

THE HEART HAS A HOME

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Hearbreak. Sympathy. Sadness. Those are the emotions I felt this past November when I opened up The Boston Sunday Globe and read an article by Steven Rosenberg about homeless children and families living in a Danvers motel. I could not stop thinking about that all day. It weighed heavily on my heart and mind. I needed to do something.

As an educator in an inner city school district, I have seen my share of children from poor families. Homeless children and families are everywhere. We educate these children for six hours a day in our classrooms but when we pack up our belongings and head for home, their day does not end like ours does. We go home to warm houses, comfortable lives and nourishing food. They go on a bus to shelters, motels or transitional housing. That is their home. That is their reality. Our reality has become clouded when we look the other way as the man on the park bench lays covered in tattered newspapers. He is dirty and probably hungry. Can you look the other way? Forget that he exists? I can't.

After I read the article I needed to take action. I called the motel and asked if I could bring some books to the children. The manager set up contact with the social service agency so I could make arrangements and Project DEAR (Donate, Educate, Amaze, and Read!) was born. Once I got organized, I emailed Steven Rosenberg to thank him for bringing such an important topic to light. He did a follow up article in The Boston Globe to publicize my efforts. As a result, people from all over Massachusetts wanted to get involved. They offered to donate books, read to the children and take action in their local communities. The outpouring of volunteers has been heartwarming and I feel so lucky to have met wonderful people who want to help with this cause.

Gathering books and bringing them to shelters is a simple thing. It is another thing to leave these children behind until I visit them again. They have desperate eyes and longing hearts for someone to read to them. Recently, I brought my 13 year-old niece with me as part of her community service project for school. She read to a small group of children and the smiles on their faces were priceless. I read to them with exaggeration and expression and try to impart life into the stories, hoping this will transfer to the children and excite them about books.

"I can keep these?" asked the children on many occasions. I thought, "We came for you. You are our focus today. Right now," but they didn't understand that. Since the children wanted us to keep reading for a long time, I got the impression that some parents may not be literate. "Will you be back?" some parents asked. "Yes of course," I replied.

These children are tender. It is not their fault they are growing up in such sad situations. There is no judgment towards the parents. They live in a room, often four to six people together in small cramped quarters, with no home to call their own. Before I start reading, the children mill around the motel lobbies. The mothers, often with many children in tow, push strollers and carry plastic bags with laundry passing through to their rooms. The momentary chaos often leads to a calm and captive audience as I begin to place books out for the children and read.

These reading sessions provide a respite for the parents. They smile at me as I read to their children, gathered on the floor of a motel lobby rug.

At the last motel I visited, a toddler came up to me and rested her hand on my knee while I read to her, but when I finished the story she asked me to continue. Her eyes were beautiful, big, brown and full of light. I am sure she was about three, and she giggled as I read.

Homelessness is an epidemic. As of January 2015, The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless reports that there are around 4500 families with children and pregnant women in Massachusetts' Emergency Assistance (EA) shelter program. Many live in motels, cars and other unsafe living conditions. The sad reality is that these children will suffer the most. It is devastating. They need our help. They need homes. They need books and they need to be read to. These children are our hearts and our future. ■

Sources

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§ **MARCY A. WINER** has been in education for 10 years as a paraprofessional. Since last fall has been enrolled in the M.Ed. Program in Early Childhood Education at Rivier University seeking her teaching certification. Marcy enjoys working with young children and has been teaching in Kindergarten for many years. She enjoys leading the reading groups. Marcy has written a yet unpublished children's book about a little boy who befriends a bumble bee. She hopes to publish that book soon. Most recently, she has begun a campaign to aid homeless children and launched the Project DEAR (Donate, Educate, Amaze and Read!). This program collects new and gently used books for children in need. In her free time, Marcy enjoys writing, making jewelry, sewing, cooking, exercising, and lots of crafting.