

Professor Doug Garnar reflects on the 6th annual Sleep Out for the Homeless

May 11, 2015

On Saturday May 9th the first shades of light began to fill the eastern sky shortly after 5 a.m. At the same time, the moon continued in its ever-plodding westward journey, soon to disappear until another sunset had begun the next evening.



I spent the evening with an incredible array of students, maybe 30 to 35 in number. Women and men; traditional students and non-traditional students; students from the Student Village; Rae Palmer-Jones, a mother to be, who helped to organize the first Sleep Out for the Homeless and has worked tirelessly on each succeeding one and she assures me she will continue in future for so long as there are annual sleep outs; Tyrone King (aka Claudius) who like Rae is another student who has been there from the beginning—the quintessential “civic Sherpa” who, in addition to working on the usual logistical details, also buys a tent each year to add to a growing collection he brings for those who wish to sleep out in a tent; and to Princess, a young Student Assembly leader whose heart and passion for the marginalized is breath-taking.



What amazed me was the sight of people — most still sleeping in tents, some on benches, some on the ground and one in a box. They, for a brief moment, experienced some sense of what being homeless is like. But equally important was the joy for all in brief moment in time meeting new people, breaking bread (really pizza!), sharing stories, thinking about those whose lives would be touched by this fundraiser; this is part of what we mean by “doing the public work” of democracy.



And then there was the “balloon launch” when each person released a balloon in memory of Wes Warren who worked with me, Rae and Claudius from the start. Wes knew that homelessness is a plight not just of those suffering from addiction, but veterans returning home and wrestling with what to do with their lives, which have been impacted in ways that none who has ever been in combat can fully understand. Wes also understood the toll of the Great Recession of 2008 and the floods of 2006 and 2011. Wes was the quintessential “Mensch” who truly believed on our best days we need to move beyond our own personal agendas and those of our families, friends and associates, and that we need to take seriously those words in the Preamble of the Constitution — that among other things government (and Wes and I) would add the “intermediary bodies” that Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about over 160 years ago were the strength of the young/fledgling democracy called America “to promote the general welfare.” I sense Wes’s spirit still around us even though he no longer sleeps on the bench during the Sleep Out. Rather, he sees the balloons ascending in the sky and knows that we should on our

best days live in service to others.

If anyone wishes to make a donation to the Sleep Out for the Homeless they can write

a check addressed to “Coalition for the Homeless” and send it to me (Professor Doug Garnar, Titchener Hall, Room 211-B). On Friday, I will see the coalition receives this year’s donations from SUNY Broome Community College.

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