Maria Lombardi: Night Duty

Before embarking on our trip to Washington D.C., each person in our seminar had to sign up for some activity that they were going to participate in at N Street Shelter. I was lucky enough to get my first choice: Night Duty. I can honestly say that the experience I gained during these few hours will last me for the rest of my life and I hope that my retelling will somewhat convey what I experienced.

Shannon Russell and I went up to the shelter at 8:45p.m. When we arrived upstairs, we went through all the necessary paperwork, routines, and received a basic overview of what we were expected to be doing while there. After that, we were pretty much left to our own devices and we went and sat down in the common room. The woman who was there was crocheting a spider for the shelter decorations for Halloween. She was one of the nicest people ever and we spent some time making small talk. Another woman noticed the writing on my arm (Binglei had written my name in Chinese and Annie had written my name in Arabic). She informed us that she had studied at an American University in Cairo for two years and knew Arabic. She was very interested in discussing what Shannon and I wanted to do in life and wished us the best luck. Shannon and I also began discoursing with another woman named Rhonda. Rhonda had also noticed the writing on my arm and it turned out that she knew what the Chinese meant. Rhonda had graduated from Lincoln University and spent a semester abroad in Taiwan, which is where she practiced Chinese. Rhonda explained what each character meant and differences between shortened forms of Chinese and full versions. She was curious about my studies in Italian and had me teach her a few phrases. We also discussed how she used to be a Head Start teacher and now tutors privately since she lost her job. Another remarkable woman Shannon and I had the pleasure of meeting had an amazing story. She had moved to D.C. to work for a nonprofit until she was laid off because of the economy. The women then educated Shannon and I on different aspects of D.C. and shelter life, ranging from Health Care coverage and policies in shelters. During this time we also watched several television shows with the women and just hung out until it was time for bed at 11:00p.m.

In the morning, Shannon and I woke up at 5:50a.m. in order to wake up all the women at 6:00a.m. We had to knock on every dormitory door and announce the time at 6:00a.m., 6:15a.m., 6:30a.m., 7:00a.m. (at this time we also announced that the women could start coming to take their medications), 7:15a.m., and 7:30a.m. (the time that every woman had to be out of the shelter by). Also contrary to popular belief, most of the women were not on medications. Several were diabetic and others just took vitamins. One of the women appeared frustrated and discouraged when we interacted with her. She confided in us that shelter life is one of the hardest things ever and no one understands what they go through. Another woman even said to us that she could not comprehend why we were made to announce the time when the women could take medications, seeing as how they took them at the same time everyday without variation. Yet another resident of the shelter informed Shannon and I that she was in school and had two children in college, one at the University of Maryland. Her dream is to write a novel on her experience being homeless. I hope that she will get that opportunity.

The shelter was definitely eye opening. I wanted to share accounts of the women because of the impact they had on me and also for what they signify. Several of the women have college educations, one worked for a nonprofit trying to help homeless people before she herself became homeless, and others have dreams and aspirations for their lives. I hope that this dispels many people’s notions that homeless people deserve the situation that they are in and that all of them are addicts or crazy. These women were some of the kindest, funniest, insightful, intelligent, and caring people I have had the opportunity to meet. Although they did not have much, they were willing to share anything with Shannon and I, even though we have considerably much more than them. The women are victims of circumstance, and of a society that (on a whole) is not willing enough to help out their fellow citizens. It is so inspiring to see that although these women get judged every single day by people who have preconceived notions of who they are, they can still remain so caring. I hope that one day I can be even half the woman that some of them are.

Earlier on in the week we visited the National Coalition for the Homeless. While there, we heard from a panel of homeless people. They instilled upon us the importance of recognizing the homeless with something just as simple as a hello. I really took the lesson to heart and every time I entered Luther Place, I chatted with the women from the shelter who were hanging out on the steps. When I did night duty, one of the women came up to me and expressed how nice it was to see me again. At first I was confused because I could not remember her, but then I understood. She was one of the women I had said hi to and expressed to her my liking for her journal. It really hit me then that these women I was talking to were so overlooked in their everyday lives. It made me want to cry. This idea was also reinforced when the woman who had been crocheting the spider told Shannon and I how wonderful it was that we had volunteered and that we were great girls. So, I would encourage you, the reader, to start adapting your everyday interactions with people, whether they are homeless or not. I would also advise you that if you have the opportunity, you should volunteer to work with the homeless in some aspect. It does not necessarily have to be doing night duty at a shelter but can be anything you are interested in. It is important that society does not dehumanize the homeless and remember that they are someone’s aunt, grandmother, husband, wife, or child. I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to go on this trip.