

# One, One, One - Just Begin

## Ministry helps the homeless to get off the street

### By Deacon Michael Oles

“So, you begin ... I begin. I picked up one person — maybe if I didn’t pick up that one person, I wouldn’t have picked up 42,000. The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn’t put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less. Just begin ... one, one, one.”

— Mother Teresa, “Words to Love By”

Mother Teresa formed the worldwide organization Missionaries of Charity, leaving the safety and comfort of the convent to assist the poorest of the poor. In her book “Words to Love By” (Ave Maria Press, \$19.95), she talks about experiencing “the call within the call,” serving the neediest and alleviating the suffering of one individual at a time, a drop in the ocean forming a ripple of love that continues to reverberate long after her death.

Unlike Mother Teresa, I saw no lighted runway revealing my path, but rather a series of interrelated events, coupled with the prodding of a group of young students inspired by the Holy Spirit, and Off The Streets was begun. Here’s my story. I hope and pray it can become your story, too.

### Unnerving Experience

Fifteen years before I was ordained a deacon, I started volunteering one night a month at the Dorothy Day House, a homeless shelter in Danbury, Connecticut. It was the most unnerving experience — more difficult than anything I’d encountered in my 20-year Air Force career. More than anything, it was the smell that got me: wet and earthy body odor commingled with unwashed clothes and fear in an open room that housed 17 twin beds separated by small partitions.

If you’ve ever shared a room with a sibling and experienced the lack of privacy, then you know what I mean. But this was exponentially worse: the phone rang all night; people banged on the door looking for shelter and a brief respite from the elements from frigid Connecticut winters and dog-day summer rains; and incessant coughing emanated from bed after bed while I wondered about the germs. Guests roamed the floors of the shelter either to use the bathroom or because they couldn’t sleep. And always, the smells. I was scared and clung to the notion that I could get up and leave in the morning, but what about the guests? What alternative did they have other than

to go back out into the elements and hope that, by some miracle, a bed would be available the next night? The shelter saved lives but demoralized mine. I saw it as a hopeless place, and in desperation I canceled more shifts than I’d care to admit.



### Image of Christ

Despite dodging this commitment, I signed up for one week of coordinating overnight stays once each month. It proved to be a turning point in my life. I had started this journey as a good Catholic hoping to make a difference in the world, but was really more concerned with the shine of my halo, stockpiling good deeds like a squirrel buries nuts in winter, shoring up my godliness so when the time came there’d be no question about my admittance into heaven — in other words, for all the wrong reasons.

All that changed when I met Mike Kusen, a homeless Vietnam veteran, a guy who I’d told more than once that he was wasting his life. Mike would show up at the shelter, wait in line for a couple of hours to take part in the lottery system designed to handle the overabundance of people hoping to win a bed for the night and usually get turned away.

It was gut-wrenching to turn people away. Constant exposure to cold weather is punishing, and after three straight nights in the elements, Mike looked like a ghost on his feet, but God be praised, his number was called. Then, as the guests who made it through the lottery were making their way to the beds, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Mike, holding out his lottery ticket.

“I’m giving up my bed,” he said. I was stunned. I thought he was delirious and told him to take his bed, but his reply was simple: “She needs it more.” He



pointed to a lump in a corner outside the building, a woman who seemed in worse shape than Mike. And with that, my eyes were opened. Here was this man with literally nothing but the clothes on his back and a lottery ticket entitling him to a night out of the cold, and he was willing to give it up to help a perfect stranger — the epitome of selflessness. All these years I thought I was helping the homeless. Yet, at that point, what I saw in Mike Kusen was not some wasted life, but the transfigured face of the homeless Christ in my midst. It scared me, and it changed my life. Now I search for an image of Christ in everyone I meet.

## Lasting Love

We all get those mailers asking for money. Sometimes it seems that everyone has their hand out. But what if instead of money, like Mother Teresa, you could give someone a bit of lasting love? What if you could give the homeless, the very poorest among us, a new start in life by getting them into permanent housing, something which might seem impossible? To do this requires stepping out of our comfort zone — a great act of faith — just like Mother Teresa. We deacons, uniquely, by our calling to the order of the diaconate, know what it means to step out of our comfort zone. Reflect on the formation years, the studies, the papers, the discernment and questioning, trying to balance family, job and formation. It was tough. How can we forget that glorious day when we were ordained to the order of diaconate! Soon we started to settle in a life of balancing family, diaconate and job.

It can consume us, making us feel there's nothing left to give. But then, something stirs us. Maybe we read about the homeless in our community and are made to feel the utter futility of trying to solve the problem. It hits us that there are no panaceas, no lack of new comfort zones to step out of, so we continue to expand our minds, our spirit and our outreach into the community.

## Successful Program

Would you be willing to step out of the comfort of the diaconate boat and allow your parish family to learn about this time-tested successful program operating in three states, which has already helped more than 4,000 people get off the streets? Would you be willing to see if this resonates among those who are working in soup kitchens, emergency shelters and food banks? Would you give this ministry a chance to

be introduced within your parish, to be there among the people who are marginalized, those on the peripheries as described by Pope Francis? I've witnessed the impact of small committed groups of people from coast to coast firsthand, and it's a wondrous thing. The gestalt of their energy, mixed with the power of God's love, creates something more innovative, abundant and forward-thinking than any one of us alone could have produced. Off The Streets provides the lynchpin of necessities to get the homeless into affordable housing, a call to action with demonstrated results. Today we have five independent chapters in Danbury and Bridgeport, Connecticut; Lancaster and Columbia, Pennsylvania; and Huntington Beach, California. We have helped more than 4,000 homeless men, women and children move into permanent housing. We have received many testimonials, the most recent from the Very Reverend David L. Danneker, Ph.D., vicar general and moderator of the curia, Diocese of Harrisburg. He writes: "Off The Streets is a compelling ministry that I pray each day succeeds."

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**Want information on  
starting a chapter?**

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