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Recently, I interviewed a young woman whose name I choose not to disclose. She is 19, from Chicago, and a very close friend of mine. Sometimes in life you take a lot of the simple things for granted until you find out that others are suffering in the same areas, and that’s exactly what happened in this case. According to the Statistic Brain, there are 1,750,000 homeless people in the US. (Statistic Brain 1) In knowing this, I never thought one of my closest friends could possibly fall into this number. Usually we think of homeless people as the old people on the corner with cups, smell bad and sit around waiting for change. I would never have thought that a young 16 or 17 girl who had no control over the finances of her parents could be looked at this same way. Would she even be able to finish school? Would this be the end of our friendship? How could she even eat? As crazy as these questions sounded, they are reasonable to ask when being told that you could possibly be homeless.

When it came time to interview her about this experience, I didn’t know what to expect. Although I had known all about it, it’s a lot of pressure for someone to answer consecutive questions about such sensitive topics. I wanted to get the best possible answers out of her without making her uncomfortable. I figured she would be a little shy at first, knowing that other people would know about this interview. I also figured that as the interview went on she would open up more and more. My biggest challenge would be getting her to give a fair balance of what went on and how she dealt with it all. Although the situation was a bit of a past thing, people never lose emotions for the situations in their lives that caused them the most harm and challenged them the most emotionally. What one may see as not a big deal, someone else may see as life changing. Personally, this is a topic I misunderstood and underestimated before I knew someone personally that went through it.

After we sat down and began the interview, she began to tell me stories about how things fell apart. Her family had moved from Indiana to Chicago in attempts for a better life. They figured if they moved to Chicago a lot of their problems would be solved, as Indiana wasn’t the best place for them at the time. After all, when a family has a situation that turns sour, it can sometimes be a great idea to resort to new scenery for better fortunes. Her family had moved to Chicago just in time for her to start high school. Coming into a new city, attending a new school, and being around new people could be great, but if things didn’t end up going as planned, this entire thing could end pretty badly. After all, Chicago is a huge city that’s not always easy to succeed in and fit into. Financially, things are very expensive and it’s not cheap to live in a city like Chicago. With it being such a huge city, there’s so many people fighting for jobs and striving to be successful that often times people who work very hard still get left out. Unemployment rates soar, placing many hard working families in unfortunate situations.

She explained to me how after about 2 years of living in Chicago, things began to head south for her and her family. Although school wasn’t a huge problem for her, her family was struggling financially and it wasn’t going to get better any time soon. In her words, “I had never faced so much adversity and stress in my life before. It was like nothing I had ever experienced. It seemed like it got worse every single day. At this point, I had no clue that it’d get as bad as it did later on. This was only the beginning.” The emotion across her face in her voice said it all. It was evident that she was starting to have the same feelings she had when these events first occurred. Her and her family were soon forced move to different parts of Chicago over the course of 3 years. They hadn’t spent more than 7 or 8 months at any of the new places they were moving to. The stay in Chicago began to look more like a failure as each day passed.

After a few new homes and new schools, the family’s financial problems were finally starting to hit rock bottom. In her words, “There was almost nothing left we could do. It got to a point where we barely had food to eat each night. We had cars we couldn’t afford to put gas in. We had big flat screen TVs for years that we couldn’t even watch cable on now.” Now on their last wits, she and her family were forced to move again, but something was different this time: they had nowhere to move to. They couldn’t afford to move anywhere. Being on the verge of being homeless was like no other feeling this young girl had felt. Most people these ages don’t usually have to go through something this heavy, but in her words, “The best way for me to get through things was telling myself every day that I was at least still alive. Not knowing where I was going to live was one burden, but one thing that I had to understand was that there was someone out there who had a situation worse than mine. I looked at the bright side and saw that I was young and that everything could get better without completely defeating me.” This was a pretty strong mindset for a 17 year old girl to have.

She explained to me stories of how her and her mom had been forced to start buying all of their clothes at thrift stores. It had been years since they were able to shop somewhere other than a thrift store or Goodwill. They had to make meals out of almost nothing, and had to make food last for weeks at a time. With an elaborate voice she told me, “We almost couldn’t even afford McDonald’s! Imagine that! It was one of the most embarrassing things of life to wake up every day and go home at night knowing you can barely afford McDonald’s!” Although she and I shared a laugh after this, there was no comedy in the harsh reality of it. I sat and tried to think of a lot of the problems I had encountered in the last few years of my life and none of them compared to her problems even a bit. I began to ask myself why I complain about so many of the small things in life. I asked myself why I take a lot of the blessings in my life for granted. At the end of the day I can at least say I have shelter and food to eat. Not everyone has that privilege. Knowing that there are people in the world who don’t even know where they’re going to live the next day makes everything in my life seem minimal. As humans we should all be appreciating what we have rather than complaining about what we don’t. Too often we get caught up in not paying attention to the beautiful things life has to offer. There’s a lot in the world to appreciate, and more time should be spent doing so.

Eventually, better fortunes came along for she and her family, and they now have a settled situation. She explained that Chicago had been treating them well as of late, and she feels like they’ve finally accomplished what they left Indiana for. This was all they had dreamed of: a comfortable life that wasn’t haunted by financial troubles. During our interview one of the best things she told me was “Money shouldn’t determine the happiness in our lives. Unfortunately, though, you also can’t survive without money. It’s a horrible feeling for money to control how happy you are in life, and the day I decided to focus on life and not the drama that came with it, everything seemed to magically get better.”

I told her how much of an inspiration she was to my life. To see someone placed in such bad positions and never allow it to phase them taught me the true meaning of being mentally strong. She’s one of the strongest and most determined people I’ve met in my life. Although I never tell people in-depth details of her situation, I make sure to let people know of it to teach them lessons about better ways to live their lives. Bringing happiness to your life on your own will is a special thing, and not many people can accomplish it. Nothing should be able to control your everyday smiles besides you. Next time you’re feeling down about different things, remember that there’s someone in the world who has it worse than you do. Remember that while there’s something that you don’t have that someone else does, the same applies in reverse.

WORKS CITED

["Homelessness / Poverty Stats." *Statistic Brain RSS*. N.p., 28 July 2013. Web. 19 Mar. 2014.](http://www.bibme.org/)