



A Key Club member from Hobart High School delivers care packages of essentials, including handcrafted sleeping mats, to people experiencing homelessness in a tent city in Chicago on Dec. 11, 2021. **HANDOUT**

Can openers for the homeless?

Hobart teens learn lesson: 'Simply asking can make all the difference.'

Can openers.

Keep this simple household device in mind when you want to help someone but you're not sure how. Some people's needs are not as obvious as you'd think. Or we can be oblivious despite our noble intentions.

This was the lesson learned by Hobart High School students last month when they trekked into Chicago to deliver care packages to people experiencing homelessness.

"Today is the day. We finished our bags for the homeless and are heading to tent city with 92 bags and seven sleeping mats," Heidi Polizotto, the school's world language teacher texted me that morning.

She also serves as adviser for the school's Key Club, an international service organization for high school students that encourages leadership through serving others. Since the school year began, those students worked on a Hearts for the Homeless project, designed to provide sleeping mats, blankets, hats, scarves and hygiene kits to the homeless population.



Jerry Davich

The handcrafted mats, created with special looms, were made from discarded plastic grocery bags. Each mat needed 500 plastic bags, taking seven hours to complete. It was a tedious challenge, even for award-winning Key Club teenagers.

"I love being able to serve in this organization and to act on my passion for community service," one of the students, Elijah Puente, told me in September when I wrote about their group.

The teens wanted to address a social problem they've heard about since childhood. It's a complex topic with no easy answers or quick fixes or absolute solutions. Multiple factors play a role in homelessness. Lost jobs,

lost marriages, lost minds, lost hope. Domestic violence. Childhood abuse. Drugs and booze issues.

Every winter, social service agencies work together to estimate the number of people who are homeless. The hidden homeless are not sprawled out on sidewalks, camped under bridges or clutching a cup rattling with coins. They're living in the shadows — in their cars, cheap hotels, friends' homes, family garages, churches, homeless shelters, you name it. They melt into libraries during the day. They linger at fast food joints at dinner time. They nurse the same drink at late-night bars.

"How can we help these people if we don't know they're homeless?" asked a reader last month in response to my column on a revamped resource for the homeless population.

John Marx, who was once homeless, relaunched <https://valposhelter.org>, an

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online resource warehouse for housing opportunities in this area. He saw a need in his community and he acted on it. The Hobart teens shared a same attitude, yet they took it a step further. They interacted with people living in tent cities in Chicago, pop-up makeshift communities that the rest of us drive past with either a gasp or a shrug. The teens delivered care packages to a tent city on Lower Wacker Drive, where they learned unexpected nuances about homelessness.

"It was an unforgettable experience to actually go into the streets of Chicago to hand out these care packages," said Puente, the organization's Indiana district governor. "Seeing these communities firsthand, and every individual's genuine appreciation for items we see as a basic essential, was quite humbling."

The experience was a "privilege-check" for the students, he said.

That morning, Puente, Polizotto, and three freshman girls loaded up a vehicle with 92 blue bags filled with donated items including hygiene products, hand-made quilts, scarves, hats, and seven of those hand-crafted sleeping mats. With grant funds from Earlham College, they also purchased pouches of tuna, trail mix, hand warmers and reusable water bottles.

During their delivery drop off, they learned that the tent city recently received a large donation of canned vegetables. Problem is, no one there

had can openers to access the food. I never would have thought of this. How about you?

"Unfortunately, we didn't bring any can openers because we were unaware of this need," Puente told me afterward. "Niche needs like this are often overlooked. Simply asking can make all the difference when it comes to effectively serving others."

Unfortunately, most of us don't ask about other people's specific needs. We presume to know and then act accordingly. Sometimes the most thoughtful of gestures can use more forethought.

For instance, last week I visited a township trustee's office for an upcoming column. I noticed huge boxes of donated toys that were left over from Christmas giveaways to children in need. Brand new toys in original packaging. Dozens and dozens of them. It looked like the Island of Misfit Toys. I asked, how did this happen?

"Toxic giving," a trustee official explained with a shrug. "It makes people feel better to give to those in need. But sometimes people give the wrong things. They just don't know what's actually needed."

Like can openers.

"One of the biggest things I learned from this experience is always try to directly ask those you are serving what they are in need," Puente said. "By doing this, you may be able to meet a hefty need you never knew was there."

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