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Charlene Carruthers and Marcus Mitchell Discuss Study on Homelessness

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A group of students at Bloomington's Illinois Wesleyan University recently found homelessness is a much bigger problem in the community than many people realize.

WGLT's Jim Browne has more on the Wesleyan project, and it's surprising statistics:

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Jim Browne: Thirteen Wesleyan students tackled the issue of homelessness for their summer enrichment program designed to enhance their personal and professional development, as well as improve the university and or the community. Charlene Carruthers, a senior in History and International Studies, and **Marcus Mitchell**, an English-Lit sophomore, said they used a few different sources to peg the number of homeless in the community at an eye-opening 1800.

Marcus Mitchell: We researched information from the Department of Housing and Urban Development as well as the United States Census Bureau. They had quite a few statistics listed for Illinois as well as nationwide.

Jim Browne: 1800, I found that to be a shockingly high number. Charlene, were you shocked at that number when you got that information?

Charlene Carruthers: I wasn't shocked because, since I've been a student here in Bloomington, I've seen the homeless population grow and I volunteered at a number of places that actually address this issue, so I've always known that there has been this volume of homeless people here in this community.

Jim Browne: Marcus, how do you define homelessness?

Marcus Mitchell: I define homelessness as lacking a fixed, regular income, not having a permanent residence to rest your head at night, not having a place to store your personal items.

Jim Browne: How many homeless families in all are there in our community?

Marcus Mitchell: Based on information I gathered from Home Sweet Home Ministries as well as directors of some of the other organizations in our area, roughly 90 to 100 families were served within the past year.

Jim Browne: Your research turns up a lot of people that have mental problems, drug abuse problems, how often do you find that people have a combination?

Marcus Mitchell: We weren't able to gather a specific number on how often. We find this occurrence, however, just from our experience at Home Sweet Home and some of the other organizations we volunteered at. Quite a few of the individuals we came in contact with either have some kind of mental disability, have or have had a drug issue, and so I assume it occurs frequently.

Jim Browne: What kind of an event in these peoples' lives has caused them to become homeless?

Marcus Mitchell: One of the most common events is sudden loss of a job. Quite a few individuals were working minimum wage, struggling to afford just a one-bedroom apartment and after a while, that struggle has become too difficult for a lot of these individuals and also like a lot of individuals might have lost their home in a fire, some kind of natural disaster of some sort just completely turns their life upside-down.

Jim Browne: Charlene, in your conversation with homeless residents because you volunteer for some agencies here in the community, were there any common elements in the stories and the histories that they told you?

Charlene Carruthers: There are some common elements—loss of job, there also can be death in the family. If your primary provider dies, then that's your primary source of income and you may just be on the streets. Spontaneous events—something that is totally unexpected and that's how we know that it could happen to anyone. Basically, that was the common thread throughout all the stories.

Jim Browne: Marcus, what surprised you most about this program?

Marcus Mitchell: I just find it really profound how close to us this issue is. You can go in downtown Bloomington by the U.S. Cellular Coliseum, you can go to the local McDonald's and if you look very closely, you will see these individuals roaming the streets, walking up and down Main Street. You'll see tent cities in random locations. You'll see sleeping bags and other items right outside U.S. Cellular Coliseum and on the sides of churches. These individuals are everywhere.

Jim Browne: Do you think you could spot a homeless person more easily, more readily than before?

Marcus Mitchell: Actually, I think no. I think a lot of us had the misconception that homeless individuals wore ragged clothing and, you know, kind of had a certain appearance. We learned through this project that they don't. Many of them are trying their best to get back into the job force. Many of them are making good use of the services available—resume-building, job-counseling. They come in many—

Jim Browne: So our stereotypes are wrong.

Marcus Mitchell: They are, they are.

Jim Browne: What surprised you most about the program, Charlene?

Charlene Carruthers: There are people with master degrees, doctorates that may stay in Safe Harbor and you would never know that they're homeless. You may see them on the bus one day and then you may volunteer at one of the agencies and then see them there. And the second thing that surprised me is that most people in this community don't know that it even exists and we saw that at the end of our presentation. A lot of the people who were there were shocked at the numbers we gave them, at the facts that we gave them.

Jim Browne: Do you think that people are just sort of not seeing it on purpose or are they just simply oblivious?

Charlene Carruthers: It may be a mixture of both. One, because you can't always tell who is homeless by looking at them and two, you may see a person going through our campus, which I've seen a number of times with a cart full of their things and their belongings, and just, you know, we firmly believe that awareness is the first step in a solution to homelessness and that's why we created a pamphlet about homelessness awareness that will be distributed throughout the community.

Jim Browne: Charlene Carruthers and Marcus Mitchell say the homeless population in Bloomington-Normal also face challenges you might not think of including health difficulties. Carruthers says AIDS can be a challenge for the homeless because they lack resources and educational information about HIV transmission. Their summer enrichment program wrapped up Friday. I'm Jim Browne, WGLT News.