

# SOUTH SIDE WEEKLY

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## Grass Roots

*A community mobilizes to keep a Bronzeville high school open*



ART SPIEGELMAN, THE HOMELESS COUNT, KAHIL EL'ZABAR, PICASSO, ANNA DEAVERE SMITH & MORE INSIDE

# The Count

*A community organization leads volunteers in an annual homeless census*

BY JAKE BITTLE

January 22 was a bad night to be homeless. A thick snow had fallen the night before, and temperatures dropped into the negatives as the sun went down. No one was out on the streets except those who had to be.

That night, volunteers from across the city, partnering with various community organizations, took to the streets to attempt a census of Chicago's homeless population. From 9pm to 2am, armed with survey forms and spare hats and gloves to give away, they drove block-by-block searching for anyone who didn't have a place to stay.

"The point of the count," said Adriana Camarda, of the Department of Family and Support Services, "is to demonstrate to [the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] what exactly Chicago's need is for federal funding for homeless service programs and federal housing programs for homeless individuals." In a webinar presented to volunteers in the count, Camarda said the city usually applies for about \$40 million in funding from the government.

"[The count is] essentially a snapshot of how many homeless individuals are being housed in shelters on a given night, and at the same time, how many individuals are sleeping on streets or in places that are not meant for human habitation," said Camarda.

One participating group was Featherfist, a homeless empowerment organization located on 75th and Yates in South Shore. Featherfist is one of only a few organizations on the South Side that participated in the count, along with Olive Branch, located in West Pullman. Under the direction of Stacy Anewishki, chief program officer of Featherfist, the group has served as a South Side leader in the count for ten years. Year-round, Featherfist case managers reach out to the homeless and attempt to help them find permanent housing and get back on their feet. Their website claims a seventy-five percent success rate.

"[The homeless count]'s not a fun time for the volunteers, but we at Featherfist want it to be a learning experience,"

said Anewishki. "We want to find whoever doesn't have a place to stay, the chronic homeless, the ones who aren't going into the shelters."

Before she sent volunteers out on their surveys of the city, Anewishki gathered them (about fifty, all told) in a Featherfist conference room and gave a brief overview of the history and rules of the count.

"It's always the coldest day of the year," said Anewishki. "I don't care how many years we've been doing this, it's always cold on the day that we do it. Since this time of year is usually when shelter use is at its highest, and since the end of the month is usually when public benefits run out, many people will be out roaming the streets. If they're out there, they have nowhere else to go."

Anewishki explained that teams were not allowed to wake sleeping people in the streets, or give money or food to any homeless people we surveyed. Surveys had to be completed in full.

"How do we know if someone is homeless? We don't really ask," she said. "We never assume that someone is homeless. We just ask, 'Do you know anyone who is homeless?' And then they may say, 'I'm homeless.' But you never assume."

As many teams as possible, Anewishki announced, would be led by a Featherfist team member who had experience with the homeless count.

"Where are the homeless people hanging out? Find out," she said, before taking questions. "Get out of your cars. Don't be afraid." The room was silent. "Man, you all look scared. You're all thinking, 'What did I get myself into?'"

At around 9pm, Featherfist coordinators split the volunteers up into teams of four, most captained by an experienced employee.

"Homelessness is pervasive in a way that is very invisible," said Steve, a long-time team-captain for the count. "I'll give you an example. One day we were driving down the streets doing one of these counts,

and there were about five guys standing beneath one of the bus shelters. And I looked at the bus shelter sign, and the buses had stopped running an hour ago. So I walked over there and I asked them if they knew anyone who was homeless, and they just started talking [to me]." It turned out that all of the men were currently homeless.

Steve's son, David, a graduate of Columbia College, was in the same volunteer group. The final member was a woman named Cynthia, in whose BMW the team departed from the Featherfist building at around 9:30. The volunteers piled in, along with dozens of survey forms, a map of the assigned area, and bags full of supplies to give to any homeless people we might meet.

The team's assigned area stretched from Cottage Grove to Lake Michigan, as far north as 39th Street and as far south as 59th Street, encompassing Oakland, Kenwood, and Hyde Park. We started in the north, coming off Lakeshore Drive at 39th Street and combing up and down Cottage Grove. The roads were already empty, and most of the stores were already closed.

On 45th and Cottage, we passed Golden Fish & Chicken, which was still open. Steve told Cynthia to park the car across the street. He got out and went into the restaurant, spoke with some people inside, and then came out. There was a man waiting for the bus. Steve spoke to him as well. His booming voice echoed across the empty intersection.

No one in the restaurant gave Steve anything concrete, so he suggested heading further south. We circled around Kenwood for a while longer before continuing south on Cottage Grove, until we reached a shopping plaza on 51st Street. Inside a Subway, a few men were sitting at the counter, not eating.

"You don't sneak up and startle folks," said Steve, on the way into the Subway, to explain why he had asked Cynthia and David to wait in the car. "If a guy looks up and sees four people all of a sudden, they're subject to get scared. But if he sees one or two people, he's more subject to engage in

conversation."

Inside, he greeted one of the men sitting at the counter.

"Do you know where we might find anyone who is homeless?" said Steve.

"Yeah," said the man. "Me."

The man, whose name was Lloyd, agreed to participate in the survey. As Steve went down the list and asked Lloyd the assigned questions, a rough outline of Lloyd's life began to take shape. He had lost two apartments after getting into fights with the landlords. He had been homeless in Michigan, in Rockford, and in Chicago. He had been to prison twice. He had been homeless at least four times. His children lived with his ex-wife in Calumet City, Indiana. He had been homeless in Chicago for seven months. He had no place to stay that night.

We gave Lloyd a bag full of hats, gloves, and papers with information about shelters and places to stay. Then Steve spoke with him for a while longer, explaining to Lloyd what he could do to help him get back on his feet.

"If you could get an apartment tomorrow, would you go?" said Steve.

"I would," said Lloyd.

Steve told Lloyd about what Featherfist could do for people in his situation, and offered to meet with him again.

"Call me," said Steve.

"I don't have a phone," said Lloyd.

"Okay," said Steve. "That's fine. A lot of times I hang out in Valois after work. Know where that is?"

"Yeah."

"If you're ever looking for me, come by there, ask for me. I wish I could buy you some food, man, but we aren't allowed."

When Steve and Lloyd were finished talking, we went back to the car and combed Kenwood for a while longer, without much success. Around 11:30, Steve decided to move on to Hyde Park.

On 55th and Woodlawn, Steve told Cynthia to pull over. There didn't seem to be anyone out on the street. She parked the car, and this time Steve and David both got



JAKE BITTLE

*"Altogether, how many times would you say you've experienced homelessness?" "About fifteen."*

out, taking a survey and a bag filled with gloves and a hat. Steve led David alongside the Starbucks, and they stopped in the doorway of a neighboring restaurant and started talking to someone. There was a man standing in the doorway whom no one but Steve had even thought to look for.

"People don't mind talking to you," said Steve afterwards, as we drove through Hyde Park. "At first it was hard, because I felt that the surveys were too formal, but what I figured out is, you have to let the

survey be a tool to start that conversation."

A few minutes later, as we parked in Kimbark Plaza, a man approached our car and offered to wash our windows. He was carrying a sponge and a bucket of water.

"Hey man," said Steve. "No thanks, but do you know where we might find people who don't have a place to stay?"

"I don't have a place to stay," said the man.

Cynthia and David went inside a nearby pizza shop with him. Five minutes later,

they all walked out together—he was wearing the hat and gloves they had given him. Cynthia and David got back in the car.

"By the way," said the man. "Y'all just missed a bunch. They just headed over to that Dunkin' Donuts a couple blocks down."

At Dunkin' Donuts on 53rd and Dorchester there was a group of men and one woman, all sitting near each other, none of them saying anything. Steve approached them with the surveys. One by

one, they shook their heads: No, I don't have a place to stay tonight. The team surveyed each of them in turn.

One man said that, during the warmer months, he sells miscellaneous scavenged goods from a blanket he sets up on 53rd and Dorchester. That night, however, he had no money, and nowhere to go.

"How long have you been experiencing homelessness?" Cynthia asked one of the women.

"About four months," said the woman.

"Altogether, how many times would you say you've experienced homelessness?"  
"About fifteen."

We returned to Kenwood and Oakland, surveying the main restaurants and plazas along 39th, 43rd, and 47th Streets, but didn't see anyone walking, waiting for the buses, or loitering inside. By this time it was 1am, and teams from other sides of the city had started to return to Featherfist. Before heading back, however, Steve suggested we follow a tip from a man we had interviewed earlier and check the emergency room at the University of Chicago Medical Center to see if anyone was spending the night there.

The emergency room was full of men and women of all ages. Many were sleeping. Steve told the clerk at the front desk why we had come. She stood up.

"If anyone doesn't have a place to stay tonight," she shouted across the room, "these people have some questions they'd like to ask you."

One by one, seven men and women, some of whom had been asleep, rose

and walked over. The hospital employees opened a conference room so the interviews could be conducted in private. After each survey was finished, Steve took the man or woman aside to tell them what he could do for them.

One of the women we interviewed, Debbie, had lost her apartment a week before, after a disagreement with her landlord.

"I do have a job, I do have an income," she said. "I can't keep going from place to place like this. I need to find me a permanent place to live. Plus, I got a medical condition, high blood pressure. What do I need to do?"

"Call this number," said Steve.

"Is this Featherfist?" said Debbie. "I did call you guys. I just called the lady yesterday, and she said they haven't even gotten my name."

"We're doing everything we can," said Steve. "But you understand, there's only so many of us. Can you call me tomorrow?"

"Yeah, because I need a place. I told you, I need a place." \*

# Talk About a Question

*Chasing grace with Anna Deavere Smith*

BY HANNAH NYHART

"What is grace?" asks Anna Deavere Smith, onstage in character as Reverend Peter Gomes. "What is grace? Well, that's no small question." This not-small question fueled a three-week artistic residency at the University of Chicago, culminating in the presentation of Smith's ongoing work, "Conversations on Grace."

Over three cold weeks, Smith gave two public performances of the show, one at the UofC's Logan Center and another at the Harris Theater downtown. Smith plays real characters, their monologues formed from verbatim quotes culled from decades of interviews with figures famous and civilian: Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, inmate Paulette Jenkins. It is not quite a one-woman show; cellist Joshua Roman joins Smith onstage. The piece is a proud work in progress; Smith does not know where it will go from Harris, only that it will go. In the week between the two Chicago performances, monologues grew and contracted or were swapped out entirely at the judgment of Smith and director Leonard Foglia. Some touch on grace explicitly. In others it is hard to see grace at all.

By design, the conversation isn't limited to the stage. Audience discussions followed each performance, and Smith also appeared at Logan with Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle for a public discussion, "On Grace and Politics," moderated by David Axelrod.

Call a show "conversations on grace" and the audience will look for it, asking *where*, if not *what*. Grace slips through most easily in the conversations with religious figures, perhaps because we expect to find it there. In a search for grace, it is simple to turn to the preacher, the imam, the monk, the rabbi. The religious connotations of the word are never fully shed.

The cellist's renditions of "Amaz-

ing Grace" that loosely frame the show reinforce Christian underpinnings, but the word's theological definition acts as a jumping off point more than anything else. "If you don't have a word, you might not even see it," Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf tells Smith. And so the word is grace, and though it cannot be cleaved fully from its religious roots, it stretches beyond the hymnal pages, naming moments aligned with everything from courage to beauty to mercy.

It's hard not to look for something else in the show as well, and that's Smith herself. Smith plays eleven different figures, but she too is a character. The artist refers to her portrayals as portraits; in reciting the words of her interviewee, she becomes her subject. On stage, she is speaking to us as someone who spoke to her. She is at once the stage's most compelling presence and its most phantomlike. We are reminded only periodically that Smith was in the room. Boxer Michael Bentt punctuates his boisterous indictment of his father with "Anna, Anna, Anna," and Justice O'Connor, suddenly old, shouts reproachfully into the phone, "I'm here with Anna Deavere Smith." And so are we. There is a multitude of Annas, as the characters address the audience, or the cellist, or the empty space in which we imagine her. The only time we see Smith onstage as herself is after the ending chords of the final song have played, when she stands stoic alongside Roman to a standing ovation. She is gracious, but tight lipped.

Mute but for his cello, Roman is an elegant scene partner. At different points during the monologues he is pupil, audience, or accomplice. The compositions that punctuate the speeches and transitions are largely original, safe for a few well-known pieces the cellist plays when Smith's characters mention them—"Amazing Grace," "Rock of Ages," "Is that All There Is?" The effect is that of a brilliant and affable con-



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