

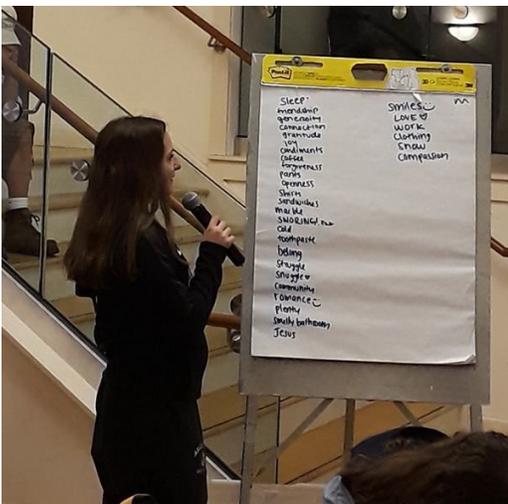
Follen Youth Participate in Homelessness Awareness/Service through Boston's *City Reach* Program



On the second weekend of March 2019, 14 youth members of the Follen UU Youth (FUUY) Group, along with their Youth Program Coordinators and the Director of Religious Education, made their way to Boston to participate in the *City Reach* program, sponsored by Ecclesia Ministries - Common Cathedral. *City Reach* gives young people the opportunity to learn first hand about homelessness from people who have experienced it. During the 20 hour session, we were oriented to the work of the program, heard testimonies of people who had been or were currently experiencing homelessness -one former 3rd grade teacher referred to

herself with a laugh as “domestically challenged”- and saw a demonstration of how one best builds up a sleep space out-of-doors, in cold weather. The latter was accompanied by a narrative of the challenges of leaving the space for even a few minutes, of stolen possessions, and indignities of being roused awake.

Next up, 17 unhoused or formerly unhoused *City Reach* staff led us on an eye-opening tour of the night-scape of homelessness around Boston Commons, through the lens of their first-person experiences. They interacted with folks on the street, shepherded their charges from dangerous situations, explained what we saw, and pointed out what we didn't. That night, our group of over 100 youth and 20+ advisors slept (or attempted to sleep) on the cold marble floor of St. Paul's Cathedral while our hosts found shelter in doorways, missions, parks, wakened wandering, or where they could before returning to us at 6am for the next day's lessons. We began with use of the church bathrooms (of which several stalls had backed up), quick dressing, breakfast together, and morning prayers; afterwards we worked together to set up donated food and giveaway items before opening the doors to over 200 guests. For the next three hours, program participants served donated food and drink, or distributed clothing, bags and luggage, and toiletries to the mission's guests, all the while interacting, laughing, and building connections.



It was a profoundly moving experience for all of us. We have some ideas for sharing the experience with the Follen community and helping move hearts in the direction of compassion as we live out our values as Unitarian Universalists. Watch for more in the latter part of the church year.

Many thanks to the Brown Fund for their generous contribution in subsidizing this experience.

Beryl Aschenberg,
Director of Religious Education
March 10, 2019



What I realized at City Reach was that people have this amazing ability to find joy in even the most unfortunate circumstances. When the people of Boston's homeless community can't rely on their government to help them, or even people to look at them on the street, they turn to each other for support. The people I met were so full of life and eager to connect with me. They have so much to contribute to this world, and we can all learn from their perspectives.
~Jacob



City Reach was an eye-opening experience for me. I loved meeting Anna and Robert and learning their stories along with that of the rest of the City Reach staff. Handing out hoodies and sweaters on Saturday morning not only made me feel warm inside, but also helped put a smile on 200 other faces!
~Annika

Dear universe, thank you for the opportunity to make connections with the guests and city reach staff we met this weekend.

We pray together not as individuals, but as a community striving to give joy and hope to our fellow homeless people, and welcome them as we would anyone else, we are all part of the same community.

Thank you so much for compassionate people like the ones we met this weekend on the staff and the other volunteers and the guests!

I forgive you for taking 3 t-shirts.

God, may toothpaste, backpacks, shoes and bags- simple things that clutter our houses become a blessing in the hands of another.

Nobody slept but the five people snoring.

Amen.

Saturday, March 9th

City Reach showed me the purist nature of humanity I've seen. I saw comradery, friendship, hardship, and trauma. Above all, I saw people that truly cared for each other. I believe that City Reach serves as an example of how we should care for each other. It was difficult to see so many people struggling to just get by, but it gave me hope for the change we can make if we stop to



care for each other on their terms, leaving our judgment at the door. ~lan

City Reach helped me break down many of the stereotypes I held about homeless people. It also showed me how easy it is to lose housing, but how difficult it can be to gain it back. It was probably the most impactful experience I have had in FUUY. ~Jessie

City Reach is always such an eye-opening and perspective enhancing experience. It highlights the randomness of homelessness that is almost never, ever acknowledged. It can affect anyone in the blink of an eye. The people that I had the opportunity to talk to who either have experienced or are experiencing homelessness taught me the necessity of reliability, trust, and camaraderie. Hearing the stories of the people from City Reach is an utterly priceless experience that builds true empathy and humanity. ~ Venice

*I learned many invaluable lessons during my time at city reach. Homeless people are usually disregarded and labeled as drug abusers, when in fact many were forced onto the street by other circumstances. People can lose everything so easily and they don't realize it until it's all gone. Every single person I met had a different, bubbly, and amazing personality despite all the struggles they have endured. People without homes are some of the strongest beings I've met. I wouldn't trade this experience for the world
~ Jacqueline*

*For me, the experience that City Reach provided evoked the "inherent worth and dignity of each person," irrespective of your economic background. My UU faith calls me to seek experiences similar to that offered by CityReach, the Common Cathedral staff, and the entire Greater Boston homeless community.
~ Grace*