

HEATHER GUHDE SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



HEATHER GUHDE

is a junior at Beaumont High School in Shaker Heights. She loves spending time with her family, playing soccer and having fun. Heather is a member of the Service/Social Justice Club and spends much of her free time volunteering. She is an avid Jeopardy watcher and hopes to become a pediatric surgeon.

As I was walking down that steep hill, I felt fearful and anxious. The sun was hot, burning down on my back. I observed the area around me. I saw the ripped and torn red tent with the cardboard underneath. I noticed the garbage surrounding the area. There were three chairs set up around a low fire. As my mom introduced herself, I found myself taking a step backward when, suddenly, a warm hand grabbed mine. His dirty hand against my clean hand felt awkward at first and I wanted to pull away, but his friendly embrace kept my hand frozen in his. I was not shaking hands with “some homeless drunk,” as many would say, but Tim*, a person-just like myself. My mom and I continued to chat with Tim and his friends about their lives. That was the first time I actually talked to someone who is homeless.

That day, when my mom and I decided to take some extra pizza to the people behind the gas station, I began to view people in a different manner. I had passed that gas station hundreds of times in my life and never known that there were people living just down the hill. Homeless people are often overlooked and not cared for. I started to think of all the remarks I had heard said about homeless people, for example: “It is their own fault they are on the streets- they deserve it,” “They are all drunks who spend their money on alcohol and drugs,” and so on. It may be that some people on the streets fit that profile; however, stereotypes like those are harmful and build barriers between people.

One day, I told my friend about my experience with Tim and she looked at me like I was crazy. She was in awe that I would actually go back there and talk to them. She automatically became disgusted and fearful. She responded by saying “Were you grossed out? Was it even safe?” My friend’s automatic fear was probably rooted in her undereducated understanding of homelessness. Often, that fear can turn into hate. If my friend had a better understanding of homelessness, perhaps she would have taken a different route other than responding with discriminatory remarks. I realized that I should be educating people, especially my friends, so that less discrimination occurs. I am a member of the Service/Social Justice Club at my school and educate my peers on subjects such as homelessness.

Another activity I have gotten involved in is the Labre Program through John Carroll University. Many Friday nights I travel through Downtown Cleveland, not only bringing the people on the streets meals, but also talking and praying with them. I plan on continuing to minister to the poor wherever I attend college and later in my life as well. In serving the people whom society pushes aside and educating my community about homelessness, I am doing my part to help stop the hate.

** Name has been changed*