



On October 5, 2006, Charlotte Courage, Mark Griffin and Lesley Bishop, spent 24 hours on the streets of St. John's to get a first-hand look at the reality of homelessness. The three social work students hit the streets with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Their goal was to find food and shelter.

Here are excerpts from their account of that autumn day:

Lesley: *It's another dull Thursday morning... Shortly myself and two others will begin our transformation from social work students to homeless people...*

Mark: *I walk into the doors of the food bank and see the stack of numbers on a peg. The number 12 lies on the top of the stack. "My god," I think to myself. The food bank has only been opened for ten minutes and eleven people have already been here...*

Lesley: *I always understood the concept of the 'working poor' but in the food bank waiting room it suddenly becomes very clear: the people we see here are just like us. They aren't dirty, or "crazy." Just "normal" people in need...*

Lesley: *Now the realization that we have no place to go is beginning to sink in... People are in cars going places, catching the bus. We are just watching...*

Charlotte: *The rain pounds the pavement as our feet move silently. We hum "The Littlest Hobo" theme song. We all smile. Somehow the human spirit prevails.*

Lesley: *We meet up with Street Reach just after eight. A worker boils the kettle and matches up knitted mittens and hats for us. Such kindness after the day's events proved overwhelming.*

Charlotte: *We run to the outreach van and I can't stop shaking. I look into the face of a man who is*

also in line. He is alone with the exception of his shopping cart. I begin to cry... As we walk back up the hill to Choices for Youth I am shaking so bad that I can't drink my hot chocolate.

Lesley: *Street Reach gives us what we have been chasing all day—an information card listing services and phone numbers.... She also directs us back to Choices for Youth to eat and dry our clothes...*

Charlotte: *As I walk into Choices I see it from a new angle... We relax in the chairs. I realize how valuable a service Choices provides. We call around to the shelters. There is only one bed left in the entire city.*

Mark: *Later that night, [we sit] against a wall on Water Street with a paper cup and a sign saying that we are homeless. No one leaves a cent... I realize now that when the people walk by... we are being ignored in the worst possible sense... suddenly I am the wall on which I lean, something to be walked past, unnoticed. We are [as much a] part of the downtown scenery as the jaywalkers or streetlights. I want to stand up and ask if anyone sees me.*

Charlotte: *We don't know where to sleep. We need somewhere safe. We find park benches. The wind from the ocean is biting but it is spacious and no one can see us from the road. I sleep with my glasses on because I can't chance being taken by surprise.*

Mark: *I am so uncomfortable. I am exposed to the elements and the people passing by... Every foot-*

step on the gravel around me rings in my ears. I begin to doubt the good nature of people. What if someone sees our backpack and tries to take it? I feel very responsible for Charlotte and Lesley...

Lesley: *It would be safe to say that by 4 in the morning I am questioning every decision I ever made in my life that led me to this park bench with a layer of frost over me... I am awakened by the glare of car lights...*

Mark: *I want to get up and leave... Out of all of the reasons I come up with in my freezing, tired mind, one inexorable fact remains. Real homeless people don't have the choice to get up and go. There are real homeless people sleeping outside tonight. I saw someone in a sleeping bag outside earlier...*

Lesley: *Shame is another reality... Even though I know better, I feel judged... I can't meet people in the eyes. I yearn for the warmth and safety that the morning will bring...*

Mark: *I made it through the night... unharmed, but definitely changed. I experienced a glimpse into what it means to be homeless, a fraction of the struggles that people have to go through, and I could barely do it...*

Charlotte: *Finally it is time to go back... to Choices and debrief about our life-changing 24 hours on the street. I will never let go of this newfound resolve. I will make a difference, and I will never walk past a person in need without saying hello. I have been changed. ■*