Have you ever wondered what’s going on behind that crisp gray storefront below Broadway on Kearny Street? North Beach Citizens bills itself as a resource center for homeless and low-income residents to “use as a base and a starting point to rebuild their lives and reconnect with their community.” But get to know the people who work there, their clients, and the people who support the mission in so many ways, and you quickly see it’s an oasis of hope and love.

I started volunteering there last fall, writing for its blog and social media and taking photos documenting events. I thought it would be a good way to use my skills to give back while I hunted for my next opportunity. I have found it’s helped me maybe more than I’ve helped the group.

Whenever my spirits get low, I go to North Beach Citizens. The optimism is overwhelming. I meet people who have little more than a duffel bag or backpack of belongings; people who have suffered physical and emotional trauma. Yet they’re sure today will be a better day than yesterday. They’re grateful for everything they have, whether it’s a hot meal, a cup of coffee, a new coat, or dry socks. It’s made me a more thankful person, and has helped me put petty battles into perspective.

Most importantly, it’s made me a more giving, loving person. If you’re tired of hearing and reading about horrible, selfish people, you may be refreshed by North Beach Citizens. It demonstrates that selflessness and compassion still exist. And it starts with every single one of us.

Welcome to North Beach Citizens!

What Is North Beach Citizens?

Francis Ford Coppola and other area residents and merchants came together in 2000 to discuss the rise of homelessness in the neighborhood, and the center officially began in 2001. The staff of seven, including executive director Kristie Fairchild, help about 300 people each year with everything from navigating the bureaucracy of social services to finding permanent housing.

North Beach Citizens is entirely community-supported. Its donors are generous with clothing, food and money (more about that in a bit), and the clients, once they get help, give back as well. They help clean the center regularly and mentor newer clients just getting their footing. Each week, clients clean Washington Square Park and sweep sidewalks in exchange for a Safeway gift card with a nominal amount on it. By helping people experiencing homelessness, North Beach Citizens isn’t just giving a handout—it creates stronger a neighborhood overall.

Who Are “The Homeless”? When people talk about ‘the homeless,” stereotypes abound. First, nobody is “homeless” as a baseline characteristic; people lose their homes for a variety of reasons. In San Francisco’s current economy, once you fall off the grid, it can be next to impossible to get back on. Stop by North Beach Citizens some morning and chat with the clients there. You’ll meet people like Will, who lived off of his bike for more than 25 years, using his savvy and recycling used goods to get by. And Dianna, who was sexually abused as a child and during her three decades on the streets. Now, she’s ecstatic over her new dentures and loves to flash that sparkling smile that gets me every time.

Others are relatively new to the streets, like Scott. He was a wealthy entrepreneur who hobnobbed with the rich and famous, but lost everything a few months ago after his mom got sick, and then he started having serious health problems.

Contrary to popular belief, not everyone on the street is on drugs or mentally ill. About a third of those experiencing homelessness have mental illness, but it’s often (understandably) depression and anxiety. True, I’ve met some people at North Beach Citizens and living outside who are probably incapable of holding even a menial job due to mental issues, but they still deserve empathy and care.

What Do Homeless People Need? Of course, they need somewhere to live, and North Beach Citizens does its best to make that happen. Veterans, the elderly, and the disabled are at the top of the list when it comes to finding a permanent place, but
due to a tornado of political, social and financial complexities, it’s not possible for everyone.

Meanwhile, if you see folks on the street, one of the best things you can do is smile and say hello. Loneliness and being treated like a pariah are two of the hardest things about street life, I’m told. Buy them a wrapped sandwich or fruit if you like, or give them some socks. Please don’t give them your leftovers. Would you want your child, your sibling, your parent eating someone else’s garbage? I sure wouldn’t.

If you truly want to help, support a worthy nonprofit like North Beach Citizens. Every year, over 90 percent of its $1 million annual budget comes from its events. The bulk of that is from its Spring Dinner, in the basement of SS. Peter and Paul Church. This year’s re-creation of the famous blind tasting between French and Napa Cabernets will feature Burgundy and Pinot Noir instead. At $1,250 a ticket, it’s not for your average Two-Buck Chuck drinker, but it features about $40,000 in top-shelf wines. The goal is to be a “friendraiser” rather than a fundraiser, though last year it netted $25,000.

If you can’t attend an event, please consider North Beach Citizens in your annual donations. They’re always happy to get gently used clothing and new volunteers!

For more information visit the website: http://www.northbeachcitizens.org/


“Stories Behind the Fog” on Medium.com includes first-person stories from people experiencing homelessness throughout the city: https://storiesbehindthefog.com

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