

GTA

### **Exceptionally Simple**

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I experienced something exceptional with a staffing recruitment firm, but it isn't what you would think. It isn't the perfect job, it isn't a new career, it isn't even being dependably placed in assignments that fulfill my skills and suit need for flexibility, though that's true. No, my exceptional experience is something far simpler than all of that.

Meeting with PD Bureau on a damp and dreary morning in downtown Toronto to discuss possible positions, a men's homeless shelter was gingerly proposed to me. I *theoretically* understood poverty, homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse, but the women at PD were careful to ask what I could tolerate. *There may be crack users right outside the door; there will be some whose hygiene isn't great.* In addition, this particular shelter manages a controlled drinking program for alcoholics: clients are allowed a measured amount every day in an effort to avert binge-drinking or ingestion of toxic substitute liquids, like mouthwash or hand soap.

Not your average filing and faxing. But as someone who'd worked for years with arts groups and non-profits, I had feared I might lack the wardrobe or poise that corporate clients would expect. Here was something I felt I could do.

The largest men's shelter in Canada, situated in downtown Toronto, has a capacity of over 400 clients. Most are users of one substance or another. Many suffer from mental illnesses. Some have become permanent residents, with nowhere else to go. A few are just passing through, trying to get back on their feet. Most have been unemployed for years.

My work with the Family Health Team in that shelter did not require direct contact with the men, but I passed them in the halls, I saw them outside every day I came to work, and I filled in temporarily in another office just beside where scraggy, roughened, defiant, charming, timid and wise-cracking men lined up to get their daily drink.

What I saw there was humanity. Broken, yes. Bruised, used, abused, angry, disheartened, unsound and embarrassed. But still human. I saw men making the best of things and men resigned to their lot. I saw men furious with the life they'd been dealt and men so intoxicated they could not sit upright in a chair. Yet I also saw humour, resilience and friendliness extended everywhere. I had more polite exchanges in the hallways of that shelter – "Excuse me", "I'm sorry", "How are you today Miss?" – than I ever do on the streets of Toronto, as if being poor and disenfranchised made some all the more careful with manners.

I didn't expect that at the end of two months it would be hard to leave. But PD Bureau knew where to place me next: in a short-term facility designed to care for homeless and under-housed men and women recovering from surgery, an injury or an illness, or needing a safe place to get back on track with medications – often HIV anti-virals.

Again I became a witness to broken lives: to people who injured themselves out of carelessness, for attention, or to divert their mind from other pain not so curable; to those who'd struggled for so long with so little only to be diagnosed too young with a terminal illness; to those missing parts of their bodies from frostbite, disease, injury or violence; or those whose injuries were minor but who had no place to put their feet up nor anyone to take care of them.

And again what I saw was humanity. I lay down my guards as I had in the shelter and talked to people who were, except for circumstances and opportunities, not unlike me. We talked about life and its struggles, successes and defeats, funny stories and hopes for the future, even if for some that only meant being back on the street with their friends. I realized comfort could come from the easiest gestures: *Can I get you a blanket? A glass of water? No I don't have any cigarettes but I'll see if the kitchen has some more coffee.*

That was my exceptional experience: to meet people I would otherwise never meet, hear stories I would otherwise never hear, see a crooked smile on a ruddy face that would otherwise never make my day, be called *sweetheart* and not mind. The exceptional was also PD Bureau, with whom I continue as a temp, an agency with an openness and flexibility to trust people like myself, with lots of skills but very few business outfits, and send us into challenging organizations that need assistance as much as the best-equipped, most pristine office that towers over the sidewalk where someone sits with an outstretched hand.

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