

# COMMENT

## Homelessness stigma stings— even 17 years later

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### The View From Here

I'm overwhelmed by the response I've received since my stories on homelessness were published last month.

The calls, e-mails, social media commentary and face-to-face feedback far surpassed anything I've ever experienced since becoming a journalist. I'm thrilled so many people took the time to read my words and are now talking to others about this important and very real issue.

While I've long had a passion for spreading the word on humanitarian issues, there's an extra reason why these stories were so important for me to write.

Once upon a time, I was homeless too.

I was 17 years old, and life was going pretty well. I had a family who loved me, close circle of friends, nice house and good grades in school. But my parents had been struggling financially for years after the recession of the early 1990s, and on one cold winter day our world came crashing down.

We were evicted. Kicked out of the only home I'd ever known. We were given 30 minutes to gather our necessities and get out. It's a surreal moment I will never forget; one that still makes my stomach churn when I think about it.

With no family in the area and nowhere to go, we moved into a motel. I can't remember how long we lived there because it felt like time had stopped, but the four of us called that small room home until my mother was able to secure us a basement apartment.

In the meantime, we were tasked with emptying out our beloved house before it was sold. We were given a total of six hours to pack up our entire lives. Even with help, it was an almost impossible task, and some precious belongings got left behind.

My emotions during this time were all

over the map, with fear, anger, shame and sadness topping the list. I imagine others who've been or are homeless feel the same way.

I didn't want to tell anybody what had happened. I was ashamed and well aware of the negative stigma that comes along with the word "homeless."

Seventeen years later, and I fear the stigma is still quite alive and well. The fact the people I interviewed wanted their names changed to protect their identities in the stories speaks volumes. I'm sure they worried about what people would think of them or their families, and I completely understand. I did a lot of soul searching before writing this column for fear of what others might think.

While society is working hard to erase stigmas that go along with issues such as mental health, somehow we're overlooking the fact that homelessness also isn't a choice.

Nobody would ever choose to be homeless, and it can happen to anyone. All it takes is one job loss, one rent increase, one abusive situation. Yet that big societal finger pointing blame at the homeless person comes out and shames them at a time when they need more support than ever.

Imagine what the world would be like if we rallied around homeless people like we do for others who are struggling with things they didn't choose, like bullying or depression. There are certainly some organizations and people trying to do so, but sadly they're the minority.

I'll leave you with the simple yet wise words from civil rights activist Jesse Jackson: "Never look down on anybody unless you're helping them up."



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