

## Being Invited

We went on vacation to Orlando in 2014 and never really made it back home.

Our family vacation to Orlando was just like the 72 million visitors who come each year. It was a chance to get into the sunshine and escape the winter for a week! We didn't have enough money to go into the theme parks, so we just played at the resort with the kids. It had a water slide and a lazy river and three golf courses – what more could pasty white people need?

The resort was pretty empty which was fine by us. It was warm and it was peaceful. Our kids were finally old enough to stay by themselves in the condo watching Disney channel. That was a parental vacation in and of itself. Krista and I enjoyed taking walks around the resort in the mornings. The economy was still recovering, and the resort had a bunch of condos with foreclosure signs on them. Even though we didn't have much money, it didn't stop us from dreaming about having our own Florida condo to come to whenever we wanted to escape the winter darkness of Washington state. These were beautiful places with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, and they were selling for under \$100k. When we found out purchases were cash-only with no financing, the short dream ended.

We returned to Seattle and entered back into our lives where we owned and operated a conference management company. We'd do all the conference planning and development for a number of education associations and a few other companies. We were successful in our work, but I was still hoping to develop jobs and housing for people coming out of homelessness in Seattle. It's what I really cared about. I had worked with people on the streets for three years and it never stopped impacting me. I learned more than I realized in those years and became friends with dozens of amazing people who just needed a good opportunity. We had some plans drawn up to add a second story to our house where our family could live upstairs and people coming off the streets could live downstairs. Coming up with good job opportunities was the hard part. Our own company needed strong computer skills and professionalism – which wasn't the best fit for my friends on the streets. The economy was tough, so getting people to invest in new ventures was like pulling teeth. Sometimes it feels as if my dreams were dreamt in the wrong years.

I'm not a blog reader, a magazine subscriber or a person too interested in keeping up with the goings on in the world. The people I meet and the things I see are enough to keep my brain busy. Someone must have thought of me when they saw a Time magazine article about Walt Disney World's Homeless Population in late spring that year. As I read the article, it was the same story of friends I had in Seattle who lived in the low-income motels on Hwy 99. The only difference was those in Orlando lived in low-income motels on Hwy 192.

The issues that lead to homelessness are quite similar everywhere. There can be a loss of jobs and resources, a loss of friends and family to make a difference or a loss of willingness to ask for help. There can be serious issues of mental illness or addiction issues, although, I've found this to be the lesser of the causes. Almost always, the people we met in need were far from home and family. They had come to Seattle looking for an opportunity. Homelessness is hard work and the people experiencing it are doing their best to stay alive and afloat. No one ever intends to struggle. Having respect and compassion for my friends who were living a hard life was sometimes the best I could do. My friends on the streets taught me how to love. I don't think love is about fixing. I think it's about walking alongside and it's about listening.

At first, not being able to fix things was impossible for me to see as love. The homeless by definition need a place to call home. I could fix that. I could see ways to provide housing. So why not? When I walked alongside the homeless, I didn't see people who were any more or less miserable than those who owned their own homes. I saw people who were trying their best. I saw people who had friends that looked out for them. I saw people who were living in community in a way a family of four like ourselves knew nothing about. So I listened

and I learned some of the most important lessons from Larry and Donald and Gretchen. Their goals were unique to their person, just like everyone I knew.

Larry was not seeking stability and security. Steve met him wrapped in cardboard and carpet on a cold winter night. He was thankful for a warm meal, a hot shower and a place to do some laundry. Larry loved getting to share his wisdom with all of us young folk and we enjoyed listening. He planted a garden outside our house and brought a lot of life to us.

Donald wanted to live again. We met him when his wife was very sick, and she was living in a state-run facility. She died and Donald didn't recover for a while. He was just heartbroken, and homelessness was his plight. We helped him with a safe place to live while he healed. There was no mental illness or addictions with Donald. He was light and joy and life – it just took some time to be able to see it again. When that time came, he left in the middle of the night without even saying goodbye. It was as if a light switch turned back on and he was ready to live again.

Gretchen lived at the Seals Motel in room #7. She was alone, odd, gruff, smelly and scared. She had enough money through disability and social security to pay the bills at this grimy motel. We'd deliver groceries to her overflowing room every so often. She'd call us when she needed help. We'd sit on the steps outside her room and listen. Often Gretchen didn't make sense to us. We didn't know the story of how she came to be who she appeared to be now. But Gretchen was once a child who laughed and loved just like all of us. She was the kind of person the motels loved and despised at the same time. She paid on time, but she was painful to have around. She yelled at people and she was a little scary if you didn't know her.

Some of the best parts of who I am today come from these friends. They redefined love for me. They allowed love to be rich with action and at the same time, peace to stay still.

Attaching Walt Disney's name to a story about homelessness made it newsworthy, but much the same story could have been written about Seattle. Jobs that pay minimum wage don't create a safety net and the cheapest option when you're living day to day are those dive motels that had people like Gretchen living next door. You can live for a few days in your car and a few days at the motel – until your car breaks down. It's a tough life when you're on the edge of poverty, but there aren't many other options. When you have no network left, who do you ask for help?

Try showing up at a church or a soup kitchen when you are in need. Asking for help can be humiliating, depending on who you meet. The people serving in those places are not evil, nor are their intentions bad. The giver and receiver dynamic is just terrible. I humiliated many people with my questions as they came asking for help. I didn't want to be lied to. I didn't want to invest in people who would not be helped by my assistance. I asked questions as if I were an investigator. I learned that people lie to get what they need. They told me what I needed to hear in order to get what they wanted. They were smart, just like I was smart. It was as if helping people was a game of chess, moves and countermoves. Winning a chess match against a homeless person has no reward. They leave with the same poverty I met them with, and I'm left justifying my decisions. I learned more about myself than I learned about my opponent. Unfortunately, I learned that I didn't know much about love.

It's not for lack of good intention, but somehow, people like me with money find ourselves judging who is a good investment and who isn't. We create rules for others to live by and we can miss the goodness of who they are. After I read the story about homelessness at Disney World, I was struck by the similarity of the issues between Seattle and Orlando. But life was still getting in the way of doing anything about it.

A few months later I hadn't thought any more about Disney World or the article I'd read. Nothing more had happened with my dreams for housing and jobs in Seattle. We were busy. We were working so hard on our business and being parents that I'd made no headway on other work. We were living a life of busyness and good intentions. It wasn't the life we wanted.

We found ourselves praying about opportunities for our kids. Drew and Annika were 9 & 11 and two of the most amazing little people I'd met. For years we'd looked for opportunities where they could be involved to live out loving God and loving others in ways that would fit a child's capacity. This is where the Disney parks became an idea of a place to serve. Kids can talk to Disney Cast Members for as long as they want – it's actually encouraged. We'd had many special conversations with Cast Members over the years. I don't think many guests were asking them questions about their lives and listening. What captivated me was realizing the connection between those working for Disney who were homeless and our own family story. There had been many times where we said if we'd have had a home in Anaheim or Orlando, we would have invited the Cast Member over for dinner, but since we were always on vacation in a hotel, that didn't seem doable. But why couldn't it happen?

Why couldn't we buy a house in Orlando and invite strangers over for dinner? Is that so crazy?

Krista and I had colored outside the lines for a long time in our lives. Our kids had lived this journey with us. But this would mean selling our house, risking our business and moving across the country. And for what - to invite people to dinner who we'd never met?

We sat the kids down and asked them what they thought about living at Disney World for part of the year? We would get to know people who worked for the Mouse and we could see if they wanted to join us for a home cooked meal. Those working at Disney World are a people who are away from their own families. Being children, that reality connected with Annika and Drew who couldn't imagine being without their parents.

As it turned out, we have become extra moms and dads and brothers and sisters and family to those who came to dinner. A few years turned into the place we now call home. There are scads of stories that now remind us that God lives and calls and uses us today. Krista and I know it. Annika and Drew know it. And our new family in Florida knows it too. We can't avoid knowing that this is a special place.

I think God's invitation is often as simple as, "Would you like to come over for dinner"? For some reason, often unbeknownst to us, people say "Yes". And we know it takes courage to show up somewhere when you're not known. During dinner at our place people are seen and known during those meals in ways they may not have been seen or known before. Friends have told us it feels both good and terrifying at the same moment. Most of us are not used to being invited.

There is something life giving for us about inviting others in. And if there is one thing that God is – I think he is certainly inviting. The whole world somehow hinges on that principle. God invites us all, so maybe I should do the same? We can accept invitations and we can offer them. All I know is that I feel closer to my Maker when we open the doors of our home to enter into the unknown with strangers who quickly become our dear friends and family.