

David, My Homeless Mentor

Everyone needs mentors, and that was certainly true for the executive director of Loaves & Fishes. There are no books written about how to provide survival services for homeless people, nor are there Internet Websites to visit that explain what services are the most critical, and why. So it came to pass that as the first director of Loaves, I would need a mentor. David was my mentor.

David was raised in the Midwest and from an early age wanted to do only one thing with his life: become a sailor in the U.S. Navy. And so he did. His dream had come true, his goal in life had been achieved, he was happy and content, he had found his life's career. But then he took sick and never fully recovered his health, at least according to the Navy doctors who ordered him released and eligible to draw a small military disability stipend.

David was given no choice, he was provided with no other alternative to military service. The only thing made clear to him was that he was no longer a member of the U.S. Navy. This may sound strange to you and me, I don't know, but this turn of events in his life left him crushed and heart-broken. In a certain sense his life was over, he had no future. He was at a loss.

Because he had a brother, a professional photographer, who lived in Sacramento, he came to this area to pick up the pieces of his life and start over again. At some point, he managed a small hardware store, I think it was, or something similar. He managed the store for several years, and at some point he also began to drink. You can write your own predictable ending to this part of David's story. I can, too.

There came a day in the late 80's when David was out of a job and soon thereafter was put out of his small apartment. David became homeless at a time in Sacramento when the term "homeless" was still new enough to barely have a definition.

On his first day of homelessness, with no money, no job, no apartment, he confided to me years later, he expected to die. He saw death as the natural result of being homeless. He began to walk; in fact, he walked more than 20 miles that first day. He walked until it was dark. He was afraid that if he did

not keep walking, he would be picked up by the police as a vagrant and incarcerated. He reasoned that as long as he was walking, he would not draw attention to himself.

That first night he slept in William Land Park. And for the next two weeks, he walked all day and slept in the park after dark. Much to his surprise, he was still alive, even though he had almost nothing to eat. One day, he saw a large apple that someone had left behind, sitting on a picnic table. He could not believe his good fortune, and he almost cried as he bit into it. (I remember how animated he became as he told the apple story.) As the days passed, and all he could find to eat were scraps of food, he realized that if he did not find something to eat on a regular basis, he would certainly pass out during his long walks.

It was this need for food that brought him to the noon hot meal at Loaves & Fishes, which in those early days of its existence fed hungry people Monday through Friday. He showed up early one morning and joined the line of people waiting on North 12th St. for the meal. He had to wait several hours, but he was afraid to leave the line because he would lose his place, and maybe they only had enough food for a certain number of people, he didn't know. With an hour still to wait, he felt so weak from hunger, he thought he might pass out. With both hands, he clenched the chain-link fence and held on with all the strength he had left. Years later, as he recounted this story, he said, "LeRoy, I swear to you that on that day, Loaves & Fishes saved my life."

Dave became a daily guest at Loaves, and because of the free meal, he began to camp close by the river in isolated spots on the American River Parkway. He camped there for several years, always by himself.

What does this have to do with mentoring, you ask? Well, if you read carefully up to this point, you can already see how much I learned from David about the homeless and the services they need. But you are correct, there is more.

As the numbers of homeless people increased in those early years of Loaves & Fishes, I was concerned about safety – the safety of the guests who came to eat. Just because people are down and out and hungry does not grant them saintly status. Some people like to push others around, some like to cut in the food line because they can get away with it, some like to steal from others – in

short, just like any cross-section of people anywhere; yes, even people like us. I decided Loaves needed a street monitor.

The first person I hired was not a guest, but the son of a Loaves & Fishes supporter. A young man in his late 20's, a nice guy with a huge body, his career goal in life was to become a correctional officer. He lasted less than two days. He figured that if you confronted and pushed homeless people around a little, you would create law and order. It didn't work.

After the first monitor had been run off, David asked me if I would let him give it a try. He thought he could do it. You already know what happened. David did so well, he served as the street monitor for more than a year before I promoted him to the washhouse.

David was an excellent monitor because he knew how to approach people and talk with them in a friendly manner. He was firm but not pushy or judgmental. Sometimes he would explain that he was only trying to do his job of enforcing the rules – no booze, no drugs, no violence or threats of violence – and asked for their cooperation. Because he himself had been homeless, he knew the stress people were under and how cranky they can sometimes be. He was respectful and did not aggravate people or paint them in a corner by throwing his weight around or barking out orders.

David's success as monitor was a good lesson for me, and I never forgot it.

As the director of this fledgling organization, I knew we had to expand and offer more survival services for homeless people. We opened a waiting area so that people would have a place to sit down and wait for the meal. We instituted a ticket system for the noon meal so that people would not have to stand in line for hours at a time, but just come when their number was called. We provided clean bathrooms – oh, such a luxury for homeless people. We built roof shelters to protect the guests from the rain or the blazing sun. (Every homeless person who comes to Loaves & Fishes is referred to as a guest.) Eventually, we purchased property across the street from the dining room and converted it into a private park, which we named Friendship Park. We opened our own library for homeless people to use, we built a day storage area so that they would have a safe place to check their possessions for the day, and we built a washhouse complete with showers, shaving sinks,

bathrooms, and laundry facilities. We opened a social service center in Friendship Park to assist people who had questions, needed help, or service referral information. We initiated a coffee breakfast program in the park, provided free ice and subsidized sodas, and so forth and so on. There is no end to the most basic kinds of survival services that homeless people need, things that you and I take so much for granted because we never have to think about them.

I never authorized any of these new survival service programs without seeking David's advice or at least getting his reaction. He could be cagey. He never said, "Do this, don't do that"; instead, he would respond indirectly as in, "The fellows would go for that," or "I don't know." Cautious, level-headed, sensible, and conservative advice was David's mentoring style.

David worked for Loaves & Fishes for almost ten years. He saved money from each paycheck to put into a savings account established by Loaves for his retirement. He was never married, or at least he never talked about it; he did not hang out with others, he was the classic loner. But unlike so many other homeless loners I have come to know over the years, David was engaged in life and not traumatized by depression or loneliness. He could hold a job, take on responsibility, speak with others. He was functional.

When David turned 65, he retired with his Navy disability stipend, his Social Security, and his \$10,000 savings account. He spent his retirement days walking, at least five hours a day walking. I saw him from time to time in different parts of the city, making his daily walk. Even after a stroke a few years later, he forced himself to walk. Walking seemed to be an integral part of his retirement.

I owe a great deal to David for his mentoring advice and loyal support, but I would gladly have given all that up if it meant that David could have remained a sailor in the U.S. Navy, the only career he ever wanted in life. A career, I am convinced, that would have saved him from the indignity of being homeless and forced to sleep in parks and along riverbanks for several years, which will certainly shorten his natural life.

David was not my only homeless mentor, to be sure. There were many others: Sandra, Dalton, Augie, Rambo, Greg, Sarah, Gene, Pete, Charles, Anthony,

Mr. Banks, and Bob come readily to mind. I take some credit for being a good student.