

Lesson Plan 2

- Objective:** Students will better understand the needs of homeless people and how they can help them.
- Skill Area:** Language Arts, Critical Thinking
- Materials Needed:** *Trevor's Place*
- Student Preparation:** None
- Teacher Preparation:** Copies of *Trevor's Place*
- Activities:**
- Review vocabulary words.
 - a) Discuss homeless stereotypes.
 - Small discussion on Community Service
 - Journal
 - a) How would the loss of your parent's income change your lifestyle?
 - Read chapter one of *Trevor's Place*

Trevor's Place: The Story of the Boy Who Brings Hope to the Homeless

Trevor's Place*

The Story of a Boy Who Brings Hope to People Experiencing Homelessness

Frank and Janet Ferrell with Edward Wakin

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The Beginning: A Pillow and a Yellow Blanket

“Click.” As I heard the lock drop on the door of the brown station wagon, I looked back on and caught the apprehension in Janet’s eyes. A chill went through me as I turned to watch the silhouette of Trevor, our eleven-year-old son, as he stepped silently toward the subway steam grate beside the white concrete building not five feet in front of where I stood on the curb.

The huddled body Trevor approached on the sidewalk was almost lost in the chilly darkness on the corner of 15th and Moravian Streets. A man in dirty pants and plaid shirt, his head cradled in his right arm, was lying there like a discarded newspaper. Although we were in the center of Philadelphia near the exclusive Union League Club, two-and-half weeks before Christmas, we might as well have been on a deserted Skid Row intersection. We were there alone with that shoeless man, staring at his grease-stained white socks, wondering whether he was unconscious or, worse, ready to explode with rage.

The man did not move from the steamy grate. The air that wafted up from underground surrounded him in a damp cloud of warmth. I stood frozen. My own breath veiled my view as it turned to fog in the silent chill of a December evening. Each time I inhaled, the stench of sewage filled my head.

An unseen rat scurried in between Trevor and me. I felt an eerie, nauseating churn in my stomach.

What had I allowed Trevor to talk us into? Why did I agree to come downtown tonight? As I read the graffiti that covers the alley walls behind the streets where business people and lawyers spend their daylight hours, I kept asking myself the same question. What are we doing here? What am I doing standing on a deserted corner clutching only a spare pillow, while my little son walks alone to that human form on the ground? I was clutching Trevor’s special pillow, the one he needed to hug in order to fall asleep at night.

Trevor had pulled the hood of his jacket over his head and was a small dark figure in front of me. He walked hunched down as he approached the dozing form on the grate.

Only an hour before, Janet and I had been sipping coffee in the kitchen of our sixteen room suburban ranch house. We chatted quietly as we looked out onto our kidney-shaped swimming pool and the darkness behind it that was our two acres of woodland. On that Thursday night it had felt particularly warm and cozy inside. Our children – Liza, Allen, Jody, and Trevor- were each in their own rooms. It was one of those nights when we were all at home, and we felt most like a

family. All together, sheltered in our own cocooned, predictable world.

Suddenly, Trevor rushed in. "Quick, turn on the TV," he said breathlessly. He flipped through all the channels once, then twice. What he had seen was gone.

"The TV had these pictures of people who were living on the street!" Trevor exclaimed. "Go on, Trevor," I prompted.

"So, do people really live like that? I thought they lived like that in India, but not here, I mean, in America. The TV said these people live like that here in Philadelphia. They said it was especially sad because we're supposed to be the city of brotherly love!"

Trevor couldn't believe it. It couldn't be true. "People sure do live like that, right in center city," I confirmed.

"Why are they there?" he persisted. His dark blue eyes clouded with confusion.

"Must be because they want to be." I said without thinking.

"You mean they have no place to sleep, no homes?" He looked around the room in disbelief. "They're out there in the cold and snow right now? Tonight?"

"Trevor, not everyone lives the way we do here in Gladwyne." I turned back toward Janet to resume our conversation. But Trevor's interrogation continued.

"If they live on the street, where do they eat? How do they stay alive without a bed or blanket when they sleep outside in the winter?" Janet and I answered as best we could – with vague, evasive answers. We didn't know.

"Well, can we go downtown and help them?" Trevor asked pointedly.

"Why not?" I expected that Trevor's impulse would soon go away, like most of them did.

"Why not tonight?" Trevor demanded.

"Oh, not tonight," I groaned. "I've had an awful day." The hassles at my electronic store in nearby Bala Cynwyd had been enough to deal with for one day.

Hoping to satisfy Trevor, Janet added, "Let's talk about it another time and we'll see about going downtown." Trevor insisted. He wanted to go downtown tonight. He acted as if some street person's life depended on it.

Finally, I said, "That's enough, Trevor," and he dejectedly budged back to his room. He was sad his own parents didn't want to help him help the people on the streets.

Janet and I looked at each other with a sigh. "Frank, we take all four of our kids to church and Sunday School every week and send them to Christian camp every summer because we want them to care about other people. What kind of double message are we giving him now?"

"I know, Janet," I responded. "I was just thinking about the discussion in our church group a few weeks ago. Remember? We talked about what it means to really love our neighbors and not just talk about it."

A rare opportunity to go with our son to give to the "least of these" was open before us. Trevor had initiated it. My eyes were drawn back to the cold darkness beyond our back patio. We lapsed into a long period of silence.

I thought maybe this would show Trevor, living in protected suburbia, how well off he was. Normally, he was all wrapped up in Pac-Man and riding his motorbike up and down the cul-de-sac. He was not working hard enough in school. We struggled with him all the time about homework and grades. Maybe an experience like this would help him understand priorities and motivate him.

"OK, Trevor," I called out. I felt as though we were giving in to his childish impulse and just looking for adult justifications to rationalize going. "We'll take you downtown tonight." I was confident this would be the last we would hear of it.

As Trevor ran to find his warmest jacket and shoes, Janet dug an old yellow blanket out of the hall linen closet. Just as we were

leaving, Trevor grabbed his special pillow from his bed. During the twelve-mile drive downtown, he put the blanket under the heater to warm it, and he quietly hugged the pillow.

Janet and I tried to prepare Trevor for what he would encounter downtown, not sure ourselves what we would discover. We weren't even sure that we would be able to find any street people. We didn't really know where to look.

We passed the expressway sign that directed us toward city center, and veered to the left.

"Now, Trevor," I said, "we may not even find anybody. And if we do, they may not want your blanket. If they don't want it, don't be upset. It has nothing to do with you. Some people have too much pride to accept charity." I could tell Janet was worried about whether Trevor might get injured. So I said, "Don't worry, Trevor, when we get down there, I'll be right behind you." But Trevor wasn't concerned at all.

Almost as soon as we arrived downtown, we saw the man sleeping on a grate at the corner of 15th and Moravian. We stopped the car and scrutinized the huddled figure. None of us had ever taken much notice of a street person, much less watched another human being sleep on the street. I marveled that he slept with nothing but metal strips beneath him...nothing to protect him from the bitter wind. I wondered what he dreamed of. I had never stared at another human being as I did that night. Who was he? Did he have any family? Friends? Where did he come from? How did he start out and how did he end up like this? Would he answer if we asked him questions? What will he do when Trevor steps up next to him? What kind of father am I to bring my son down here and then let him go over to some guy lying in the street? These thoughts raced through my head as we watched that mysterious human being, an isolated creature. At that moment the whole universe seemed to center on that one solitary figure.

Trevor scrambled over Janet to get out of the car. Her eyes fixedly probed the curled-up body from behind the window. I walked around from the driver's side. The motor was still running. Trevor stooped over the man. There was no turning back. My mind stopped racing with unanswerable questions. No longer a worried father or even a curious suburbanite, I was now simply a spectator. I was there and yet I wasn't. It was all in Trevor's hands. Janet and I were rapt observers at a private street-corner drama starring our son.

This was the quiet beginning of a thunderous change in our lives. But at that moment we were still a suburban family taking a quick peek at life in the raw before we rushed back to the safety of home.

"Here, sir, here's a blanket for you." Trevor offered as if he were bringing a cup of coffee to a guest in his own dining room. He laid the crumpled, half-folded, yellow blanket on the man's arm.

The man sat up on his elbow, a dazed expression on his face, and mumbled, "Thank you very much. God bless you."

Trevor simply returned the blessing "God bless you," and turned back toward the car.

I spun around, relieved and about to burst with excitement. Janet turned down the car window warily and heard me blurt out: "Did you see his face? Did you see the smile on his face?" I was standing there announcing the event as though I were some kind of herald angel. Trevor, however, was calm.

After piling back into the car, we drove around the block and came back to see whether the man had unfolded our yellow blanket and placed Trevor's pillow under his head. We wanted to see him using our gifts, and we did. He looked as though he were at home sleeping, cuddled comfortable in a warm bed.

During the short trip home, we were inebriated with joy. "Did you see that smile?" I asked again and again.

“Yeah, it was great,” Trevor concluded. He beamed.

Though Jane still had reservations about the wisdom of our excursion, she, too, was flooded with a rush of warm feelings. By the time we reached home, we felt as though we had returned from a religious experience. We felt as though we had been praying, but I couldn’t remember offering any words. I remember deciding we’d been praying with our actions.

Before going to bed, I stepped into the shower. With my hand on the knob, I started to appreciate how amazing and nice it was just to turn a knob and feel warm water wash the cold and dirt away. The steam surrounding the faucet reminded me of the steam coming from that subway grate. Simple running water. Talk about taking things for granted! That night, and countless time since, I have felt gratitude for the ordinary things in life. I began to notice how snug my own bed was; how, at even the thought of food or a first twinge of hunger, I could satisfy my needs by walking to the refrigerator. These were lessons I thought I would teach my son. But I had to learn them first. We were all learning.

As he got ready for bed, Trevor thought about the man on the grate, now wrapped in the yellow blanket and resting his head on his pillow. Trevor fell asleep in no time at all, without a thought or desire for his other pillow.

On Friday evening, when I returned home as usual at exactly 5:20, Trevor met me at the front door. “Can we go again tonight? Mom and I found two more blankets.” I was annoyed at Trevor’s badgering, because the next day was the most aggravating day of the week at work. Saturday was problem day for all the people who had bought home computers or video machines and wanted to know why they were having so much trouble getting what they wanted to come up on the screen. At the same time, I was curious. Did

that man still have our blanket and pillow? Thursday’s experience had stuck with me all day. When I was tempted to complain about the pressures and demands of customers and problems, I flashed back to the scene at 15th and Moravian. I would see that unknown man’s smile of gratitude, a man who had nothing. He brought perspective to my day-to-day difficulties. I guess I knew I would go again. Janet shared Trevor’s excitement as he talked about going downtown. He had persuaded her all afternoon with his bantering and enthusiasm.

Finally neither Janet nor I needed to weigh any pros or cons. All three of us wanted to go downtown again. We had two more blankets to give away and, besides, Friday had been a gloomy day with temperatures getting down to freezing. We looked forward to the warm reception we hoped awaited us. We wanted to see if that man was still sleeping under our blanket.

When we reached the grate, we were disappointed. He wasn’t there. We drove on. A few blocks away we saw a different man wrapped tightly in our yellow blanket. We cheered. Our blanket was in circulation! But what had happened to that first man? We were getting our first glimpse of the hidden community, a veritable subculture operating out there on the streets.

As we cruised slowly past a doorway on Locust Street between 13th and Broad Streets, Trevor shouted, “There’s somebody!” Janet and I didn’t see anyone. We drove around the block to show Trevor he was wrong, but sure enough, he’d spotted a half-hidden clump of humanity.

Even though it was only our second experience, we let Trevor venture out on his own. We had already decided there was no real danger. Something innocent and almost magical had pervaded Trevor’s first encounter. We trusted that. Still, we parked a few feet from the shadowy doorway, as close as we could inch the wagon. The man did not

stir. Trevor gently covered him, tucking the blanket around him. There was neither a nod nor a murmur.

From there, we continued down 13th Street to Walnut and on toward Rittenhouse Square. Trevor's eyes, riveted on the passing scene, spotted someone near a parking lot and some stores. "There's somebody walking." I stopped the car and followed Trevor, his arms bundled with a big blanket, as he strode toward a disheveled man who was shuffling along. We approached from behind, and the closer we got to him, the more the man picked up speed. As we tried to catch up with him, we were almost running.

Suddenly, the man wheeled around, reached in his pocket, and drew three black pens. He leveled them at us as if they were ray guns or hand-held bayonets poised to puncture our illusions of safety. Trevor jumped back in fear. I stopped short and reached for him. The man glared at us and rushed away. Trevor smiled adamantly, "I don't want to try to help anyone who's up and walking around. No way! Never again."

Then and there we realized that you don't approach street people in any ways that might be construed as threatening. In their lives, every stranger is a potential enemy. They must always look over their shoulders. They're human wanderers who never know if someone is going to kick them-or, occasionally, help them. I'd never noticed before that I expected people would be kind to me – even unknown people. I didn't know what it was to live in constant fear.

We drove a few blocks further and saw a man sitting cross-legged, looking vacantly into space. Trevor gave the bewildered man a blanket. As he chattered on the way home, he decided to nickname the man "Puzzle." Before we knew it, nicknames became the way we identified those we helped. We met them as people without names or identities. They seemed faceless. But as Trevor gave them names that reminded us of how we ran across them, we began to create some kind of personal link. The street people were becoming more than strangers in need of essential care and basic commodities. They were coming into focus as distinct personalities – members of a forgotten community.

As we drove home, we were all lost in our own thoughts and the glow of having helped two more people. We now had three blankets and one pillow in circulation on the streets of Philadelphia. On the surface, we were still a family crossing a dozen miles to the safety, warmth, and comfort of the suburbs. Yet already the breezes of transformation were rustling inside of us. And Trevor was leading the way.

Who is homeless? How big is the problem?

- Anybody can become homeless.
- Every night in Minnesota approximately 8,600 people experience homelessness and thousands of other families are at risk of losing their homes.
- Children make up one of the largest and fastest growing segments (approximately 43%) of the homeless population.
- Most homeless families are made up of a young single mother with two young children.
- Some homeless youth live without their parents or another adult to care for them. These children have an even harder time finding shelter because they do not have adult supervision.
- On any given night in Minnesota, an estimated 660 unaccompanied youth (persons 17 or younger) are without permanent shelter.