Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder

*Explain, Persuade, Reflect on TGPLAN*

When I was younger, I was focused on what new toy I wanted, where I wanted to go on vacation, when the next playdate with my best friend was. Concerns regarding where my next meal was going to come from or where I was going to sleep that night never crossed my mind. The answer to all of those thoughts would have been easy for me, but for many youth around the world, these are serious questions, and the answers to them could have very different impacts on their lives.

Out of the 7 billion people that live on earth, an estimated 100 million people "[lack] a fixed, regular and generally adequate night-time residence" (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2005; Stewart B. McKinney Act qtd. in "Who is Homeless?”). These 100 million people are not all older men and women, they are youth as well. While it is impossible to obtain a concrete statistic on the number of people in general, much less youth, experiencing homelessness, in the United States alone, there are an estimated 1.6 million homeless children (National Center on Family Homelessness qtd. in Hoffman). Continue zooming in on Austin, Texas and a person would not see many homeless youth as they drive down the streets. However, “there are a lot of them [children experiencing homelessness]” said Cecilia Blanford, co-founder of House the Homeless, “…they try to keep the children hidden and out of sight and that’s why you don’t see so many, because it’s very dangerous for a child”.

There are many reasons why a youth-aged person would be experiencing homelessness such as abuse, neglect, economic problems, and aging out of the foster care system without receiving support (National Coalition for the Homeless). Although youth may not come to mind when a person thinks of people who are experiencing homelessness, it is not too late to realize this issue, how we are impacted by it as a community, and how we can help them. Citizens of Austin should support youth who are experiencing homelessness in the community, and the first step of supporting them is seeing them. Seeing them does not always mean literally seeing them. It means recognizing that there is a problem; that youth who should be hanging out with their friends and working their way through secondary school are street-dependent. “Austin is a highly desirable city for youth…so we see many more homeless by virtue of Austin being a cool city,” said Brett J. Barnes, Director of Development and External Relations at LifeWorks. This fact presents a unique opportunity and responsibility for the people of Austin. With these youth coming and living here, the community needs to be willing and ready to give them the support that they need and might even be crying out for.

Another step in supporting them is getting out in the community and taking action. There are many organizations around Austin that help people who are experiencing homelessness, and some even focus on helping families and youth. One of the organizations that focuses specifically on helping youth who are experiencing homelessness is called Street Youth Ministry of Austin. Located on Guadalupe Street, or “The Drag” as many Austinites know it, Street Youth Ministry of Austin works to support “street-dependent young people” (primarily high school and college aged) in our community through various outreach projects such as a Bible study, and passing out food, water, and other items (Who We Serve; What We Do). Anyone with a little time or some clothes that they want to get rid of can get involved with Street Youth Ministry of Austin. There are volunteer opportunities for everyone from small children to older adults, preparing sandwiches, donating toiletries, or just giving a smile (Ways to Get Involved; Ideas for College Students). All of those things no matter how small they may seem, can have a huge and positive impact on the lives of youth who are experiencing homelessness. Blanford, when asked what she would say to someone who does not think they can make a difference in their community, stated, “I’d say try it… because if you, if you say, “well there’s too many people out there for me to help one and it’s gonna make a difference”, it makes a difference to that one person and it can really, truly be life changing to them”. Making a difference in the world may start with making a difference in one person’s world, and that is something that everyone can do.

A group of four students from Stephen F. Austin High School, including myself, got together and worked to positively impact the lives of youth who are experiencing homelessness, as well as answer the question, “How can we provide homeless youth in Austin with the things that they need?” This question, like many others related to any global issue, does not have a simple answer. Our group researched and decided that some of the things that homeless youth need are necessities such as food and clothes, as well as fun items such as markers and books. We collected donations at O. Henry and Clint Small Middle Schools, garage sales in the community, as well as in our neighborhoods, and received bags and boxes of donations filled with clothing, shoes, books, food, and more. The generosity of our community and their willingness to help us, as well as youth who are experiencing homelessness is overwhelming. We are still collecting and sorting donations, but when we are finished they will be divided up and given to Street Youth Ministry, Foundation for the Homeless, as well as other local organizations that work with and help people who are experiencing homelessness in Austin.

When I think about all that we did in our TGPLAN (Think Globally, Problem-Solve Locally, Act Neighborly) project, I am very proud. We accomplished so much in putting together an entire action and advocacy project. At the same time, I want to remember who we are taking action for, who we are advocating for, because that is really what it is about when you get to the very core of this project. Throughout the process, I lost sight of that main goal sometimes and began to think more about myself, but I pray that God would set my eyes and mind where they need to be as our group continues in the efforts that we have begun. TGPLAN is all about giving a voice to those who do not have one, or issues that do not have one. Our group was working to make a positive impact on the lives of youth who are experiencing homelessness, as well as give them a voice by advocating for them and informing people about this issue. I am very excited to take all of our donations to the different organizations and come closer to seeing the impact that we made, yet it is possible that we will never see it, not completely at least. I know that all that we did is going to make a huge impact, even if it is in seemingly tiny ways. Youth who are experiencing homelessness can see that there are people around their same age and in their community that care about them, and know that they are there, and will not turn their eyes away. Now it is our job as students in this TGPLAN group, as well as a people in general to uphold this, continue to tell people about this issue, and take the time to help. “There’s no fixes for chronic homelessness, you don’t fix someone and make them normal,” said Steven Hebbard of Mobile Loaves and Fishes, “you accept that what they’re calling out of you is something beautiful and to accept that in this community of brokenness a new picture could be imagined”.