



AT THE CROSSROADS

Spring 2017: A Night on the Streets

What does it feel like when the sun is going down, and you don't know where you are going to sleep? What are the choices that young people have to make throughout the night when they are trying to balance safety, comfort, and the realities of survival? In this newsletter, we examine what a night on the streets is like for our clients, and what it feels like when you have little control over what the night holds for you.

ATC Clients Reflect on Their Nighttime Experiences



"Walking down Market Street all night, waiting for 4 o'clock to come to get on the BART so I can sit down and relax and close my eyes for a few hours or minutes ... Sleeping on couches, sleeping in strangers' cars. Being homeless is really no joke."

-Justin, ATC client for 8 years

Difficult choices

Imagine it's 8 p.m. You've had very little to eat all day. Maybe you just got off a long day at work. You need to figure out where to go for the night, because it's starting to get cold and you heard it might rain. Last night you crashed at a friend's place, but they told you not to come over tonight. As it gets later, you have a few choices—you can try to hustle up enough money to pay for a cheap hotel room, you can sleep on MUNI for a couple of hours, or you can try to find a place to sleep outside. Unsure where to go, you start walking.

These are just a few of the many decisions our clients make every single night. All of our youth are familiar with navigating this reality. Some clients spend days, months, or years sleeping on the streets. Others bounce between friends, family, and strangers' couches and floors. Some try shelters. Many work every day to make enough money to pay for a temporary place to sleep at night. We interviewed four clients about what "a night

on the streets" means to them, and they shared their experiences with vivid detail and thoughtful reflections.

Rabbit has been a client for a little under a year. She is very funny and talkative, adaptable, self-reliant, and self-aware. After nine years on and off the streets, she is resilient and has a comprehensive understanding of life's struggles and how to overcome them. She describes the challenge of deciding where to go at night, "As the day went by and I got off work, it was a hard, difficult decision—was I gonna deal with somebody I didn't like and stay at their house? Or would I sleep in a storefront? Some people would be like, 'Oh you can sleep in my car.' But the car, if you don't turn it on, you're still gonna be cold." One night she turned down the offer to sleep in her friend's car, and everything she had with her was stolen. "My shoes, my hat, my sleeping bag, my food that I had just bought for myself—and my phone that was under my head."

Trying to find somewhere to sleep was never easy because Rabbit was constantly weighing several factors, like warmth, safety, and the likelihood of being disturbed. No matter where Rabbit ended up, she explains that "sleep didn't come very easily at all." She describes why people sleep on sewage covers—"cause they're

warm"—and how it's important to find one off of the main streets or you might be woken up by a cop and forced to move. When she would finally find a spot to rest for the night, Rabbit had to remain alert, sleeping upright to stay attentive to her surroundings.

In the morning, Rabbit remembers the sensations that would wake her up. "The only big thing that continues to replay in my brain is the sound of the trains and the smell of crack in the city. I was always woken up by the F train in the morning, at 6 a.m. That was my alarm clock, like literally." With the sound of the train, it was either back to work, or back to finding food and a place to go for the day.

The phrase "a night on the streets" stirs up a lot of memories for our clients. The moment ATC client Justin hears it, he immediately begins listing all the things he would do at night when he was homeless. "Walking down Market Street all night, waiting for 4 o'clock to come to get on the BART so I can sit down and relax and close my eyes for a few hours or minutes. Sleeping at hospitals—not even having an injury or illness—just sleeping there to get out of the cold. Sleeping on couches, sleeping in strangers' cars. Being homeless is really no joke."

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Letter from the Director

Rob Gitin

For about six years, I met twice a week for lunch with a client named Mateo (name has been changed). Mateo was one of the most complex people I'd ever met: alternately loving and cruel, methodical and impulsive, peaceful and angry. He noticed everything around him, including every facial expression or subtle change in your tone of voice or mood when talking with him.

Often, I would see him on outreach the night before our meeting. We'd chat, confirm that we were still meeting, and then go our separate ways. I would be home about two hours later, and experience a pretty stable and predictable reality that included an uninterrupted night of sleep. Mateo would walk away and have no idea what the night was going to hold for him.

The next day, as I would walk up to our meeting spot near 5th and Market, I would see Mateo, and start to get a sense of what he had experienced during the 15 intervening hours.

Sometimes he'd be passed out on the sidewalk, indicating another night where he had barely slept. Sometimes he'd have an excited look on his face as I approached, which often meant he hadn't eaten since I had seen him, and was looking forward to getting something in his stomach. Other times, he'd show up with a black eye, a busted-up lip, or some other sign that a fight had happened. If he saw me first and greeted me with a mellow smile, it meant he was feeling happy to see me, and had probably had a decent night. If he wasn't there, it usually meant he'd been arrested and was in jail, or had had a really rough night. Frequently there was an angry look on his face, suggesting that something had happened since I had seen him that had made his already challenging life a bit harder.

We'd always go to eat at the same restaurant at noon on Tuesdays and Fridays, where he would order a bowl of pozole that he would season with every spice, herb, and lime possible. Mateo would often recount the events of the previous night. The thing that always stayed with me the most is how many different ways he might have had his sleep disturbed, and how it could happen at any time.

If he was sleeping on the sidewalks, he might be woken at 2 a.m. by people getting out of the bars, and often being disrespectful toward him; at 3 a.m., by cops who would tell him to move along, when there was nowhere to go to; or at 4 a.m., when the Department of Public Works would power spray the sidewalks, often in areas where homeless people were sleeping. He might have gotten some sleep, but he was never truly at rest, always on guard.

Mateo's nightly uncertainty didn't just affect our appointments. It affected whether or not he showed up to work, kept plans with friends, made it to court dates, got to appointments for social services or benefits on time, or made it to doctors' appointments. His ability to function in the way that he wanted was deeply tied to what had happened the previous night, and this was not in his control.

For Mateo, and many of our other clients, nights are often full of randomness and uncertainty. They are not a time to recharge, as they are for many people; they often leave our clients feeling more drained. Mateo would talk about how there was a part of him that enjoyed the mystery of what was to come as the sun was going down, but mostly it exhausted him. Sometimes at night when I'd see him on outreach I could feel his anxiety. We'd be wrapping up a conversation, and I'd ask him where he was headed, where he was going to crash, or what he was up to the rest of the night. Often the answer was the same: "I don't know."

You may notice that throughout this newsletter, we use they/them/their/themself as singular pronouns. We've chosen to do this because using gender-neutral language aligns with our core value of respecting individuality.

Electronic copies of previous newsletters are available to view at atthecrossroads.org/newsletters

Mission Statement

At The Crossroads reaches out to homeless youth and young adults at their point of need, and works with them to build healthy and fulfilling lives.

Our Core Values

- ❖ Prioritizing meeting the needs of our clients first
- ❖ Making services as accessible as possible
- ❖ Supporting empowerment
- ❖ Respecting individuality

What We Do: The Basics

- ❖ ATC walks the streets of the Mission and Downtown/Tenderloin to reach disconnected youth on their own turf. We hand out basic necessities like food, socks, and hygiene supplies, and slowly build counseling relationships with youth.
 - ❖ We focus on youth who have fallen through the cracks of other services, and would not get support without us.
 - ❖ We meet with clients 1-to-1. We listen to them talk about anything they want, with no agenda and no judgment. We help them identify goals, figure out who they want to be, and how to become that person.
 - ❖ We keep working with clients after they leave the streets. We continue to support them for as long as they want, helping them build outstanding lives, not just lives of subsistence.
 - ❖ We partner with other organizations, connecting our clients with resources such as jobs, housing, education, health care, and mental health services.
 - ❖ We support other programs in their efforts to work with homeless youth through dialogue, trainings, and technical assistance.
 - ❖ We work with the government at the city and state levels to improve the continuum of support for all disconnected young people.
- "I've been going through a lot, and At The Crossroads has really been there. I don't have a lot of support, as far as family, so having you guys—you guys are like my family."*
- Calvin, ATC client for 4 years*

Get Involved with At The Crossroads

Make a donation to ATC

You'll experience a sense of happiness and fulfillment that you've never known. You'll want to do it again and again! In all seriousness, the future of At The Crossroads depends on the generosity of individuals who believe in our work. If you value what we do, please support us! **Make a credit card donation at atthecrossroads.org, or make checks payable to "At The Crossroads."**

Join our email list

Sign up to receive emails twice a month about upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, organizational updates, and ways to get involved. **Email getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org with the subject heading "Join the ATC email list."**

Volunteer

Do you have free time in the morning or afternoon? Come by our office to sort clothing, put away food, prepare supplies, help with administrative needs, or pitch in on a number of tasks that help keep us going. **If you are interested in learning more, please email volunteer@atthecrossroads.org.**

Get your company involved

When companies and their employees engage in our work, it can have a huge impact. The opportunities are endless: team participation in our fundraising hike, grants, sponsorship of events, group volunteering, in-kind donations, individual and matching donations, or pro bono services. **To get your company involved, email getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org.**



Jenefer, Theresa, and Irene are three of ATC's wonderful volunteers!

Help with new clothing donations

ATC is always looking to build relationships with stores and businesses that are able to donate new clothing for our clients. In particular, we are in need of jeans, hoodies, T-shirts, and warm items. **If you can connect us with a store or clothing manufacturer who may be able to donate these items, please email getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org.**

Watch and share our documentary

Monica Lam's 15-minute documentary takes you onto the streets and into the world of our clients and our work. **You can find the documentary at tiny.cc/ATCdocumentary.** After you watch, share it with your community as a great way to introduce new people to ATC!

Share our newsletter

Please spread the word about ATC to people you know who might be interested in our work! If you want to send anyone our newsletter, give us their name and address and we will mail them a copy. **Email getinvolved@atthecrossroads.org.**

Stepping Out Onto the Streets with ATC's Counselors



Outreach Counselors Abby Pennington and Onyinye Alheri are prepared to go to work, bringing their supplies, their enthusiasm, and their support directly to the streets.

“That’s the cool thing about being out at night, it’s almost like being on someone’s stoop, at a restaurant, or in a community center.”

-Abby Pennington, Outreach Counselor

Since At The Crossroads was founded, nighttime street outreach has been central to our work with disconnected homeless youth in San Francisco. All of our clients first start working with us by meeting us on the streets, so these encounters are critical to building trust and laying the foundation for long-term counseling relationships. For ATC’s program staff members, going on outreach is one of the most important elements of their jobs. Here, they talk about what happens on outreach, and the benefits and challenges of going out at night.

Getting ready to hit the streets

A typical night of outreach begins at the office at 6:30 p.m. with a check-in. The two or three staff members who are going out that night talk about client-related updates, how things have been in the neighborhood, and generally how everyone is feeling. They make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, stock their backpacks with hygiene and harm reduction supplies and snacks, and make sure everyone is ready for the night. At 7:30 p.m., the outreach crew sets out on the nightly route. With heavy backpacks, they walk slowly along Market Street, looking out for clients, new and old.

On an average night, ATC encounters about 50 young adults. The outreach team will pause near clients, ask how everyone is doing, and see if anyone wants supplies. Clients can request specific items, and counselors will offer choices. We assemble a Ziploc bag with up to 20 supplies, including Q-tips, deodorant, a toothbrush, toothpaste, lotion, and lip balm. While handing out these necessities, counselors ask about how the night is going, opening the door to deeper conversations. Giving out supplies is important in itself, but even more critical, it serves as a vehicle for our primary goal of building relationships with young people on the streets at their own pace.

Building relationships on outreach

Nighttime street outreach enables us to reach the young people who are the least likely to get support. Few services and resources are available at night, and most require the individual to go out of their way in order to access them. Getting to know our clients on their own turf makes it easier to see all sides of them and learn who they truly are. One of our Outreach Counselors, Abby Pennington, says that there are more young people out at night than one might expect, “That’s the unique thing about the nighttime; you get to see lots of people. Some of them are working, but some of them are out there just hanging, wanting to check in with their friends and chill. That’s the cool thing about being out at night, it’s almost like being on someone’s stoop, at a restaurant, or in a community center.” Counselors remark what a privilege it is to share space together with clients on outreach.

When there are fewer people around, clients tend to open up more. Abby describes some of the different ways this unfolds. “Sometimes you get to just chat with people for 20 minutes and that’s really fun. We talk about current events or how scary rats are, or a new movie that came out, and that’s just as important as other conversations too, because you get to hear what people are interested in, and you get to see people as more than their housing status.” Abby describes a client she sees fairly often on outreach who loves horror movies. When he’s seen a new one, he will give it an extremely detailed review, complete with extended reenactments (and the occasional spoiler).

Program Coordinator Irina Alexander echoes Abby’s sentiment, and points out that it’s common for people to have a misconception about how intense nighttime outreach can be. “There definitely are a lot of heavy parts to outreach, but the majority of our interactions with clients are super positive, fun, and upbeat. You get to really see people in their element out there, and get to see how interesting, creative, and full-of-life people are.”

When meeting young people for the first time, building trust can be challenging. Many youth ask if they have to give us something in return for accepting supplies; the answer is always no. Some wonder if we are a religious organization and are surprised when they hear that we’re not. People are often skeptical of us at first, unsure of whether or not it’s safe to take food and supplies from strangers with big backpacks. Outreach Counselor Onyinye Alheri describes a time when she had a first encounter that didn’t end well. “I had the unfortunate experience of telling a girl that we were a ‘homeless youth program’ and she immediately was like ‘I’m not homeless,’ and didn’t take anything. As far as I know, we haven’t seen her since.”

Onyinye explains why she thinks the word “homeless” elicited such a strong reaction: “There is a big stigma around accessing services, especially services that are branded for ‘homeless youth.’” Getting past this stigma is a key component of building trust with new clients on outreach. We generally tell new clients that we work with youth and young adults on the streets, which is a more realistic description of our work and tends to make our clients feel more comfortable.

After the first stretch of outreach, counselors stop into the office to take a quick break and restock their backpacks, usually around 8:30 p.m. (depending on how busy the night is). They check in with each other, discuss anything that came up during the first leg of outreach, and prepare to go back out.

What comes up for clients at night

Being out at night puts a spotlight on some of the hardships of being on the streets. Abby describes how the weather can really affect our clients, “It’s colder at night most of the time. The people who are out there are very cold and they’re trying to get past it. They might be working non-traditional jobs, so they have to be out there even if the weather is terrible, or they are out there because they want to check in with their community.”

We do outreach in the Union Square area, which means that we have to navigate busy sidewalks while we’re talking with youth and handing out supplies. “There are a lot of people walking up and down Powell Street shopping,” explains Irina, “so there’s a dichotomy we see out there. Our clients are really struggling to get by, and there are people walking by them who don’t pay them any attention and maybe just spent hundreds of dollars at the mall. This comes up at nighttime because it’s when a lot of our clients start working, doing whatever they need to do to get by, while people walk past, ignoring them.”

Another thing that can really affect nighttime outreach is the police presence. “There are nights when we go out and at every single block, there are cops posted out either in cars, walking down the streets, or biking,” says Irina. “We see the way that they move our clients around. Our clients have been told in the past things like, ‘If you stay here you will be arrested, but if you go down a block into the Tenderloin, then we won’t mess with you.’” A strong police presence can cause many of our clients to leave the area, and in turn, can affect how many youth we are able to connect with on a given night.

Reflecting back while heading home

ATC’s counselors feel really lucky to get to know our clients and talk to them on outreach. Onyinye and Irina explain that the youth we work with might be different from what people imagine when they



Program Coordinator Irina Alexander stocks her outreach backpack for the night.

think of “homeless youth.” Onyinye explains, “I keep thinking about this group of young people we’ve been seeing more and more. They are pretty young, and they are always out and super loud. Other pedestrians on Market Street will look at them and think they’re delinquents. To me, it’s a good indicator of our privileged position because we actually get to interact with them. We can see them for who they really are, and also recognize that there’s a reason they are out on the streets at

9 o’clock at night. There is so much more of a backstory. Who knows what’s going on in their homes? Do they have homes? What’s going on with their parents?” Onyinye feels lucky to be a part of their lives, “Even if they never call ATC, they will remember that somebody was nice to them and they were perceived as human.”

At the end of a night of outreach at about 9:30 or 10 p.m., counselors come back to the office to recap important details from counseling conversations, the supplies they gave out, and any encounters that need follow-up. Sometimes this is the hardest part; Irina describes how conflicted she feels. “Going back to the office at the end of the night is a pretty brutal period of time when you start to realize that our clients are still out there doing everything they need to do just to get by, while we head back into this comfortable little bubble. It’s a really stark realization of what our clients have to go through on a nightly basis just to survive.”

A Week of Outreach by the Numbers

This is a snapshot of one week of outreach in March 2017. At the end of each night, counselors sit down to note who they met and the supplies they gave out. They also discuss the conversations they had, and any updates from clients on the street.

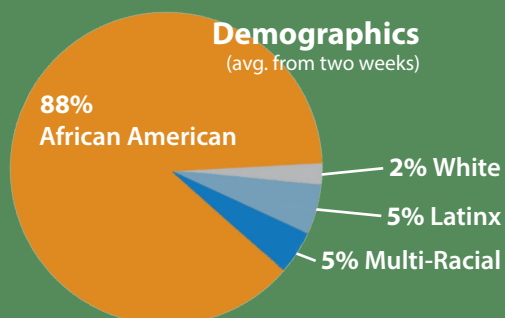
Who’s Out at Night?

On average:



What’s in an Outreach Backpack?

Four nights a week, ATC staff members walk the streets of the Downtown/Tenderloin neighborhood, carrying big backpacks that are stuffed to the brim with food and supplies. We bring over 20 different items, ranging from granola bars to toothpaste to antibiotic ointment to condoms. At the start of the night, our backpacks weigh **28 pounds!**



Top 10 Most Popular Outreach Supplies

1. Food and snacks
2. Tissues
3. Alcohol pads
4. Socks (once a week)
5. Q-tips
6. Band-Aids
7. Lip balm
8. Toothbrushes
9. Toothpaste
10. Condoms



Icons from TheNounProject.com – Band-Aids: Atif Arshad; Condoms: Alina Oleynik; Q-tips: Rohan Gupta; People: Corpus Delecti; Toothbrush: Hopkins; Sandwich: arejoenab.

"I never really recognized if a good night was a good night, you know ... Each night was what it was. Another night to get through. Another day to struggle."

-Joe, former ATC client for 17 years

Continued from front page

Justin has been working with ATC for eight years. He is a resourceful and sharp person, as well as a fierce advocate—he does everything he can to ensure his needs and those of his family are met. When he first connected with ATC, he had two young children and was working overtime to find a way to support them and himself. "It's hard not having money to buy food. Panhandling out there all night just to get your needs and wants. Not having a fresh shower in the morning or at night before you go to bed to try to relax. It's hard, not knowing how your kids is doing."

For some clients, trying to make enough money to pay for a place to sleep at night is a struggle that starts the moment they wake up. Joe, a former ATC client for 17 years, reflects on the time in his life when he was hustling on the streets every day to pay for hotel rooms, which were usually rundown and sometimes had bedbugs. "The clock started as soon as I woke up and got outside. The pressure and the fear of not getting a place or not getting enough money starts right then and there. In my situation, I needed to get at least 10 dollars, and then I could make 30. And if I could make 30, then I could hopefully take that back and make 60 or 70. Once I did that, then I could get a place."

Sometimes making enough money for a hotel, which at the time was about \$40-\$50, would take all day and night. "And if it did take all night—if it didn't happen by 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning—might as well just go sleep in the Carl's Jr. 'til about 4. Then I'd go get on BART, sleep on BART and ride the tracks 'til 10 or 11. Then, depending on how I felt, I'd either try to make more money or go get a room and sleep some more. But more than likely, it was make more money." There were nights when Joe made the money he needed

to cover the cost of a hotel room, get food, and have enough left over to start again the next day. But even on these nights, there was no guarantee that he would be able to get a room. Sometimes the rooms were all booked, the hotel required ID, or the person at the desk flat-out refused to rent a room to Joe.

On nights when Joe didn't get a hotel room, he didn't get fazed. "To be quite honest, it didn't impact me at all. I mean, if it was one night or two nights, it wasn't too bad. It was just a 48-hour hustle, sometimes even a 72-hour hustle." But when these sleepless nights would stretch on for three, four, or five nights in a row, it was a different story. "You get to a point where you can't even take a shower and stuff like that. It ain't cool, you know. You don't want to go nowhere, you don't want to be around nobody. You might be able to go buy a fresh pair of socks at the store, but that's just to relieve the pain of your feet, it ain't to relieve the smell of it. At that point it's embarrassing and depressing, but you know, you keep going until you get a room and get a shower."

Survival mode

During this time in Joe's life, having a place to sleep, no matter the condition, was a relief. "It might not be a relief in the greatest of situations, but at least you get to rest, which is something that every human being needs to do." For Joe, constantly being in survival mode made the days and nights start to blend together. When asked what a good night was for him, Joe doesn't have an answer. "To be quite honest, I never really recognized if a good night was a good night, you know. If I was indoors, I was indoors. If I was outside, I was outside. I never felt afraid ... Each night was what it was. Another night to get through. Another day to struggle."

Kassandra, an ATC client for seven years, is known for being a charismatic and driven person. She is always connecting to someone in her community and excited to talk about what she is working on in her life. In the recent past, when she was unstably housed, Kassandra describes working long hours and spending a lot of money commuting between work and the various places she could find to crash. When she got a seasonal job in the city and was able to stay with a friend in Oakland, her late hours made getting home a challenge.

"It was just kind of iffy, 'cause when I would get off work it used to be so cold. So I'd be like, man, I hope I got somewhere to go ... I got off kind of late, and so I was like, how am I gonna get back to Oakland? By the time I get back to Oakland, the buses are going to stop running. So, sometimes I used to be scared, because I didn't want to walk in the night." On top of these worries, Kassandra wasn't technically allowed to stay at her friend's place due to the rules of the building, so eventually she had to find somewhere else to sleep.

On nights when Kassandra couldn't make it back to Oakland and didn't have a place to crash, she would spend all night walking around the city. Not only was this exhausting, but she felt a lot of peer pressure to do things she didn't want to do. "That can relapse to anything, having to be out there all night on the streets, not knowing where to go. You could relapse to drugs, hard drugs like heroin, and dope and stuff like that. I never used to be on that, but people used to try to get me on it when I had to stay out at night."

For Rabbit, survival mode meant using drugs in order to stay warm and stay "content." "Homelessness was really shitty for me! You feel me? And the only way that I got through

"At night I get kind of hyped up about myself. Like, I can't wait 'til tomorrow! I'm going to be looking so cute! I'm going to get my son, take him out to eat!"

-Kassandra, ATC client for 7 years





"I feel like a person who has been displaced and homeless as long as me will always have that thought in their brain—that something is gonna get took from them."

-Rabbit, ATC client for 8 months

it was drugs and alcohol. And there are a lot of young adults in my position. If you're 21 and you can get your hands on a bottle and you're outside, that's the only thing that's gonna keep you warm. And there's no sleeping bags, no cover, no nothing that's gonna keep me warm for the rest of the night."

Even after a long, cold, mostly sleepless night, most people who knew Rabbit were not aware of what she was going through. "I never looked homeless and that's what everybody used to tell me. I never looked like I was sleeping on the streets. I always looked like I came from somebody's house or I came from my own home. But I did that to hide from people what was really going on." Keeping her homelessness hidden from others didn't make it any less real for Rabbit. She found it really hard to see past her day-to-day, and imagine a life beyond the streets. "I never, ever thought it was going to stop. Like, I never thought homelessness for me was gonna quit. I thought I was gonna be this way the rest of my life. I thought I was gonna be on the streets the rest of my life."

Now versus then

Rabbit recalls the worst night of her life on the streets. She was sleeping in front of a store in the early morning when something hard hit her neck, waking her. At first she thought it was the door to the store, but when she opened her eyes, two cops were standing over her. Though she didn't have anything illegal on her, she was taken to the station and treated very roughly—simply because she had been sleeping on the street. The next morning she had several injuries, so she tried to dull the pain with drugs. That night, she ended up in the hospital with an overdose. It was after this experience that Rabbit decided she needed to make a change. "I literally came to

that point in my life and I was like, 'I need to get the hell off these streets.'"

After several months of crashing in different places, Rabbit was able to secure housing in a single room occupancy through the Pathways program at Larkin Street Youth Services. Her housing isn't perfect, and she had to do a lot of cleaning up to make it feel like her own. But now that she's settled in, Rabbit thinks of her room as an escape where she can do what she wants. "It's solitude for me. I can lock my door, watch my TV, do whatever I please, and not have to worry about, you know, am I gonna wake up smelling crap next to my head, or am I gonna wake up to the F train, or am I gonna wake up getting beat or something like that."

Occasionally, this solitude makes Rabbit feel lonely. She describes her fear of being alone, and how she misses nights when she would watch TV and eat popcorn with her mom, who lives in Tennessee. The sense of isolation is exacerbated by the fact that being housed can mean that people on the street view Rabbit as an outsider. "Some people that are homeless don't feel like you can relate to them because you're housed now. But what y'all don't understand is I've been homeless for nine years and I *just* got housing."

Justin currently lives in a housing program and is saving up for a deposit on an apartment. Having his own space means having control over his nights. "As soon as I got my place, I go home when I want to go home and go to sleep." He often thinks about what he would be doing if he didn't live at the program. "I used to stay up all night because I didn't have anywhere to go. And I think about what if I didn't have housing? I think about where I would be at. Would I be trying to get into someone's housing? Or I'd

probably still be doing the same thing, riding buses all night."

Despite being housed, the feeling of being on the streets hasn't left Justin. He aims to be a leader for his community and a supportive and loving father, but sometimes he feels like being homeless made it harder to be kind to others. "It made me like, cold-hearted. I am kind-hearted but it made me kinda cold-hearted ... 'Cause nobody was looking out for me when I needed them. And I had to do it by myself sometimes." He is happy to have his own place, but doesn't think he'll ever feel fully at peace, no matter where he lives. "I think about my safety all the time. I'm always on the edge to defend myself. That's what being homeless did to me. It makes me always prepare for the worst. And hope for the better, you know."

Kassandra is also in a housing program and working hard to get her own place and be reunited with her kids. With a smile and a giggle, Kassandra talks about her favorite kinds of nights. "A good night is going out with all my peers, and we're going to the movies, or we go to Great America and we're having fun with each other. We talk about how happy we are to know each other and to be able to spend time with each other, 'cause there's no telling what tomorrow will promise." Every day brings the unexpected, so every night Kassandra pumps herself up. "You know, sometimes at night I get kind of hyped up about myself. Like, I can't wait 'til tomorrow! I'm going to be looking so cute! I'm going to get my son, take him out to eat! Or always getting hyped up, like something good gonna happen. And something good always really does happen."

"A night on the streets" means something different for each of ATC's clients, but all four clients interviewed expressed how their time on the streets has stayed with them, no matter how long they've been housed. While her current apartment is referred to as "permanent," for Rabbit, nothing feels this way. "I feel like a person who has been displaced and homeless as long as me will always have that thought in their brain—that something is gonna get took from them. Or something is never gonna be there, you know?" Rabbit explains that no matter how hard she works, everything in her life still feels temporary. This fear that at any moment everything could be taken away illustrates how getting off the streets does not mean feeling secure. ATC works with our clients to build that sense of internal stability, and this does not happen overnight. ♦

Street Retreats in the Tenderloin:

Faithful Fools Street Ministry



Carmen Barsody of Faithful Fools at the UN Plaza during a seven-day street retreat.

“We have had [participants] who, with the lack of sleep, come to edges of breaking points. Just as we say in our mission statement, we discover on the streets our common humanity.”

-Carmen Barsody
Founding Fool, Faithful Fools Street Ministry

According to the 2015 San Francisco Homeless Count, the Tenderloin and SOMA have 57% of the unsheltered homeless population in the city. The imbalance in these neighborhoods underscores the segregation of poverty and wealth in San Francisco.

For the last 20 years, Faithful Fools has been an integral part of the Tenderloin community. Carmen Barsody and Kay Jorgensen founded Faithful Fools Street Ministry in 1998 as a place for people to connect with and learn more about the growing poverty and injustice in their own community. Their mission is focused on “meeting people where they are” through the arts, education, advocacy, and accompaniment in order to “shatter myths about those living in poverty,” “discover on the streets our common humanity,” and enable healing.

The Faithful Fools live and work at Fool’s Court, located at the intersection of Hyde and Turk. The building is welcoming and playful—its facade is painted a bright purple with gold trim and its windows are filled with signs for a variety of programs and services. The Fools create and sustain relationships with their Tenderloin neighbors, both housed and on the street. They don’t consider themselves service providers or a program, but active community members who take responsibility in their neighborhood to keep the community’s voice heard through groups like the Market Street for the Masses Coalition and the Community Advisory Committee for the Central Market and Tenderloin Area.

The Fools ask people to join them on one-day and seven-day street retreats, during which people walk the streets of the Tenderloin (as

well as other cities in the U.S. and Nicaragua) and are called upon to reflect on who and what exist in parts of cities that people are encouraged to avoid. ATC had the chance to sit down with Carmen and learn more about the Faithful Fools, their work, and their street retreats, which now engage over 200 people each year.

Who are the Faithful Fools?

The Faithful Fools are the space in between. We aren’t formally a social service agency. We aren’t formally a church. We aren’t formally a school. So, we get a lot of freedom to work with people. People arrive here in various ways. We meet people through referrals from the Unitarian Universalist Church, or from social workers at hospitals or social service agencies that realize they can’t provide the ongoing support necessary for an individual’s stability. Some people arrive through word-of-mouth. Many just pass by and stop in. We assist people on a one-on-one basis and stay in relationship over the long haul—moving through housing with them, and whatever gets revealed after that.

We can be a place where people can connect by doing writing programs or meditation. We do advocacy work with a neighborhood group called TL VOTES! Bringing people together, a real piece of Faithful Fools, is how to keep the community’s voice in decisions that are being made here.

What are the origins of the street retreat?

Kay (Faithful Fools co-founder) and I came together and realized that we both wanted to bring people into personal relationships, which is where the street retreat comes in. Our level of commitment and responsibility is because of the relationships we have with people. The street retreat is simply a forum to bring people into their own relationships with a neighborhood that they are told not to go into.

Why is it called a street retreat?

Most people come into the neighborhood with a sense of volunteering: “I’m here and I’m going to help you.” The sense of a retreat gives it a little bit more of a reflective element: “I’m here, I’m giving some attention to and reflecting on who I am here, what I have heard about the Tenderloin, and what judgments or fears or assumptions I carry in relationship directly with the Tenderloin community, or homelessness and poverty as a whole.”

Can you describe a one-day street retreat?

We begin with an orientation to the day, most often starting up at the Unitarian Universalist Church, where we do the opening circle. Then we walk down into the neighborhood together. For the day, we give very little direction and not a lot of words or images. Adults spend the day on their own. When youth make a retreat, they are shadowed by an adult who has previously made a retreat themselves.

They spend the day on the streets. We’ll often invite them to eat in one of the soup kitchens or public dining halls. Most often, these people are on the other side serving, so it’s a time for them to actually sit and have conversations with others. After they’ve spent four hours or so [out on the streets], we come back to [Fool’s Court] to do reflection and close the day with soup and bread.

What is a seven-day street retreat?

The practice of an extended [street retreat], which is now seven days, is really the same thing [as the one-day retreat]. It's our retreat, and the retreat center is the streets, so we generally will sleep together or have people knowing where the other is [if they're sleeping apart]. Our default place of sleeping is up on [the steps of the Unitarian Universalist Church]. Or there have been times, over the years, that we've stayed at shelters when they were available, and sometimes on Golden Gate Avenue or on Hyde Street in front of our own building.

What does being out on the street at night reveal during the seven-day street retreat?

One of the realities is that when you are sleeping outside, there has to be a certain level of alertness. For me, I can't lose complete consciousness for my own safety. I'm never completely at rest. If you think of somebody who's just accumulating exhaustion for weeks, months, and years, it gives insight into where violence, hard edges, or even hopelessness comes from.

We have had [participants] who, with the lack of sleep, come to edges of breaking points. Just as we say in our mission statement, we discover on the streets our common humanity. A lot of people, homed and homeless, have struggled with addiction or mental health issues, grief and death, physical pains, illness, and things like that. Sometimes, we [believe that the experiences of] people who are

homeless are outside of ourselves. Sometimes, people come on a street retreat and believe that they've moved beyond [these struggles], and all of a sudden, find their own story showing up.

Two years ago on the seven-day retreat, I was so exhausted from the lack of sleep that I was laying down at the UN Plaza on a patch of grass. I just thought to myself, if I had an appointment for housing right now, I probably wouldn't go because if the waiting list is anywhere from eight months to three years, what's the hurry for me to go now? Right now, I'm just exhausted.

Why continue the street retreats?

The street retreats help us make sure that what we're doing is relevant to the needs of the larger community and the Faithful Fools community at this time. We're not mimicking or imitating or playing homeless. We're finding out what's happening closer up. For me, even though I live here, I work here, and I have been doing it for 20 years, it's a conscious choice to say, "Okay, where am I right now in relationship to what's going on in [the Tenderloin] and to the work? Where has my heart gotten a little crusty? Where have I become disjointed? What is it that I still pass by that I just don't have the patience for in the neighborhood?" I'll keep working and chipping away at those little places that don't allow me to be as available or understanding as I want to be.

To learn more, visit: faithfulfools.org.

ATC's New Board and Staff Members

Pablo Villavicencio, Board of Directors



Pablo Cesar Villavicencio is the Deputy Chief, Innovation for Oakland Unified School District. Previously, he served as Director of High Schools for San Francisco Unified School District. Pablo lives in the Mission District of San Francisco and enjoys exploring the city's amazing food scene. He also loves running—which helps him burn off all the calories from his first love. Pablo is excited to join ATC, because of our focus on working with marginalized youth.

Justine Lauderback, Board of Directors



Justine Lauderback is the Senior Asset Manager at Chinatown Community Development Center, and has over 20 years of experience in financing for affordable housing nonprofits. Justine has strong ties to the Bay Area: she was born and raised in San Francisco and has three grown children and one granddaughter who live in the area. She also enjoys the progressive politics, great food, and mild winters of San Francisco. Justine brings a deep commitment to helping youth who are homeless.



ATC's Newest Staff: From left to right: Sharissa Staples, Abby Pennington, Mari Amend, Briana Lara, and Emily Liu.

Abby Pennington, Outreach Counselor: Born and raised in the Bay Area, Abby is excited to work with and provide individualized support to ATC's youth. She enjoys playing soccer, reading anything and everything, watching the Golden State Warriors, visiting tide pools, and eating breakfast food.

Briana Lara, Outreach Counselor: Originally from Tulare, California, Briana joined ATC in the midst of finishing her bachelor's degree. Briana is an incredible multi-tasker, and likes volunteering, hiking, and attempting to cook when she's not working.

Emily Liu, Development Associate: Emily has been working in public health and youth services since 2011. Despite growing up in Southern California with a fondness for dry desert heat, she is beginning to call the Bay Area home. When Emily's not at ATC, you can find her climbing rocks, volunteering at a youth shelter, watching live music, and looking for the best BBQ in the country.

Mari Amend, Communications Manager: Mari moved to the Bay Area for college, and since then, has been working with her community to share stories, create dialogue, and inspire change. Most recently, Mari was on the road with a book that she co-published about plant medicine. Before that, she wrote and directed a play about California's worst drought to date.

Sharissa Staples, Volunteer Coordinator: A recent graduate of Santa Clara University, Sharissa joined ATC when we were in need of a more robust volunteer program. Since starting in January, she has already doubled the number of weekly volunteers! Sharissa considers herself to be a professional puppy-petter, connoisseur of chicken tacos, and a wannabe powerlifter.

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You'll hear more in the coming months, so stay tuned!

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WHAT IS
HOME?

“Home is where I get back and there’s people who worried about me all day and are interested in hearing what the hell I did with my day.”

-Maya, former client for 12 years
