Day 4- David Hilfiker

David Hilfiker, in many of my classmate’s minds, was the true “rock star” of homeless writing. As he was preparing to leave the hostel, everyone crowded around for autographs in their personal copies of his book and perhaps a few pictures. Not only was David personable, genuine, modest and passionate, but he was a heartwarming figure in the face of poverty medicine through his stories. It was wonderful that instead of listening to a prepared hour long lecture about his book that the majority of us had already read, he let us ask him in depth questions about the hardships of poverty medicine and being in such close quarters to his patients, and he left nothing secret. He opened up and instantly captured everyone’s hearts when he spoke of his multiple “burnouts,” and the close encounters he faced in the inner-city which seemed so far from his past rural roots. When asked about his predictions for the future homeless problem in the future as the economy continues to spiral out of control, he was quite optimistic. He saw this more as an opportunity for reform than a major crisis. This kind of serious honesty was what made him so interesting- he was real and he wasn’t afraid to speak the truth- he strongly believed in every word he said and we wanted to agree with him regardless of the topic. In 1985, David created the Christ House for sick and injured men seeking a safe place for recuperation in times of vulnerability. This revolutionary idea helped thousands of homeless men over the years get back on track when they could not receive the help they needed elsewhere. It was inspiring to hear firsthand just how far his commitment to the health of the homeless population stretched, and how time after time he never gave up on those who he knew would continually fail. David also spoke about the harsh realities that his job ultimately imposed upon him- the divorce of his wife, and his retirement of medicine due to heavy depression. It was as though David was a survivor in the war of the streets and the personal struggle to fulfill his passion but give his family the attention they needed.

Of all the speakers we met on this four day long journey through the dark side of the DC streets, Hilfiker really brought our experiences to life. Speaking to different homeless persons can give you a good idea of life on the streets, but it is not until you devote your life to helping these people that you experience the full spectrum of homeless hardships. He experienced the extremes of working with homeless people that most volunteers and shelter managers only hear about. No matter how serious and dangerous his line of work became, he never quit. It is this undying love David exemplifies that makes the communities he visits want to help in his fight for universal medical care. Through talking with Dr. Hilfiker, I have discovered the difficulties for the homeless population to receive adequate medical assistance. Before this I believed that the homeless had many more options in front of them, but as it turns out not all is at it seems. This down and out group of people has become trapped in a life of poverty with what looks like no way out. It is through only medical treatment and rehabilitation that they can hope to escape this terrible fate. Until then, they must mange on their own getting by through only the help of kindhearted people such as Dr. Hilfiker.