I am not quite sure what I was expecting from the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) Faces Panel, but whatever my hopes may have been, what I experienced with the speakers far exceeded anything I could have imagined. We walked into the office and were greeted by Michael Stoops, the director of NCH. The blankets composed of t-shirts advocating homelessness awareness immediately caught my eye. I studied them while I waited for the speakers to begin, nervously anticipating what was to come.

Our first presenter, George, talked of his life growing up in the foster program. George became an emancipated minor at the age of sixteen due to his refusal to attend school. He then turned to a life on the streets, migrating from Long Island to Florida in search of warmer weather. George eventually decided to make his way to D.C. but was forced to stop for the night in Baltimore, Maryland. It was here that he suffered from his first seizure and was hospitalized for three days. The doctors at the hospital diagnosed him with epilepsy, wrote him a prescription, and sent him on his way. George claims that the doctors were not concerned with his condition because they knew he was homeless. George’s struggle with epilepsy had a significant effect on me because one of my best friends suffers from the disease and I have witnessed her epileptic fits first hand. I cannot imagine how the doctors could deny someone who was in desperate need of their help just because that person happened to lack a home. Once George finally made it to D.C., he became involved in programs including the Friendship Place and the Anne Frank House, a service which allowed him to procure the studio apartment in which he currently resides.

The next speaker, David, represented a different face of homelessness. He grew up in a nice home in Fort Washington, Maryland and experienced a comfortable youth. His girlfriend became pregnant when the two were only seventeen years old, leading the couple to drop out of high school in spite of David’s dream to be the first in his family to attend college. David and his girlfriend wanted to try to make their independent family work, refusing offers of assistance from their parents. David procured entry level work as a speaker and a deliveryman. However, after suffering from a heart attack and a stroke, David was left with a speech impediment and trouble walking that left him unable to work. This led David to a life on the streets. David spoke about his struggle with alcoholism and depression. Currently, David has published a book of poetry and is also involved in the Anne Frank House service, living in an apartment in close proximity to George.

The third speaker, Jackie, most definitely seemed to have the biggest impact on the group. Jackie grew up in a privileged lifestyle in South Carolina. Her family was well-off and had superior connections within society, though Jackie herself described them as “uppity” and “arrogant”. She attended an elite college for African American women and graduated with a degree in the performing arts. Jackie married a young man she claims to have been “madly in love” with at a very young age, something she cautions against. She had a hard time dealing with her husband’s busy life as an officer in the Marine Corp and decided that divorce was the best option for her. Jackie left her husband and three children behind and made her way to D.C. to live with her aunt. Following a long struggle in the job market, Jackie’s aunt suggested that she should return to school. Jackie received her master’s degree for George Washington University and began work in special education. Jackie recalled an experience during with she burst into tears at the sight of a twelve-year-old pregnant child. Jackie spent some time living off of her life savings due to her decision to do self-contracting work for which she was not paid. Jackie was kicked out of her apartment and spent several nights on the street before she was taken to a group home. Jackie became a director of a program for the mentally ill at the group home; however, Jackie decided to leave because she was severely underpaid and was essentially a slave to her boss. Jackie currently resides in a shelter in D.C., where she has been for over six months.

Jackie was an excellent speaker. The manner in which she spoke effectively drew the listener into her story and made the audience actively engaged. Jackie pointed out that when the class entered, everyone greeted Michael yet ignored her, though she was quite obviously sitting in the corner of the room. Though she did not intend to make us feel bad, she definitely accomplished this. My eyes immediately brimmed with tear when she explained how this hurt her. I was raised to always be polite and greet people, yet I had just passed right by this woman. Why I did so I cannot explain but I can be sure that this sort of issue will not occur in the future. Jackie also spoke about how she discovered that her mother had passed away via email. When she attended the funeral, other attendees did not even realize she was the daughter of the deceased or ignored her or tried to dissuade her from speaking about her condition. I cannot imagine the horror of this situation. I truly believe that I had so much to learn from Jackie.

In addition to the three speakers, another man named Gerard sat in the panel. Gerard is in training to join the speakers’ bureau and shared bits of his story with us. Gerard also affected me because he is a Vietnam veteran. I have always found it exceedingly awful that we allow these men and women who have sacrificed their lives for our country to live on the streets. Gerard encouraged us “never to lose our humanity”. This is a piece of advice I will continue to carry with me.

As I listened to the speakers, I felt myself so involved in their stories that I began to cry, quite uncontrollably may I add. Embarrassed, I looked around to find that many of my fellow classmates were experiencing the same reaction. I was glad to see that the speakers were having such a profound effect on myself and my peers. This gives me hope that we will be inspired to make a difference and do all that we can to help those who are less fortunate than ourselves.