Introducing Community Conversations

A new series begins with a discussion of homelessness in Alaska.

To get started, we interviewed three leaders who have different perspectives. While their thoughts are stimulatingly divergent, all agreed on one point: challenging yet respectful conversations will be necessary for our communities to overcome homelessness. We are indebted to Rodney Gaskins, Ernestine Hayes, and Jamie Boring for initiating the exchange on the following pages. Their extemporaneous and candid remarks are models for us. (They speak for themselves, not on behalf of any organizations they are affiliated with.)

Not interested in homelessness? Read anyway; each contributor employs techniques of discourse important to the humanities. Ernestine Hayes asks us to question the social and political assumptions of the language that frames the topic. Rodney Gaskins has a gift for trenchant metaphors that help to visualize concepts. And Jamie Boring displays a healthy skepticism of orthodoxy.

Discussion Tips

Ready to discuss the article? Whatever the group, you can use this guide to delve deeper and think about homelessness in a new way.

SETTLING IN
Before beginning, set the intention for this conversation: it is an opportunity to learn about other points of view, to be heard, and to hear. This is not a debate. We seek to understand one another, not change one another’s minds. We are all invited to speak for ourselves. No one is being asked to speak for their group, position, denomination, or party—just for themselves. If people don’t know one another, have them introduce themselves.

GROUNDING THE CONVERSATION
Choose one of these questions and take it around the room.

- What is your own experience with or connection to homelessness?
- Why are you here? What interests you about this conversation?
- What hope or fear do you bring to this conversation?

READING
Ask the group to read the article silently (if they haven’t already), considering the following questions.

- What assumptions does each contributor hold?
- What do you agree with?
- What do you want to argue with?
- What do you admire?

DELVING DEEP
Kick off the discussion with your own reactions to the article and encourage the group to share their thoughts. If people begin to cross the line into advocacy and abstraction, coax them back into speaking for themselves with questions like these:

- Tell me what you mean when you use that word.
- Can you tell a story to illustrate that?
- What experiences led you to that point of view?

CLOSING
To close, ask people to share their reflections on one of the following questions:

- What does this mean for our community?
- What is something you’re still thinking about?
- What is something you learned from someone else today?
Ernestine Hayes, of Juneau, is the 2017 Alaska State Writer Laureate. She belongs to the Kaagwaantaan clan of the Eagle side of the Lingít nation. Her published works include two books of memoir, Blonde Indian (2006) and The Tao of Raven (2016). She serves as an Associate Professor of English Arts and Sciences at the University of Alaska Southeast, and sits on the Alaska Humanities Forum Board of Directors.

**What is your experience with or personal connection to homelessness?**

I was homeless myself on and off over a period of a few years when I was in California. At the age of 40, after having been homeless for a bit of time—couch surfing and so on, not necessarily on the street—I decided to come back home to Juneau, where I hadn’t been for 25 years. It took eight months to get from San Francisco to Ketchikan, living in my car, standing in food lines, sleeping in shelters. When I got to Ketchikan, I remained homeless and camped out from May to October.

**Why are people homeless?**

There are as many reasons as there are people. I was broke, my life was in shambles, I wanted to get home but I couldn’t afford to hop on a plane. I stood in line and slept in shelters and talked to lots of homeless people who were either on the street or camping, and every one of them had a different story.

**What do you think we should do about homelessness?**

Who’s “we”?

**Well, we as a community, we as Alaskans, we as humans...**

Just like there are uncounted reasons for being homeless, there are uncounted solutions. Some of the time it isn’t necessarily a problem to be solved. I met some people who chose a certain lifestyle that didn’t root them to one place. It’s a totally legitimate choice to not enter a capitalist consumer society that condemns you and judges you if you don’t conform. Of course, there are plenty of people who just need a break and came on some hard luck, and if there is a solution for their particular circumstance, it would be down a different path. We don’t know the solution, we don’t know what will work. But we certainly know what won’t work, and that is judging people and insisting that they get a job like everybody else, as though consumerism in this capitalist society is the miserable answer to everything.

**So, you think the term “homelessness” and the inherent lack in the language there isn’t right? Maybe there’s too much assuming going?**

I think that’s a really brilliant thought. People say that defining something by what it is not is a bad start. That would fall in those parameters.

**Is there a limit to our responsibility to end homelessness?**

The use, there, of the possessive pronoun “our” is a bit troubling, because it’s automatically exclusive. Those are terms that are usually recognized by mainstream populations, when you see the word “we.” Because of the way society is built, it automatically embraces a certain population and excludes Others. “Others,” capital O. If anyone is not a mainstream, middle class, white American with a home and a job, then we say, “What can we do?” and “What’s our responsibility for these poor Others?”

A lot of these societal issues are so intertwined that the root cause is not going to be healed by placing band-aids here and there on what might be considered the “poor,” the “Other.” So, what’s creating all this? Why are we in a society that actually debates whether people have a right—a human right—to shelter and food and health? Here’s my thought: we—and when I say “we” I’m not including only middle class, white Americans, because that’s not who I am, so my “we” is different—we as human beings have to learn to ignore the suffering and hunger and cold and pain of others. I think as humans, we’re born with the impulse to protect and care for others. But that has to be educated out of human beings and that’s what this society does very, very well.

What do you think would change the rhetoric around that, or change the narrative that’s been created?

Well, it’s systemic. You have to change the system. We’re talking about the master’s house, and the master’s house has to be dismantled. How do you dismantle a whole system that teaches everyone in the world, because of neocolonialism, that greed and consumerism and profit-seeking and accumulation is the measure of a person’s worth? It needs to be dismantled, but I have no idea how that gets done. It’s a huge global thing that’s going to have to come to its natural conclusion. It’s alarming, because we’re talking about the environment, we’re talking about inequity, we’re talking about people being shot in this country. If there’s an answer, I wish we could discover it. In the meantime, we just need to step aside and change our perspective and relate to people as equals and feel the impulse to help other people, but not from the position of noblesse oblige.

There’s something inherently condescending about charity?

Right.

Maybe conversations like this are a good place to start.

I think so. It’s about changing our perspective, hearing other voices, acknowledging the intellectual authority of the populations that are the target of these projects. If we want to hear homeless people, we need to first ask homeless people to speak for themselves. And, of course, there will be some who choose not to or are unable to speak for themselves. Then, we can share their story, with their permission and from their perspective and relate it within the context of our own story. Not saying “I met this person and I’m going to tell you their story because they’re so pitiful,” but rather “I met this person and I heard their story and I was changed.” And maybe that’s it. Maybe these projects shouldn’t have it as their sole objective to change someone else. Maybe it should be to change the people who include themselves in the pronoun “we.”

—Interview by Lillian Maassen

Ernestine Hayes
It Needs to be Dismantled
Jamie Boring is the Executive Director of Anchorage Downtown Partnership, Ltd., responsible for “assuring a clean, safe, vital, and healthy downtown.” He grew up in Anchorage, served in the Marines, owned a downtown business, and worked in development, construction, and finance. Today, he works with the community in collaborative ways to address local challenges. Among these challenges is homelessness and its consequences in downtown Anchorage.

**What is your experience of or personal connection with homelessness?**

Anchorage Downtown Partnership is responsible for 120 blocks downtown. One unique thing about our downtown is that we’ve placed 80 percent of our social services for people who are physically or mentally unhealthy, or homeless, in exactly the same neighborhood as 80 percent of our tourism, and a majority of our best hotels, government buildings, class A and class B office spaces. We have created an environment where we’re trying to serve the homeless community in the same place that we’re using as an economic engine for the State of Alaska.

**Do you think that overlap is a detriment to the tourism industry? Does it scare people off?**

Unfortunately, we don’t have a base of people who live downtown to offset the numbers of people who are homeless downtown. In other communities, you may have a homeless population and a tourist population, and you usually have a large number of residents, too. Downtown Anchorage doesn’t have that piece because it’s lacking in residential housing. So sometimes a tourist may look at a park and see a larger percentage of people who may be either mentally unhealthy or homeless.

**Why do people become homeless?**

Last year, when I took this job, I kept hearing from everybody that homeless numbers were decreasing, but that’s not what you see. So I talked to my family and I decided to go and live on the streets for a few days. Of course, you have some paradigms and assumptions: a stereotypical Alaska Native male who maybe has chronic alcohol problems, for instance. That paradigm is not correct.

What I found was a human being issue. It wasn’t one culture or one community; it was every culture, and all communities, and all ages. A large percentage of the homeless people I met were homeless because they depended on family that weren’t able to assist them. They came to Anchorage thinking they had a job or thinking they had a place to stay, and they didn’t have either of those things. A lot of people are eligible for social services, but they either can’t get to them or they haven’t connected with outreach, so they’re missing opportunities.

The biggest thing that changed my paradigm was the percentage of mentally unhealthy people, at least in the downtown area, who are homeless. They maybe are drinking or doing drugs, but really what they’re doing is self-medicating because they’re victims of mental health challenges.

I’ve encouraged my staff to go speak to people and look them in the face and call them by name, if they can, because sometimes that’s the only reality check they have. Even to hear what day it is or what time it is. Some people on the streets go days or weeks without even being called by their own names, or hearing a kind word. When I was doing my bit on the street—which I could have left and gone home to my family at any moment, so I’m not comparing it—I was hypothermic; I was only sleeping for two-hour chunks; the free food that was available downtown was mostly pretty starchy and low on protein. So, even after four or five days, I started getting foggy in my head. I could only imagine what it would be like if I had also been drinking, and been out there for weeks or months.

**Did you find that people treated you differently?**

The homeless population that I was talking to—I admire their hope. There was a gentleman who sat next to me one night. I wasn’t speaking, but he was telling me, “Everything you need is here; don’t give up; let’s make it through another day...” Really encouraging stuff. But, yes, most people walked by and intentionally looked away, even though there was nothing to look at. Maybe they thought I was intimidating or that I was going to ask for money—whatever the reason, there’s always the other person’s side—but there was zero eye contact, zero greeting. It shouldn’t be this way, but when we talk about homelessness we whisper, and when we see somebody who’s homeless we walk away.

**What should we do about homelessness?**

Although the Housing First initiatives that are common across the country are excellent, it’s one thing to feed people’s stomachs, and another to feed their hearts and minds. Something as simple as a conversation or music or a puzzle or book or woodshop. Something that brings them back to a baseline of hope and inspiration. I’m sure the boredom has got to be overwhelming.

The other piece is, at least in downtown Anchorage, there’s really no visible sign of outreach. This may be because of a gap in the system, or funding. When people ask me about my relationship to the homeless service providers, and what should they do, my question back to them is always, “Who do you give money to, and do you know where that money goes? Does any part of that money go to outreach? Does the system allow the money to go to outreach?” It may go to housing, which is splendid, or it may go to something you’re passionate about, like homeless families or children. But how much of it actually makes it to the street through outreach? And not from eight to five, Monday through Friday, but literally 24 hours a day.

Outreach is an important key. We can ask someone 99 times if they want or need help, and they may say no. But when you ask the 100th time and they say yes, we need to be there to hear it.

It’s one thing working hard to create an environment to house a homeless person.
It’s another thing to work with a group like mine, or Covenant House, or the Anchorage Police Department, or any of the other organizations out there, who encounter homeless people in the streets and ask them if they need help. When they say yes, who do you call? How do you connect them? That’s the part that is definitely missing, for the most part. I’m certainly not disparaging any of the organizations that are operating downtown; most times their shortcomings are a system failure or funding restrictions, not lacking heart or compassion for the problem. To really end homelessness, the outreach component—24 hours a day, seven days a week—is as important as any other component of the process.

Is there a limit to our responsibility to end homelessness? If so, what?

Where I sit now with my job and my dedication to serve this community, my limit is endless. My job is to wrap my arms around people and offer as much support and love as possible and ask my staff to do the same thing. That’s our job, and it’s endless. We may be helping, but we’re not the solution.

The interesting question: is Anchorage equipped as well as it could be to serve this customer base? I don’t know if we are. We have limited beds and limited resources. Our shelters are overrun with double the number of people they were set up to serve. But, certainly, leaving people—especially the mentally unhealthy—on the streets of downtown Anchorage is not a solution.

I think talking about it like we’re doing now is a start. But talk needs to become action and solutions. Homelessness tears the soul out of a community. We are given a great opportunity to serve people who really need help. Figuring out a way to do that, having hard conversations, and having accountable leadership are the ways to really break down barriers and address the issue. That will be the day we actually solve these problems. •

—Interview by Lillian Maassen

Rodney Gaskins
Get to the Fire

Rodney Gaskins is the Executive Director of the Fairbanks Rescue Mission. The Mission’s goal is to serve the physical and spiritual needs of people experiencing homelessness; it operates the only overnight emergency shelter for men, women, and children in Interior Alaska. Gaskins, originally from Washington, D.C., served 20 years in the military, then earned a degree in business administration. He has lived in Fairbanks for 18 years.

What is your experience with or personal connection to homelessness?

When I was in the military, I used to go to the youth facility and talk to some of the kids there. I grew up in a violent place, in Washington, D.C., and I got in trouble as a youth, so I wanted to reach out to kids. In Fairbanks, I did ministry outreach, and started going to the Rescue Mission with my church. What I saw was this: these were people who had encountered hardship, made a bad decision, had life problems thrust on them. But they were good people, and they were no different than the other people I knew. The difference is the other people I knew had a social group that helped them and kept them from hitting rock bottom. A lot of the people at the mission didn’t. So, I wanted to be used, in a sense. I realized that a lot of the people here have been hurt by other people, and it takes people to heal them. I wanted to be a part of that healing.

Why are people homeless?

There’s no one answer. I heard something recently: people don’t become homeless when they lose a house or when they run out of money; they become homeless when they run out of relationships. That really resonated with me. There are a lot of reasons—for some it could be substance abuse, for some the loss of a job, for some an extended illness. It could be one thing or many things. Some people can encounter hardships and overcome them with a social network, but the people we serve either burned all their bridges or they have no bridges.

What should we do about homelessness?

There’s no one big solution, it’s all individualized. It’s reaching the person. We have a saying here: if you’re working harder than the person you’re helping, you’re not helping. It’s about empowering them. We interviewed one guy years ago; he said that we, here at the Rescue Mission, loved him until he was strong enough to love himself.

There are other approaches where they allow people to continue drinking, thinking that providing shelter is going to change the person. If you have a drunk driving problem in a city, you don’t provide a special lane for them and pad the guardrails and allow them to continue to drive. That’s harm reduction. I understand harm reduction, and there’s a place for it, but it should come with expectation. When you have no expectation of someone, you’re going to be successful every time in achieving nothing. Expectation communicates respect. It communicates that I believe in you, that you can do this, that you have value. When we have no expectation for someone, we’re telling them that this is the best they will ever achieve. But I think we’re made for challenge.

Is there a limit to our responsibility to end homelessness?

In a community, we’re responsible to one another. But homelessness is the result of a problem, not the problem itself. It’s the result of a broken home, or a lack of mental health services, or a drug epidemic. It’s a symptom that shows there is a problem. So often, we address the symptom without getting to the source of the problem. If a smoke detector’s going off in my room, I can address it by taking the batteries out. But really, the smoke detector’s going off because there’s a fire somewhere. Often, we keep addressing the smoke detector without ever getting to the fire. •

—Interview by Lillian Maassen