

The Sanity Project

Essays by a Michigan-based Homeless Education Liaison

by Beth McCullough

For over a decade Beth McCullough has served as the homeless education liaison for Adrian Public Schools, in Michigan, and as the homeless education coordinator for Michigan's Lenawee County. Her "mantra," she says, is "Education is the answer," and as she informed UNCENSORED, she "can be found crawling under porches to find homeless youth and visiting aluminum sheds to rescue children who are using a blue tarp as a blanket." McCullough has written 200-plus short essays as part of what she calls The Sanity Project: musings and observations on the people she has met in her work, the dire situations they face, and the mingled heartbreak and inspiration she finds in their stories. McCullough felt inspired to undertake the project after her supervisor asked her one day, given the stress that her work involves, "How are you going to keep doing this job?" Shortly afterward she began writing the essays, which helped her to "keep sane in the job so I could keep going," and e-mailing them weekly to four colleagues. Those women shared McCullough's writing with others in the field, who passed them on to still others—until the essays began to be included in state conferences on homeless education and McCullough started to hear her own stories being repeated back to her.



Following are seven essays from The Sanity Project.

Beth McCullough, author of The Sanity Project, in her office.

Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This ...

I have looked for success this week. It is Friday and I am still looking. Failures seem plentiful. A mother who is a long-haul trucker refused to let her daughter, who should have been a second-grader, stay with the grandmother so the girl could attend school. The mother said she was "homeschooling" her daughter. The girl can't read.

One of the unaccompanied youth I am working with said he would just go to jail because he was tired of being on probation. I told him there was no high school in jail. He shrugged. He said he would get three meals a day there and gets only two meals a day at school. He loves music, and I told him he couldn't play his trumpet in jail. He said he had to think about that one. I watched him walk out of school and disappear amongst the tall piles of dirty snow.

The Michigan Department of Education came out with guidelines that make it very, very difficult to use special education buses for homeless students. In my county the guidelines take away that option altogether.

So at noon on Friday, I have to look a little closer. I gave a coat to a high school student yesterday. He was wearing two sweatshirts, but it was below zero outside, so he was still cold. He was pretty excited about the coat. He walks a lot. His attendance continues to be spotty, but he loves his coat.

I certainly had a good smile today. When I dropped off a bag of mittens at the shelter, I saw two toddlers playing king of the hill

on top of a snow pile. The one little guy made it to the top of the six-foot-tall mountain and raised his arms in the air like Rocky. I saw the snow hill as dirty. He saw it as a victory. The mundane became his challenge and his success.

I take for granted so many of the successes of the week. They are just part of the day-in-and-day-out happenings in the job of a homeless education liaison. These successes are like the piles of snow that are the accumulation of many snows. I just take them for granted and forget to climb to the top and throw my arms in the air. Here are just a few of the successes of the week:

One of my unaccompanied youth just received a \$40,000 scholarship to the University of Michigan. She has a 4.2 GPA and will be one of our valedictorians this year. I have been trying to figure out how to get her a laptop computer and forgot to celebrate her amazing scholarship.

A 19-year-old student just made up the work he needed to finish in order to graduate this year. He has learning difficulties, so it has been a long and difficult road for him. His family has lived in at least six different places this school year. I need to call the organization that rents caps and gowns because now he will need one. Where did I put that card?

The to-do list is long, and the struggles continue, but I do need to look up and see the many victories. I am surrounded by amazing kids crawling to the top of the dirty snow pile. We all need to dance like Rocky and throw our arms up in the air. Graduation is not just one success, but the result of a thousand successes along the way. Maybe "Pomp and Circumstance" at graduation should be replaced by the theme from *Rocky*. //

"What Are You Going to Do with All of Those?"

A third-grade boy came into my office with his mother. He had not been enrolled in any school yet. I met the mother when I was at a motel, visiting another family. I think I need office hours at the Motel 6. The mother and I were filling out paperwork, calling the school to remind them that we could enroll this student even without the birth certificate that had been thrown out during the eviction. I would order another one.

The young student sat quietly in the corner, going through a box of Beanie Babies people had donated. He picked out about ten. I almost said, "Maybe you should just pick two," but they had been given to me freely. Why would I ration them out? The boy stood up with an armful of the little critters. His mother stopped him at my office door. She said, "What are you going to do with all of those?"

The boy replied, "These are the Beanie Babies that Dad would never buy us when we went to the flea market. These are the expensive ones. I am going to sell these and buy a house for us." Homeless children take on more than we know. //

“If My Mom Could Be the Mom She Wants to Be ...”

I was working with a homeless unaccompanied youth. He was a 17-year-old high school senior and varsity football player on track to graduate. His mother was a drug addict and an alcoholic. On nights when she became violent, he would find another place to sleep. We found a host home for him so he would always have a place to sleep and have some stability in his senior year.

He came to my office on a Thursday with a heavy decision to make. “My mom is really sick. She called last night.” He had disclosed to me earlier that sometimes his mother would get sick from the drugs, and he would stay with her to make sure she didn’t need the ER or go into convulsions or choke on her vomit. This student saved his mother’s life on at least one occasion.

He continued to explain his predicament: “I should go back home and take care of her. But I have a football game tomorrow. I really want to play football. But my mom could die without me.” We talked for a while and he came to the following realization: “Somewhere in her she wants to be a good mom. She must want the best for me. If my mom could be the mom she wants to be, she would want me to do the best for me.”

He played football on Friday night. I was there screaming for him like a mom, or like a homeless liaison. At one point I made my way down to the rail, and he came over to me and said, “It is good to play football.” I agreed, and he gave me a fist bump. I hope his host home knows how to wash out grass stains. //

Is it OK to Work with Toddlers?

Our new governor gave the “State of the State” address last night. He suggested that we start thinking of education as “P to 20” rather than “K to 12.” He was referring to “preschool through college” rather

than the more common “kindergarten through 12th grade.” It reminded me of this story from a tutor we employ for the local domestic-violence shelter.

The tutor had gone through the shelter’s training program and was versed in its policies, rules, and procedures. Then came her first day at the shelter. It was eye-opening for her. She was greeted by a three-year-old carrying a container of diaper wipes. He held it up to her and asked, “Please?” His diaper was full and apparently uncomfortable. The tutor found a shelter worker, who found the boy’s mother, who changed his diaper. The mother apologized to the tutor and explained that she was trying to make the diapers go as far as possible because she didn’t have many and had no funds to get more.

I met with the tutor after her first week, and she told me that story. She also asked, “Is it OK if I work with toddlers?” I told her that I would prefer she not change their diapers but that she could certainly offer preschool activities for them. She ended up prioritizing homework help for school-age children but always had preschool activities in her “bag of tricks,” as she never knew which children were going to be in the shelter when she arrived. She also performed an incredible service for moms when she explained that homeless children had priority when enrolling in Head Start. Children who had been on a waiting list were now being placed in Head Start due to their homeless status.

The tutor was also able to follow up with the three-year-old who had greeted her on her first day in the shelter. On one of her return trips, she sat down to read a book to a small group of toddlers. The little guy who had greeted her snuggled up close to her. Halfway through the book, his mother asked if she could sit in and listen too. The tutor gave her a smile and nodded yes, and the mother joined the group.

After the small group had dispersed, the mother told the tutor how much she loved listening to books, as her own mother had read to her when she was little. The tutor asked if the mother needed books to read to her child. After a few moments of hesitation, the mother disclosed that she could not read very well. The tutor explained how the mother could tell her toddler a story just by using the pictures in the children’s books. With the next group of children, the tutor demonstrated this idea. The tutor contacted me to find a referral for an adult-literacy program. (We have a great one in our town.) She also offered to help the mother with the Head Start application.

In the first half of the school year, our tutor worked with 47 children at that shelter. Twenty-seven of them were preschool-age but not in preschool. They may spend the entire day at the shelter in the whirl of women and children in crisis. It is a common shelter practice for one mom to babysit for another so little kids are not hauled around for apartment hunting and long waits at the Department of Human Services. Even when moms get out of the shelter for a few hours a day, these children may not get out at all. The tutor may be the highlight of their day. She told me, “I just want to make a difference.” I told her, “You are the difference!” In the field of homeless education, children are listed in reports to the Department of Education as “others served.” I think we would all agree they are well worth serving. //

I'm Sorry

He was soft-spoken. He made eye contact briefly and then looked at his hands in his lap. He said, "I'm sorry, I have a question. But ... umm ... I'm sorry. Wait ... I mean ... I'm sorry." He took a deep breath

and tried again: "I'm sorry. Could someone ... I mean ... I don't eat a lot. I don't eat. I'm sorry."

"When was the last time you ate?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. I just ... I just ... I ate Friday at here, at school. I'm sorry," he said. It was Monday morning. We quickly provided him with breakfast. I made arrangements for an outreach worker from the Runaway and Homeless Youth program to take him shopping with gift certificates I had for a local grocery store.

The application for food assistance from the Department of Human Services was a challenge. The woman helping him with the paperwork asked, "Doesn't your mother give you any money?" He looked down and shook his head no. He didn't have a penny on him. The woman put down "zero" as his income. That prompted a DHS worker to call him later in the day. He told me about it.

The worker wanted to know where he lived. He has permission to sleep on the couch of a friend of a friend. That gentleman is not at home most of the time and does not eat there. "How do you pay your bills with no income?" the worker asked.

"I'm sorry. I don't have bills," he said.

"Then who pays the bills where you live?"

"The guy who rents the place pays them."

"He should feed you," the worker said. "Where is your mother?" He told her his mother lives with one of her friends. "Then she should feed you too. You have two different people who can provide food for you," she said. Did she really expect this kid to say his mother was committing welfare fraud because she had not reported asking him to leave and was not providing food for him?

I gave another grocery coupon to the outreach worker to take him shopping again.

"I'm sorry," he said. Reading between the lines, I heard so much in his apologies. I couldn't read his mind, but what I heard sounded something like this:

"I am sorry to take up your time. I am sorry I don't know the answers to the questions I have. I am sorry my mom can't take care of me right now and I don't know where my dad is. I am sorry I don't want to tell you of the loneliness I feel. I am sorry I don't fit into your boxes on your forms and the 'other' line isn't big enough to describe me.

"I am sorry nobody wants me or wants to feed me. Please don't ask me why. I don't know. I am hungry. I am hurting. I am scared but I am still here. I am sorry if that bothers you. I am not sure I believe I am worth all the bother, but I want to believe I am. I want to believe I am worth an education. Maybe you don't think so. I'm sorry. You are wrong."

I read this to him. He smiled like he had been caught and then broke out into a full laugh. His laugh is not soft, and it made me laugh too. I asked if I could send out what I had written to help others understand the difficulties he faced. He said, "Send it." //

Looking Over the Edge of the Cliff

I hope that when I re-read this in years to come, I have to work very hard to remember what all the talk of the "fiscal cliff" was about. Presently, every news broadcast starts with

those words. The idea is that without some precision cutting, the federal budget will automatically have massive cuts across the board. Although I hear the panic in the voices of a number of lawmakers, citizens, analysts, and newscasters, I can't help but wonder if they have looked over the edge of the cliff lately.

Come with me to the edge, lie flat on the ground so you don't fall off the cliff yourself, and look down at what many believe will be catastrophic cuts. If we get past the dizziness from looking at

the drop and focus, we can see people holding on to bits of roots, branches, and rocky landings. Maybe there is a small tree that tried to grow out from the cliff several feet down, but it has been stripped bare of leaves as people grab on to anything they can in the fall.

What does that really mean? It means that our county has fewer Section 8 vouchers than it did ten years ago, despite a 63 percent increase in homelessness. There are over 1,000 families on the waiting list. There hasn't been a new voucher added in 18 months! Why are they still taking applications? Those families have already fallen off the cliff and are hanging onto a branch, sure that help is on the way.

It means that the emergency funding our county normally receives went from \$56,000 two years ago to \$16,000 this year.

I Met Satan in the Woods

A few times a year, I go into the woods where I know a group of homeless individuals camp out. I go to make sure there are no school-age teens who want to go back to school. On one occasion I was surprised to find a mother with a second-grade daughter. She told me the shelter was full. I told her I could help. I had to find a place for them to sleep that night or call Child Protective Services.

I asked her to come with me to my office. "Can I go?" said a man standing next to her. He was dirty and looked thin, despite the layers of clothes he had on. His hair was in knots. He wore a torn dark blue stocking cap and smelled like a wet dog.

I looked at the mother and said, "It is up to you. Is he with you?" She said, "Yeah, he is a friend. He can come along."

On the walk to the car, I asked their names, and the man took his hat off and pulled his bangs aside. The tattoo on his forehead read "666." "Just call me Satan," he said.

I stopped walking. "That is not the name your mama gave you," I said. He smiled. He knew I wasn't afraid of him. He put his hat back on and looked sheepish, like a little boy caught in a lie. The mother with us told me his name was James.

Back at my office I made some phone calls and got permission for the mother and child to stay on a couch at the shelter. I arranged transportation to school and gave them school supplies, shampoo, soap, deodorant, and new coats. I looked at James. It was cold out, and James was wearing two hooded sweatshirts with a white dress shirt underneath. It looked like he had tried to fold the collar of the dress shirt over the tops of the sweatshirts. "Do you want a coat, James?" I asked.

"Yes ma'am, I would really like a coat," he said. I smiled. His tone was so different from when he introduced himself as Satan. I found a heavy down coat for him as well as some new socks, mittens, and a new hat. He was grateful. I dropped the mother and child off at the shelter and James off at the soup kitchen.

When he got out of my car, he smoothed out his new coat and smiled at me. "Thank you very much, ma'am. You are a good woman," he said.

I offered him my hand and said, "It is good to meet you, James." He shook my hand and nodded.

Two weeks later James was sitting outside my office at 7:00 a.m., waiting for me to come to work. He was wearing the coat I had given him and had brought a mother and her middle-school son. "Ma'am," he said, "the woods is no place for these young people. I told them you could help them. I let the boy sleep with my dog. It made it really cold for me, but the boy needed to keep warm so I let Rusty sleep with him."

"Thank you, James," I said, unlocking my office door. I helped the mother and son find a place, made some arrangements, and gave them some supplies. James didn't ask for a thing. He sat quietly in the corner and picked up a book out of a box of discarded library books. I told him he was welcome to take a few. He took the one he was reading and another, both Stephen King novels.

When I dropped him off at the soup kitchen, I said, "James, when you are ready to get that tattoo off your forehead, let me know. I think I could find a doctor willing to help you with that." He laughed and told me he would think about it.

I saw James three other times before he left town for parts unknown. Rusty stayed in the woods waiting for his master to return. The other homeless people there fed him. //

Those funds are used for utility assistance, rental assistance, and food. There on the rocky landing is a family who lost their apartment because of a utility shutoff. If you can't heat it, you can't live there. It means that local charities are struggling to supply emergency food rather than funding programs like Roadmap to Graduation. Two years ago we had 13 in that program. We presently have two and had to decide today which student would receive the last slot, as we have funding for only one more. So there, hanging onto bits of root on the side of the cliff, is a 17-year-old.

Yesterday over 2,500 people protested in the rotunda of the capitol building in Lansing over the "right to work" bill, which will cripple unions. It will be signed into law next week. Next up are three bills that will drastically change school funding in Michigan. It will leave many traditional public schools with the students whom charter

schools can reject. I can't help but remember my Intro to Political Science class and *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. "Separate is not equal," they said, but we may lose that lesson. Walking into work today, I literally shook my head like I had water in my ears. I was just trying to shake off the panic of the cliff, the panic of the end of a way of life in Michigan, and the panic from the three work e-mails I read before I made it to my car to come to the office.

I helped make a decision today about which student will receive the remaining slot for the Roadmap program. Lying over the edge of the cliff, looking at the sea of people clinging below, I can grab the hand of one kid and pull. If the nation goes flying off this cliff like Thelma and Louise, I hope I am still here, grabbing the hand, the wrist, the arm of a kid to pull her up. If you see me down there, please do the same. //