people in need to purchase essential groceries. The fact that so many people in the City of Greensboro live over a mile away from a grocery store, places the city as one of the nations highest ranked food deserts.

We quickly grabbed a hot dog at the adjoining restaurant and walked next door to the Greensboro Urban Ministry.

Upon arriving, we observed an agitated man in the corner of the parking lot yelling and talking to himself. When we tried to open the door, it was locked and

another man walked up and pushed a pager button that notified the person at the center's front desk. We were quickly buzzed in.

We walked to the front desk and presented our needs. We were politely and quickly told that there was no room for us there and that we would need to go to the IRC to be placed on a waiting list. We asked if we could sit in the lobby for a few minutes to gather our thoughts and we were told that we could not.

Before making the walk back to IRC so that we could eat dinner, we decided to explore the city on foot to see if we could locate one of the "tent cities" that we'd heard about. After around an hour of walking, we decided to return to the IRC to wait for dinner, which was being offered after hours by a local nonprofit group, Greensboro's Food not Bombs.

Along the way the same woman under the doorway we'd passed earlier shouted out to us as we passed, her phrasing understandable this time. She asked, "Did you find a place?" We told her no and continued along our way.

As we neared the downtown depot, we stopped at an intersection for a few seconds so that Michael could tie his shoe. While stopped there, a former member of the United Way of Greater Greensboro Board of Directors pulled up in their car, looked directly at us and quickly looked away. In everyday work, we had worked with this person several times and counted them as a friend.

But, in this case, we were overlooked and unrecognizable. We could not believe we were so easy to miss. We wondered if the roles were reversed, whether or not we would recognize people we know. We counted the experience as very meaningful not knowing that later that evening we would discover that we could get even closer to someone we knew and not be seen.

When we arrived back to the IRC, the doors were locked and several people were gathered in the parking lot. While waiting for the doors to open, we found an outside electrical plug and sat on the ground in front building to charge our phones. A young man approached us asking to use one of our cell phone chargers to recharge his electronic vape pen so that he could smoke. We obliged and the young man quickly began talking to us about his life. He was there to grab food before going to work at a nearby construction site.



Frank McCain, Vice President, Community Impact & Investment and Michael Cottingham, Vice President, Marketing & Communications of United Way of Greater Greensboro sit outside of the Interactive Resource Center while waiting for meal to be served.

The young man also said that over the past several months, he spent the night at multiple places and had no place to call home. He had recently spent the night at someone's place and was severely bitten by bed bugs. He lifted his shirt to reveal hundreds of bites on his abdomen and back. After about 10 minutes of charging his vape pen, he left with a young woman that he said he just met to drink alcohol. He later returned and told us that he had a sexual encounter with her.

Shortly after, a man and a woman pulled into the parking lot with four kids, two boys and two girls, all appearing to be under the age of eight. They joined a small line that was forming in front of the door. The kids played in small dirty potholes in the parking lot while they waited and were occasionally pulled back into line by their mother. While playing, the children's already stained clothes became even dirtier. At one point, the horn of the family's old SUV began blaring a constant tone and the woman walked over to the vehicle and quickly stopped it like she'd no doubt done before.

We were very impacted by this family as we watched them interact with one another. We are both proud fathers of children, and watching the four siblings reminded us of watching our own kids. Frank was particularly struck by imagining if our children were in the same circumstance. A few minutes later when the family entered the IRC, the father began filling multiple plates of food while the mom sorted through a newly donated box of used clothing to the IRC. This family was a clear representation of a local family in need.

We eventually joined the line, grabbed our own food and sat a table with two other men. Our conversations with these two men would prove to be our most meaningful of the day.



This dinner provided by Greensboro's Food not Bombs, was very substantial and included both sweets and healthy vegetables.

While eating, we asked our tablemates for help finding a place to stay the evening. During the conversation, the men took us under their wings and stressed that safety is an issue to be concerned about. The safest option they offered was for us to join a tent community near West Market and Tate Street.

When we told them that we didn't have tents they were surprised, but stressed that was still a safe place. One man even noted for us to not worry about the young kids and others who visit that location to get high, stressing that they would leave us alone. Both men had places to stay themselves, but only one spoke about where they lived. That man rented a small place. He told us that he'd opened up his place for others before, but stopped doing that when a drug dealer came looking for his guest.

He proceeded to tell us that in Greensboro, no one could hide. Everyone in the group in which we were immersed knew one another in some way and that everyone followed the same patterns during the day. We were told that people shuffle between the IRC, the library, the transportation depot and Urban Ministry. "People just go around and around all day. If you want to find someone, you can," he stated. This is why he was soon to make his way to Charlotte. According to him, Charlotte has a lot to offer people in need and if we made the move, we could utilize the city's bus system to spend the night inside a heated bus throughout the night.

The man continued to say that Greensboro had additional places to spend the night when the overnight temperatures dip to 25 degrees. The IRC and a few local churches function as emergency overnight shelters when the temperatures reach that low. Special white colored flags are hoisted at these locations to notify people in need of emergency lodging locations.

According to the man, he once participated in a public meeting with Salvation Army and United Way and told moderators that they should think about enacting the emergency shelter procedures when the temperatures approach freezing, noting that 32 degrees is already dangerous and "30 degrees is cold, why do they have to wait until 25 degrees."

After we finished our dinner, the men once again told us to be careful and not to sleep on the streets. With no place to go, we walked to Center City Park to see if we could find any additional resources along the way. As we left, we walked passed a man sitting in the IRC parking lot looking down at his phone proudly shouting, "I got the job! I got the job!"

Afterwards, while walking the dark streets we found ourselves passing the International Civil Rights Center & Museum. We were around 10 feet away when one of the museum doors opened onto Elm Street.

A gentleman held the door for someone walking out. While we neared the opened door, a current member of the United Way of Greater Greensboro Board of Directors walked out of the building. They saw us and we had to actually step to the side to avoid walking into them. We both had to keep ourselves from verbally greeting this person, as it was the normal thing to do. Yet again, we were face-to-face with someone we knew and they did not see us. We were astonished that the person didn't recognize us and even more taken aback by the fact that what we had experienced earlier that day had been repeated.

Additionally, the man holding the door knew Frank on many levels and did not recognize him. Frank is a member of the International Civil Rights Center & Museum Board of Directors and has worked hand-in-hand with this gentleman for many years. The meaningful irony of this encounter has many levels. It was much more than another example of someone we knew not noticing who were. In 1960, Frank's father joined three other men at a Woolworth lunch counter at that very location and refused to leave when they were denied service due to the color of their skin.

At that very location, Frank's father played a key role in sparking the Civil Rights Movement. And, it was in the boardroom of the museum where we'd previously met to plan our experiment. The fact that Frank walked past such a meaningful location and was overlooked was a powerful and humbling experience.

We continued on our way to the park and entered a nearby Subway restaurant where a worker allowed us to sit and rest without hesitation. The only other people in the restaurant were a couple we had not seen during the day. While the man and woman ate, we noticed that they were carrying a few bags and we wondered if they were in need.

After around 30 minutes, the worker announced that she had to close the restaurant so we would have to leave. We all thanked her and walked out the door together. Frank quickly spoke to the couple and told them that we needed a place to stay overnight. The man told us he knew a place. He shook his head while thinking and proudly proclaimed Urban Ministry would shelter us for the evening. We smiled and told the couple that there was no room for us at that shelter. The couple wished us good luck and we walked in different directions.

When we arrived at Center City Park, we decided to find a few benches so that we could sit and begin processing our day and our overnight options.

The man and woman who were arguing with one another earlier in the day passed by with a few people who were also at the IRC earlier in the day. The man spoke to the woman loudly saying, “look there they are” referencing that they recognized us from earlier. The group nodded at us and continued walking away into the dark of the adjoining LeBauer Park. We officially felt as though we were welcomed into a new family.



LeBauer and Center City Parks provide temporary resting places for people on the move.

In an effort to see if we could locate additional shelter and service options, we called United Way’s 211 information and referral line. 211 is a 24 hour, seven days a week phone service that connects people to local resources. The 211 operator quickly offered shelter and services, but they were shelter and services we had already attempted to utilize.

In a city where eight people had been murdered the month before, and facing an overnight frost warning, we decided that returning to our real families was the safest decision we could make. We did not take lightly that this decision wasn’t an option for the others we’d met that day.

At 9 p.m., 13 hours after our day had begun, we walked out of the park and returned to our normal lives, forever impacted by our experiences.

Shelter Follow-ups

Frank was called on Wednesday, November 9, 2016 at 11 a.m. and offered shelter at Urban Ministry. Frank declined the offer and told the caller that he had secured a place to stay and asked to be removed from the list of those in need.

Michael was called on Monday, November 14, 2016 at 9 a.m. and offered shelter at Salvation Army's Center of Hope. Michael declined the offer and told the caller he secured housing at a friend's place. The caller followed up with a few questions to make sure Michael understood his situation – How long did he know the friend, and how long would he be able to stay with them? The caller expressed a clear concern for Michael's safety during the conversation. Michael was told that by refusing the housing slot, he would have to start the waiting process all over again should the need for shelter arise once again.

The Takeaways

We were reminded of the fact that people in need do not fit a particular stereotype.

The population living in poverty functioned in many ways like a family and both Frank and Michael were quickly welcomed as new members.

Homelessness and poverty are often the result of much larger problems like mental health disorders, chronic illness and lack of job skills.

Since many people in need shuffle around a handful of buildings in the city, it could be easy to reach them with additional resources in strategic locations.

There is a need for:

- Safe, affordable permanent and temporary housing
- Services that target single men
- Day and night supportive services
- Increased collaboration between current services to produce a holistic approach.