

H O M E L E S S

for a weekend

Student recounts experiences during 24 hours of poverty

BY ERIC DICKENS
The Battalion

The transition from college student to homeless person is an abrupt one. Until you have found yourself bent over a trash can, leaning all the way to the bottom to pick up three nickels, you simply cannot understand what it is like to be homeless.

This past Friday night, while most students either partied, went to the movies or maybe even studied, I and 27 others took the opportunity to try and understand that lifestyle. We participated in "Homeless for the Weekend," an event hosted by Twin City Mission, and got a small taste of what daily life is like for the homeless. Upon meeting in the Twin City Mission chapel on Friday afternoon, we turned in all our personal belongings and traded our clothes for some donated to the mission's Community Closet.

An information sheet we received about the project said, "the life of a homeless person is filled with uncertainties and inequalities." To simulate this, event leaders handed out demerits throughout the day where students were randomly stricken with set-backs. We each found ourselves with inequalities such as blindness and illiteracy, and had to deal with them accordingly.

Then we were sent out into the world. With a mixture of emotions ranging from curiosity to uncertainty, we left the shelter in groups of four or five with the mission to collect money by any means necessary and to find a way to feed ourselves if we planned on eating before breakfast the next morning.

The self-esteem one builds up after years of striving and achieving in school and other fields can get torn down pretty quickly once you start sorting through garbage for aluminum cans. A pound of aluminum will earn someone a whole 37 cents, making each can worth a couple of pennies each. We learned to keep a constant vigil for cans, looking along every curb, in every trash can and in front of every closed door.

However, looking for cans is an easy activity compared to begging for change. If you were approached by a fellow student who asked you for a quarter to make a phone call, chances are you would give it to them. But if the same student

was dressed in donated clothes and smelling of trash, would you be as likely to help them? From many of our experiences, the answer is no. Getting people to look at you, let alone give you money is a difficult endeavor.

Most of us had found it impossible to earn enough money for one person to eat, let alone the entire group so we knocked on the backdoor of local restaurants in hopes that they would give us whatever food they were going to throw out. While begging at backdoors for leftovers we often got responses coldly saying some variation of "We don't do that here," but a handful of the local restaurants gave out food that was going to be wasted and some, like Gina's on North Bryan, even went as far as to make something new for us. This generosity was deeply appreciated, but it raised the question of whether these restaurants had been so giving because they recognized that we were not truly homeless. This thought was first brought up when one of us asked a man for some money and he gave us two dollars. When asked why he had acted so generously, he answered, "Because y'all aren't really homeless." Apparently the only way one can get sympathy for being in need is to not be in need.

Weary from a day of wandering the streets of Bryan looking for change and sympathy, the groups met that night and traded about their day's experiences. However, the relaxed mood of the meeting evaporated as Sue, a true homeless woman wandered into our meeting. Sue is a perfect example of the kind of frustration that many homeless feel when day after day they are ignored, rejected and forced to live off the scraps of humanity. Sue rebuked us as being "rich Aggies" who "don't have a clue what it's like" to be homeless and lamented on the stress she feels. Talking to Sue and listening to her troubles left us with a heart-wrenching feeling of helplessness and a bitter guilt for all the luxuries we take for granted. Hearing Sue and spending our day asking for money and help, everybody began to understand the desperation they feel everyday.

Saturday's schedule looked very similar to the day before's. After an early morning two mile walk to the recycling center to trade our accumulated cans for a couple of dollars, the rest of the day was spent slowly learning the hardest

part about being homeless. During the day they can go out and beg for money and food, but many of them simply sit around the front of the mission and pass the time.

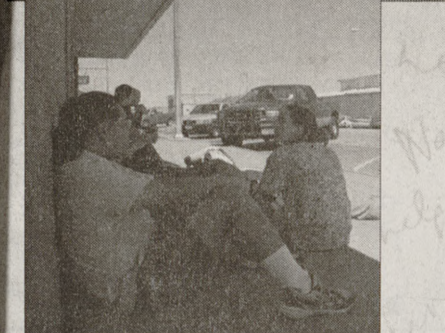
If there was one defining emotion to describe the life of a homeless person it would be "lonely." The days go by absurdly slow when you have very few belongings and nowhere to go. Most of the homeless students wandered the streets or found a warm place to take a nap, but nothing could speed up the hours. We were fortunate to be homeless in six groups of four or five students. Twin City's patrons usually spend their days alone or chatting with whatever other patrons are hanging out in front of the mission. The busy life most students are accustomed to is nowhere near as taxing as the slow lonely one the homeless live.

The purpose of the "Homeless for a Weekend" event was to raise our awareness of the problems affecting homeless people. However, spending 24 hours on the streets in a 28 person group only hints at the life of a homeless person. As one participant put it, "This experience isn't the real thing. This is probably as far away from A&M standards as we can get, but it's still just a taste."

Nonetheless, it is important for students to take the opportunity to try and understand how this part of society works. Too often we get used to the luxuries of daily life as a college student. Students think having to wait for a park space constitute hardships. We complain about cafeteria food and forget those who are happy to get the donated leftovers from SBisa. We look at our closets and think we need some new clothes or shoes,

overlooking the fact that this morning, just down the road, people woke up this morning and had no other clothes to put on.

A&M does a good job at promoting student involvement. Events like "Homeless for the

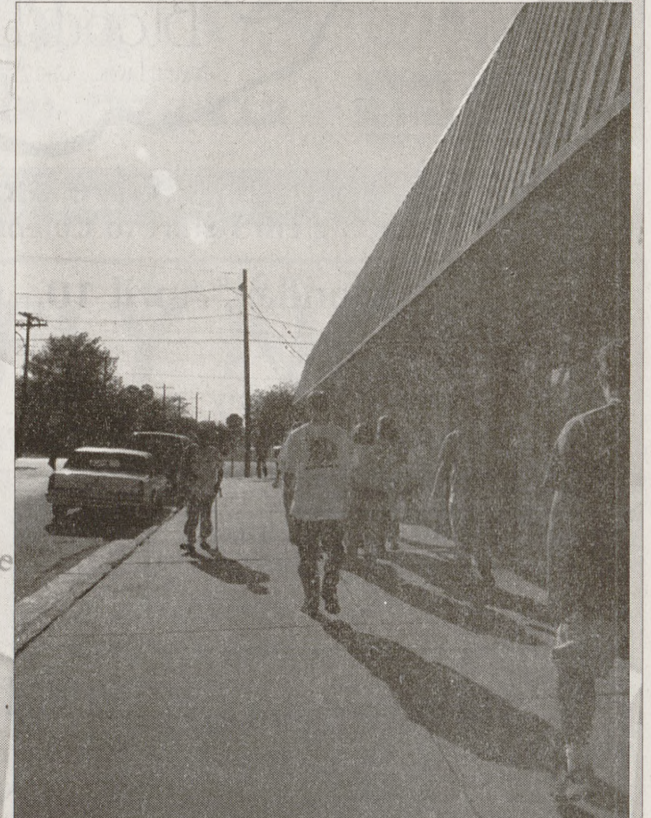


"Weekend" Participants:

- Dr. Carol Albrecht
- Dr. Don Albrecht
- Angela Adams
- Christopher Allen
- Cindy Beard
- Josh Briggle
- Amber Buehler
- Anthony Chen
- Kate Cook
- Eric Dickens
- Jeremiah Dye
- Stacey Huag
- Kim Jackson
- Thomas Kelton
- Kristen Knight
- Jimmy Martin
- Kristen Mattern
- Beverly Mireles

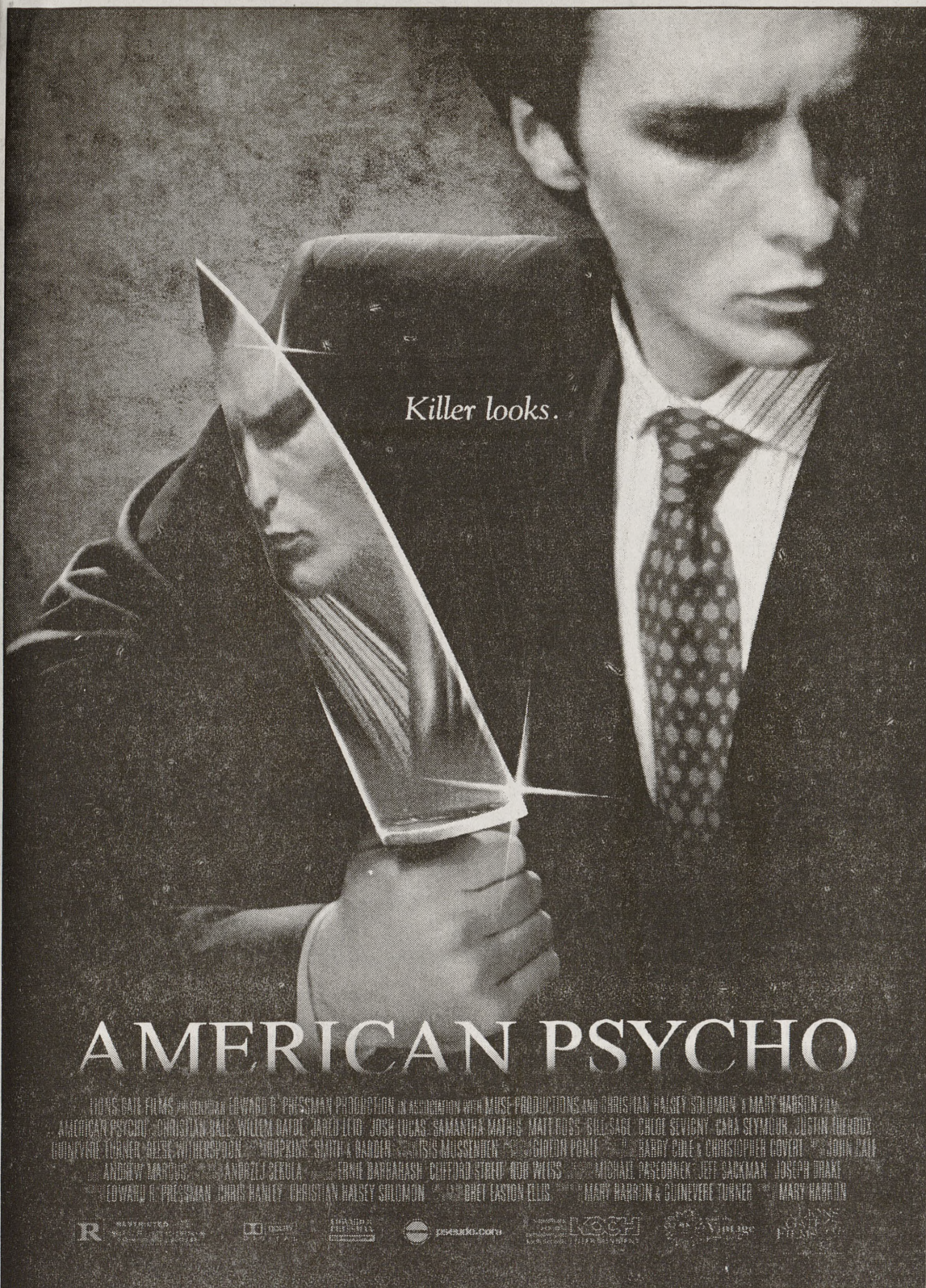


- Tamara Nagy
- Emily Perkins
- Megan Phelan
- Stephanie Rosier
- Paul Rosin
- Sarah Skinner
- Steve Smith
- Elizabeth Torline
- Krystina Tran
- Jeremy Weisinger



BEVERLY MIRELES/THE BATTALION

"Weekend" are great ways to open our eyes. However, true improvement in the homeless situation doesn't come from 28 students living out of a shelter during the weekend. The process of change begins when we, not as students, but as people have compassion in our hearts for the less fortunate. Then we have to let that compassion urge us to donate clothes, food, time, and, at the very least, a sympathetic ear.



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