

No one chooses to be homeless

By

Bandi Mbubi

Campaigns Worker



Many years ago, my predecessor, Ian Harker, told me that no one chooses to become homeless, even when on the surface it appears that they have chosen to lead a life on the streets. My own observations during the time I have worked with rough sleepers have largely confirmed this claim. I have yet to meet someone who makes me think that they really would rather live on the streets than any other place.

I held this belief unshaken until I met Michael who appeared at first to disprove this theory. Michael seemed happy living in a tent somewhere on the outskirts of London. He did not drink or smoke and did not take any drugs to make me think that such dependencies may have impaired his judgement. Often, when people are dependent on alcohol and drugs or are affected by some mental health problems, they may act in inappropriate ways which can be potentially harmful to them and other people. But I could not say this of him. He was clean, considerate, minded his own business and made friends very easily. I was won by his charm, but he remained somehow reserved towards me to the extent that I did not really get to know him.

I had many questions in my mind. What has led him to where he was? By observing him, I guessed that he was in his late fifties, but I could not tell whether for instance he was ever married? Did he have any children? Surely there must have been reasons that led him to set up a tent by the River Thames, what were they? This curiosity was just a human need to want to know, but also a concern I had for him, in the same way other people who met him had for him. I offered to help initially, but to no avail, as my many offers were met by a firm “no thank you, I am happy where I am, really”. I continued to offer to help for almost two years but without any success.

This article is not about the questions I had, some of which have remained unanswered to this day. It is about offering you a glimpse of my encounter with one of our service-user, whilst trying to make sense of the claim that ‘no one, in their right mind, chooses to be homeless’.

One day I walked into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea, to ready myself for a long day’s work. I came into the kitchen as Irena, our cook, and two of our dedicated volunteers, Abigail and Jackie, were having a conversation with Michael. He had been experiencing some difficulties caused by a small group of people who had set up a tent near his own tent. The local authority and the police were concerned that this could turn into a local trend with many other people joining in this alternative lifestyle. The authorities spoke to them all in no uncertain terms, informing them that they needed to fold their tents and leave the area. As these wise women were discussing this matter with him, I did not intervene; feeling redundant in their effort to encourage Michael to consider that now may be a good time for him to look for more settled accommodation.

Well I witnessed them using a fascinating combination of tact, forcefulness, encouragement, and gentleness; all mixed into one, to persuade Michael that he should consider making some serious changes in his life and possibly adopt a more conventional lifestyle. They had a no nonsense approach. When Michael agreed, they looked at me, from where I was standing right in the kitchen corner, and all said in unison that he needed to see me to work out a plan of action to get him accommodated. I obliged.

Invariably, the first thing to do when working towards getting someone accommodated is to help them apply for welfare benefits which is usually the condition for getting housing benefits. Michael was not on benefits at the time and we needed to help him apply for Jobseekers Allowance. But before we could do that, we also needed to get some forms of identification. In his case, we applied for a birth certificate, which took about a week to be issued. Thankfully for him, a local night shelter we have assisted in setting up, the ROBES Project, took him in whilst we were getting him sorted for more permanent accommodation.

As we got to know each other more, he opened up to me and he told me more about his previous situation; it is then that I realised that his case had not proved my theory wrong, I just had wrong assumptions. I had assumed that because he did not abuse alcohol and was not dependent

on any other substance, that perhaps he could indeed be said to have chosen to lead this alternative lifestyle. He looked so happy staying in the tent, how was I to say that he did not really choose to be homeless.

It transpired however, that prior to setting up his tent to live in the open air, he had stayed in a hostel but he had been harassed by a fellow resident and could not take it anymore, so he left.

He had felt it was better to live in a tent than in a hostel where he was being harassed. This fear, in all likelihood was what led him to adopt this lifestyle. It was not just the pure joy of living in a tent that attracted him to this lifestyle.

I checked the records on a special internet-based database, known as CHAIN, to work

out his housing history. I learned much the same of what he told me. From the entries on the system, I further learn that he was twice promised a flat, but at the last minute, the offers were withdrawn without any meaningful explanation. The workers involved expressed their frustrations about the disappointment they felt about the situation. I felt that the system had let him down. As many people who work with vulnerable adults feel, I became very protective, perhaps overprotective. I felt that he could not be placed in just any hostel due to this history. I was choosy about my referrals to hostels.

In the end, a particular St Mungo's hostel turned out to be the ideal place for him. It catered for over 50s who did not have severe dependency problems. On our way to the assessment interview for this hostel vacancy, I wanted to lower his expectations and said to him that he

should not feel too disappointed if for whatever reason he was not accommodated. He looked at me straight in the eye and said, "they are going to give me a room tonight", with a lot of conviction. He was right; he was given a room the same day. I felt like doubting Thomas in the face of his regained faith in himself and in humanity generally. Indeed, the workers at the hostel were really supportive and helped me too in regaining some of the faith I had lost. The

system was not all that bad; it sometimes just needed people to work it out.

Michael has continued to stay at the hostel for the last few months and goes on weekend camping trips once in a while, with his tent. He continues to receive further



Abigail, Jackie, Rose, Irena & Anna

support from the Manna and is still one of our most dedicated volunteer.

All of you who support us in this great work have to rejoice in the fact that thanks to your contributions we can still make people feel that they are not a dead end, that their lives still have value. We can offer more choices than just sleeping rough, squatting or living in a tent.

If there is one thing I have learnt afresh through working with Michael, it is that there is more that meets the eye. If you bother to listen, you will always discover that I, you or Michael are not really the first impressions that we give to people. We can all get in a fix, our view narrowing, preventing us from seeing things from a different perspective. This case has reconfirmed to me that no one really chooses to be homeless, but sometimes circumstances lead us to think that it is the only option left to us.

Harassment of rough sleepers

by

Michael

(Rough sleeper)

(The diary below is from a homeless man who has been sleeping rough in the city of London for the past two years. It tells of the policing action taken against rough sleepers in the city of London since the beginning of May).

The police from the corporation of London (the financial city of London) have started to wake and harass street homeless people from their sleep in the early hours of the morning on a daily basis. All rough sleepers that I know in this area have been subjected to similar police harassment. The word vagrancy is now for the first time appearing on the "stop and search" receipt that the police give to the homeless person after he / she has been woken up and questioned.

Monday 5th May: At four am this morning I was awoken by a WPC (woman police constable) from the local police station, who informed me that during the course of this coming week I could expect my personal luggage to be "hosed down" by the city of London corporation street cleaners. As I always keep my luggage with me I can only assume that I too will be subjected to this "hosing down" by the street cleaners.

This present intimidation exercise from the city of London police force is codenamed "Operation Poncho" and is designed to reduce, or eradicate the number of homeless persons sleeping within their authoritative region. A 'not in our backyard' mentality seems to be their answer to the London homeless situation.

England is a signatory to the "European charter of human rights" which quite simply entitles European people to live their lives in peace and free from persecution and harassment. It will be interesting to see as the week progresses if these intimidation tactics that are being used by the city of London police against street homeless people are actually going to work, or whether this heavy handed policing policy will be used against people who's only crime is to be poor and living their circumstantial lifestyle in a manner that is not causing anyone any harm.

Tuesday 6th May: I was awoken by two community support officers at 21:15 (9:15 pm) and told to pack up my personal belongings and "move on".

Wednesday 7th May: Despite being told on Monday that I could expect to be woken from my sleep early every morning this week, and also to be prepared to have my personal belongings hosed down by the street cleaners nothing happened to that effect last night (Tuesday), but the week is still young as yet.

A street colleague of mine was told by the London city police that he in person could expect to get hosed down!! He got his warning on the same night as me, but I've not had contact with him today to see if this threat was followed through. I hasten to add that my colleagues and myself are always very clean and tidy and treat our sleeping places (Skippers) likewise. This is not a street cleaning exercise in the orthodox sense... this is veiled institutionalised harassment.

Thursday 8th May: At 1:50 am this morning I was woken from my sleep by a corporation of London policeman who informed me that I had to leave my regular sleeping place immediately. After he did his usual criminal record check on me and gave me the all clear receipt of such, he informed me that I had ten minutes to vacate the doorway in which I sleep.

At 2:20 am by which time I was on my feet and had my personal belongings in my rucksack, a water tanker from the corporation of London stopped outside the doorway and two workers emerged from the vehicle. They brought a ten gallon container of water with them and gave the doorway a soaking. The police officer then told me in no uncertain terms to "leave the city". This was not an orthodox cleaning exercise; the reason for the soaking was to prevent me from bedding down there again because of the wetness. On completion of his instructions, (which he took delight in doing) the police officer boarded the water bowser and it drove away.

At approx 9:15 pm I was approached by two city of London community police officers from the 'Snow hill' police station while I was in my sleeping bag in my usual place and told to move on. In a heated exchange between us I likened their policing methods to that of a "fascist state."

Saturday 10th May: 01:50 am.. Likewise, again I was awakened by a city of London (corporation of London) police officer and asked to vacate my sleeping place. Having done as the officer requested the doorway was then doused in water. There was very little conversation between the

policeman and myself except for the routine CRO (criminal record office check).

Monday 12th May: At 01:50am the police and corporation of London cleaners were back as normal. This time I was ready for them with a 'disposable camera' kindly bought for me by a lady friend. The film will be developed by a magazine that is in close contact with me and preparing a story about this harassment by the corporation of London. Also on Monday I received an email asking me if I would like a chance to meet with some officials of the corporation of London (local authority) for a talk. I declined the invitation, but said I would consider it only after this police harassing operation had ceased, but certainly not before.

Tuesday 13th May: I was woken by a street colleague at 01:30am informing me that he had just received the usual water treatment and the policeman who knows me by name told him that they would be coming to me next. (Police officers change daily for this operation as it's not a popular task for them, some of them actually apologise for having to do it). I made myself ready for their arrival, camera again at the ready, but they drove straight past me without stopping. I waited a short while and bedded down again without further disturbance.

Wednesday 14th May: At 01:30 this morning I was again subjected to the same water treatment, I was woken by a police officer and asked to pack up my personal effects and vacate the doorway in which I sleep in. Having done as requested the doorway was flushed with water and the street cleaning workmen turned their attention to another street sleeper across the road.

I photographed the 'water flushing exercise' in my doorway, (see front page) but the workmen tried to hinder me from photographing the incident on the other side of the road by driving their van between me and the victim being doused. Needless to say I got the pictures that I wanted by dodging in and out of the traffic and both of them losing sight of me momentarily. After this morning's incident had passed, I again settled down in the doorway (by now dry) to sleep without further disturbance.

Thursday 15th May: 01:30 am... Similar tactics were deployed re: Operation Poncho. The dousing of my sleeping place with water continues. A general press release is being prepared for distribution, and a national TV company is already interested in this harassment exercise by the real villains of the piece as exposed above. Legal

proceedings are still being explored by those of us that are being subjected to this institutionalised harassment which amounts to violation of our human rights.

Friday 16th May: My wake up call came at 03:35am this morning courtesy of the city Police. The same procedure, which has now become a routine. I got up, collected my belongings together and my bedroom was again flooded with water from a ten gallon container by a workman from the Corporation of London.

Saturday 17th May: The morning brought this Aqua exercise to my sleeping quarters yet again.

Operation Poncho is ongoing and the visitations are regular.

Monday 19th May: The intruders were at my door at 02:00 am, they did their business .. I had a few kind words with them (very politely) and they left very agitated. I also thanked them before they departed.

Tuesday 20th May: This morning's episode of Operation Poncho which arrived at my doorway at 01:40am with the water treatment / harassment that I have now become accustomed to.

Wednesday 21st May: This morning's early call was at 01:30am it was the usual routine of getting me up and checking to see if I was wanted by the police or courts. (Criminal record check or, CRO Criminal Record Office) After the water operation I bedded down as usual.

Thursday 22nd May: This morning's arrival of the corporation cleaners was at 03:45am. On this occasion there were two vehicles, four corporation cleaners and two police officers in attendance. The wetting down of my sleeping place was again conducted by the corporation cleaners.

Operation Poncho is ongoing. I am compiling this record of the ongoing events of operation Poncho with a view of taking legal advice and possible action against the various agencies from the Corporation of London.



Memories of a volunteer (1984 – 2008)

**By
Rose Ablett**

Longest serving volunteer



So many changes have I seen since coming to the Manna Centre as a volunteer in 1984. So many years ago that I can hardly believe it myself as to how it has grown and streamlined.

My first hearing of the Manna was in church asking for volunteers. Four times or more did I go and stand outside and told myself that I could not work there until one day I was asked by my now good friend, Nannette to come inside and look around and so I did and hence my stay.

In the early days bread was collected from a place in Bermondsey Street, a helper and my self would sometimes collect it in some kind of a barrow. These days it is collected by Pat Flood in the white and blue van stating what the Manna is and what it does. In the beginning the kitchen consisted of a small oven, a rickety old table for a counter and the cook was Jim. He would be in charge of the soup making, even though he would sit on a chair with his foot up on the table and smoking his pipe, the warming soup would always be ready on time. The washing –up was done in a small like cubby hole which allowed only one person (me) inside. The person who dried-up had to stand outside to put the mugs on yet another rickety old table. To-day's kitchen is by far larger and in line with regulations and is manned by a team of regular workers plus volunteers.

As months passed the centre was getting to be known and people were beginning to donate food and clothing. The storing and giving out of clothes began on the top floor but because it was felt that the helpers were too isolated and also in case anyone fell down the stairs, a small area was found on the ground floor and one of the daily visitors who used the Manna gave his time and expertise to build shelving and a counter which are still in use to-day.

I still work in the clothing store two mornings each week and on the last Sunday of each month along with Jackie and Pascal who are both volunteers like myself. Jackie, a volunteer for four years also works in the kitchen while Pascal who has been with us for two years does the

lifting of heavy crates of clothes and blankets as well as serving behind the counter.

One day leaving my home I started to walk to the left and then I'm sure God said no go to the right. In so doing I first met Jackie who I knew had lost two of her children in such a short time. God must have known she needed support and the chat we had in the street led to her coming along to the Manna. Our other helper Pascal was asked to lend a hand with the heavy lifting, and what a help he is.

For my last piece about the Manna and me, one of the best things is when I am in the street and one of the men from the Manna Centre greets me with a smile and yes, a kiss on my cheek. It makes what I do so worthwhile and it keeps my whole being well.

“The old Violin”

It was battered and scarred and the auctioneer thought it scarcely worth his while to waste much time on the old violin, but he held it up with a smile.

“What am I bid, good folks?” he cried. “Who’ll start the bidding for me? A guinea! A guinea! Two! Only two? Two guineas! Who’ll make it three? Three guineas once! Three guineas twice! Going for three!”

But no. From the room far back, a grey-haired man came forward and picked up the bow, then wiping the dust from the old violin and tightening the loose strings he played a melody pure and sweet, as a carolling angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer in a voice that was quiet and low, said: “What am I bid for the old violin?” and held it up with the bow.

“A thousand guineas? Who’ll make it two? Two thousand? And who’ll make it three? Three thousand once, three thousand twice, going and gone!” said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried: “We do not quite understand. What changed it’s worth?” Swift came the reply: “The touch of the Master’s hand”

And many a man with a life out of tune, and battered and scarred with sin, is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd, much like the old violin. A mess of pottage, a glass of wine, a game as he travels on, he’s going once, he’s going twice, he’s going and almost gone. But the Master comes and the foolish crowd can never quite understand the worth of a soul, and the change that’s wrought by the touch of the Master’s hand.

Ernest Longstaffe

Penny's story

By
Margaret Shapland
Welfare & Advice Worker



"If you don't run your life, somebody else will"
– John Atkinson

I started with this quotation as one thing I am always being made aware of is that for many of our clients, control over their lives can seem like a far-distant dream largely due to the maze of legal, bureaucratic and sometimes totally perverse behaviour of those exercising such powers, through which our clients have to find their way.

Part of our job here is to liberate them and empower them to take the reins in driving their life forward but they can only do this with "the knowledge" (to use London cab-driver speak) and that is where we can help by explaining their rights to them so they know how to manage better in the future – a pathway to self-determination as far as possible – and this is as important as the work we can do advocating on their behalf.

I wanted to talk about somebody we have seen in the recent past who came to us with a variety of different issues, which we had to prioritise, dealing with the most pressing one first – and to give you an idea of what can be achieved in returning control to the individual in what was just one session with Advice and Welfare staff.

Penny – three strokes and still not being cared for

Penny came to see us as she had been sleeping out having left a hostel in a neighbouring borough. She had left the hostel as she had to cross an internal garden to get to the block in which her room was situated. In recent months, a man who was rough sleeping had decided to take up residence at night in the garden jumping over the wall to gain access. He then took a perverse pleasure in jumping out and taking the all female hostel residents by surprise – not aggressively or in a predatory manner - but just being plain annoying and a bit frightening. Despite a number of requests, the hostel staff were unable to stop this happening and she left. I should add that this

lady is very petite, quite frail and felt incredibly vulnerable in this circumstance.

She had made representations to the relevant Homeless Person's Unit after she left the hostel and was told that as she had left voluntarily, she had made herself intentionally homeless – I should add that this was decided at the reception desk and not as the result of an interview by a Housing Officer.

So, she had been sleeping out for about five months and trying to get help from the various agencies; by the time she reached us, she was on a very short fuse and pretty disillusioned.

Talking to her, it was evident that on her health needs, she should be considered as being in priority need by the Homeless Person's Unit. She had suffered three strokes, the last one in 2007, suffers from claustrophobia and has an eating disorder. Since becoming homeless, her life had become increasingly chaotic and she was no longer attending appointments at her GP to get the relevant medication to help prevent further incidents of strokes nor get the protein milk-shakes (of which she needs 4 daily) to keep her weight stable, nor is she being treated by a specialist in eating disorders.

We talked through the options and although she felt equivocal about returning to the Homeless Person's Unit, we wrote an application advocating that she was regarded as priority need insisting that, due to her vulnerability, she should, at least, be placed in temporary accommodation pending further enquiries by the authority and citing the relevant passages of legislation.

She visibly brightened through the time we spent with her as she started to see a way through her immediate difficulties. We sent her to the local authority with the letter - telling her what to say if they presented problems, what to take with her, telling her to get them to call us if there were any problems as we would support her - but happily, when the Housing Officer saw the letter and listened to what she had to say - the authority took responsibility as they should have done when she first presented.

It is the start of a legal wrangle with the local authority concerned but, at least, while it is going on, Penny has a roof over her head and can start concentrating on getting her health

problems addressed. Well done to her for keeping calm and focussed in a situation which is daunting and where you can feel as a supplicant that the cards are all held by the other side.

"You must recognize that some things that are legally right are not morally right." Abraham Lincoln

We all know the saying "the law's an ass" and it is also the case that although the homeless person's unit in question may have gone part of the way in determining the legality of Penny's submission that she was vulnerable and that the local authority may have a legal duty to house her, they had not investigated properly, which should be a moral duty and they stopped short of that moral duty.

Thankfully Penny, with our help, was able to make them see the short-sightedness and the lack of justice that lay at the heart of their original decision.

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Treasurer's update

By

Tony Charlton

Treasurer



I have recently completed the accounts for the year ended 31st March 2008. Subject to audit, these show a small deficit for the year. This deficit is equal to almost two weeks' running costs. I have also recently submitted the first draft of our budget to the committee for the year ended 31st March 2009. This budget also shows a small deficit, the equivalent of one week's running costs. A shortfall over two years of three weeks' running costs is not going to cause too many problems, as we are in the fortunate position of having built up a healthy reserve.

The problem with our budget is that I have forecast that our income will go up by about 3%, roughly in line with inflation. I have done this because that is what has happened in recent years. However, many financial experts are forecasting a downturn in the economy this year and this would normally mean that less money would be donated to charities. I have chosen to ignore this fact when preparing the budget and perhaps this is a dangerous policy. For example, if income were to go down by 3% instead of going up by that amount, it would mean that over the two year period we would have a shortfall of well over one month's running costs. Again, this is something that we could cope with, but it would become a problem if that trend continued.

This is not an urgent appeal for extra funds, but it is simply a request that our donors continue to support us in the very generous way that you have done in the past and to bear in mind that we are affected by inflation just like you are.

With thanks for all your support.

I would like to donate £_____ to the Manna Centre. (Cheques payable to "The Manna Society")

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here ____ and sign below.

Signature: _____

Date: _____