

ANTHONY WILLIAMS :



"HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE WORTH BIG MONEY"

By Donna Lamb

Anthony Williams, co-founder of Picture the Homeless, is changing how people view the homeless. He has researched available statistics and found that each homeless person in New York is worth as much as \$40,000 a year to the system. He is also securing for them a real voice in how money is allocated for homeless services.



It all started in 1999 when Williams was staying in Bellevue Men's Shelter in Manhattan. During that time a woman in midtown was hit with a brick. It was immediately assumed that a homeless person did it. Mayor Giuliani held a press conference saying that we've got to get those crazies off the street. Homeless men were rounded up in droves and forced through the system. As it turned out, the man who actually threw the brick was not homeless.

That's when Anthony Williams decided that he'd had enough. People's ideas about the homeless had to change. Along with another shelter resident, he co-founded Picture the Homeless.

He began speaking at churches, schools and conferences all over New York City and other parts of the nation in order to educate people about what persons experiencing homeless are subjected to and about what a big business homelessness has become.



PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In a recent talk at CUNY, Anthony Williams, originally from Baltimore, Maryland, spoke deeply and courageously about having been placed in foster care when he was an infant. The audience was engrossed as he said of himself, "This is a person who grew up without a family, a person who was on drugs, alcohol, a person who felt lost and abandoned because he didn't know his mother and father." Speaking of the problems of the homeless, he said, "Sleeping on the subway without any hope, not knowing where to go--all the bad things you associate with homelessness are things I can relate to, things I've dealt with." And he said of his work with the organization he co-founded, "This is my passion. Picture the Homeless is who I am."

He also told the students, "When you see a homeless person who is smelly, dirty--remember this was an innocent child at one time, and this was never supposed to happen to him or her. Then ask yourself what went wrong. Next, look at yourself and ask, 'Why do I feel so bad about that guy sleeping in the cardboard box?' Keep asking until you get some answers."

HARASSMENT OF THE HOMELESS

Contrary to what many persons think--that shelters are places people can go for help getting back on their feet--Williams described a very real lack of personal safety and privacy, and harassment by the police. "When I was in the shelter," he said, "they were doing pre-dawn raids. They would send officers in to arrest people in the middle of the night. Some of the warrants were for urinating in public, or jumping a subway turnstile because the person didn't have money. These raids were becoming violent. The police would come in, wake guys up and throw them against the wall. Imagine that you're in your home sleeping and someone comes in, shines a flashlight in your face, and says, "Get the hell up!" That's how it was done."

He also spoke of "selective enforcement"--the practice of enforcing ordinances and laws mainly against people perceived to be homeless. For instance, "People could be lying in Central Park sunbathing, so I come up and lie on the ground too. But the cops come over to me and say, 'Excuse me sir, you have to get up and leave.' Everyone else is sunbathing, but because I'm stigmatized as a homeless person, I have to go."

And he said that these "quality of life" ordinances and laws are being expanded far beyond New York City: "All across the country we're fighting anti-camping laws

which state that you can't sleep on a blanket in a park, but you can lay on the ground. And you can lie on the sidewalk, but you can't have a blanket--this actually went to court! The anti-camping ordinances also say you can't sleep in a box; if you do, it's a fire hazard. They come up with all these ways to justify not allowing a person to sleep on the street."

"The purpose is to move people out of the view of the tourists," Williams continued. "It's all about making money. And it's going to get worse because of the rebuilding of lower Manhattan. Trying to bring tourism back again, the city will be even more aggressive about getting anything considered unsightly off the streets."

So where do they take people to keep them out of sight? One place is Camp LaGuardia, located in Chester, New York, about 90 miles outside New York City. Within its chain-link fences and barred windows about 1,200 men are housed. "In the shelter system, the threat of being sent there is held over men's heads. If you don't come in at night and sign for your bed, or if you get in a fight with another individual, they transfer you to Camp LaGuardia where you're isolated and unable to take care of your personal business. Out of sight, out of mind."

WHY DOESN'T IT CHANGE?

"We have to ask ourselves," Williams told his audience, "why isn't homelessness being ended; why aren't they developing affordable housing? So I started to follow the money. I read an article that said \$60 million had come to New York City for the homeless. I wondered, 'Where does that \$60 million go?' Then I found out that living in a shelter--getting a locker and a bed--costs the government \$2,000 a month per person. I said, 'That's enough for any of us to have an apartment, right?'

"That really got me," he continued, "finding out about the \$2,000 a month. I looked at the Bellevue Men's Shelter and counted 850 men living there at \$2,000 a month. And that's only one shelter. There's the one on Ward's Island which holds 900 men. Another in Brooklyn holds about 500. And that's not to mention the women's shelters and the family shelters. I started looking at numbers, asking questions. On any given night, 29,000 people are in shelters--over 12,000 of them children. What does that come to? And why isn't that money being broken down to go into public housing?"

HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE WORTH BIG MONEY: UP TO \$40,000 A YEAR!

Williams brought out some monumentally important facts as he said, "The answer is, we've become profitable. Every homeless person you see is worth big money. Once we give a provider our Social Security number, our Medicaid card, every time we sign our names on a sheet of paper, that's money from the government. You have to sign your name every night for a bed; you have to sign for breakfast, lunch, dinner each program, everything.

"And," he continued, "I figured out that I am very valuable, but I didn't realize it because I was so caught up in the system, just going from shelter to shelter. In the system I'm worth a minimum of \$23,000 a year. And I found out that services for

people with serious mental illness can cost up to \$40,500 annually. Yet, it would cost only about \$1,000 more per person to place them in supportive housing."

Even though the services are provided by not-for-profit companies, "a lot of the Executive Directors of these companies make 6 digits a year so they don't necessarily want to end homelessness. And that's across the country."

ACHIEVEMENTS PAST AND PRESENT

One of Picture the Homeless' first accomplishments was finding a space where homeless people could come together to talk about issues like police harassment, selective enforcement, and being treated differently because of how they look--all civil rights issues. They started organizing on the Lower East Side at the CHARAS Community Center, and now they meet at 6:30 every Wednesday evening at Judson Memorial Church, on Washington Square South where Picture the Homeless' headquarters is located.

Picture the Homeless has also brought homeless people to the table as part of the Continuum of Care coalition, thus insuring their participation in the funding process. "We try to see what the gaps and needs are for the homeless in all 5 boroughs--what the biggest needs are of families with children, people living with HIV and AIDS, people who are mentally ill and those with other special needs."

The job of organizing people who are homeless is enormous. Their numbers are growing everyday. Anthony Williams has the ability to deeply affect and usefully educate those who are fortunate enough to hear him speak. He can be contacted at Picture the Homeless, (212) 982-5947 or pthww@aol.com. Contributions to Picture the Homeless can be made out to Judson Memorial Church, Attn: Peter Laarman for PTH, at 55 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012.

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