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BLANKETS
AND
SHELTER

for the
homeless

GROWING UP
VEGAN

QUIET
ACTIVISM:

taking understated
action

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL:

is it possible?



From Blankets to Urban Shelter for the Homeless

Beth Ross and The Blanket Tampa Bay Story

By Deborah Bostock-Kelley

We are all just one catastrophic event away from homelessness. Let the magnitude of that sink in for one minute. One lost job, one disease, one addiction, one death. ONE. A single event could move you from an accepted, contributing member of society to having almost everyone avoid your gaze.

Through her work with the homeless in Tampa Bay, Beth Ross has discovered a sad reality - most people treat

homeless animals better than homeless human beings. People will take in, feed, bathe, and rehome pets, but most would never think to allow a stranger into their home for a hot meal, running water, and clean clothing.

During a particularly chilly December in 2014, Beth was volunteering at Trinity Café and reached out to the director to find out how many people in need were served daily. When she was told 285, she made it her goal to collect 300

blankets so that every single person would have a warm blanket on Christmas Eve.

As fate would have it, in the same timeframe, the church Beth and her husband Ray attended was given a large donation. The church gave each family \$100 and said to do something to help someone with the money; in January, they would discuss what had been accomplished.

Beth knew how much she disliked being cold, so she decided to use the \$100 to buy as many blankets as she could to hand out to those living on the streets. Tampa Bay seldom dips into freezing temperatures, but during the coldest part of winter, even the 'Sunshine State' is uncomfortable when you lack essentials like a coat, hat, and gloves. Providing blankets both offered protection from sleeping on the ground or pavement and covered susceptible, often exposed skin, serving as a barrier from the wind and the chilly temperatures.

After she made her purchases, she created a page on Facebook and posted about her need for 300 blankets. Her post went viral and she was overwhelmed by the kindness of friends and strangers as far away as Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin, and California. She managed to deliver 308 blankets.

"I was so touched passing out the blankets to the homeless because they were so thrilled. They weren't used to getting a gift," she said. "We collected the next year and I got over 800 blankets."

This one small act of kindness set the wheels in motion. Beth created the nonprofit Blanket Tampa Bay to challenge the stigma associated with homelessness. Paperwork that normally means months of red tape was approved in two weeks.

With an abundance of blankets, Beth joined the men and women at St Peter Claver Church in providing food, and passed out more blankets.

"One day a remarkable thing happened. I was going to work and saw this man sitting on a bus bench. It was really cold and all he had on was a t-shirt and blue jeans. He didn't look like he was doing well. I watched as the people hurried past him, purposefully not making eye contact because he was a bum. I stopped to see if I could help him, but he kept saying, "No, I don't want any help. Leave me alone."

Anyone who knows Beth will know that this answer wouldn't do. The next morning, he was in the same spot, leaning over to the right. She stopped to ask if he needed help and he gave her the same response.

"The third morning, I saw that he was lying flat. I called a police officer friend of mine - Dan McDonald, Tampa PD Liaison for the Homeless - and told him that he wasn't doing well."

Officer McDonald took the man to St. Joseph's Hospital.

"It turns out the guy sitting on the bench had been there for four days. He was suffering from a broken hip and kidney failure. People walked past him, didn't look at him, and it really broke my heart."

Doctors quickly repaired his hip and worked to restore his kidney function. He spent several weeks in the hospital before going to a rehab facility.

"In rehab, we found out that his name was Charles and he had been employed by the Pinellas County Schools for more than 30 years and had a pension," said Beth. "I always ask the homeless what's your story because, no matter who you are, everyone has one."



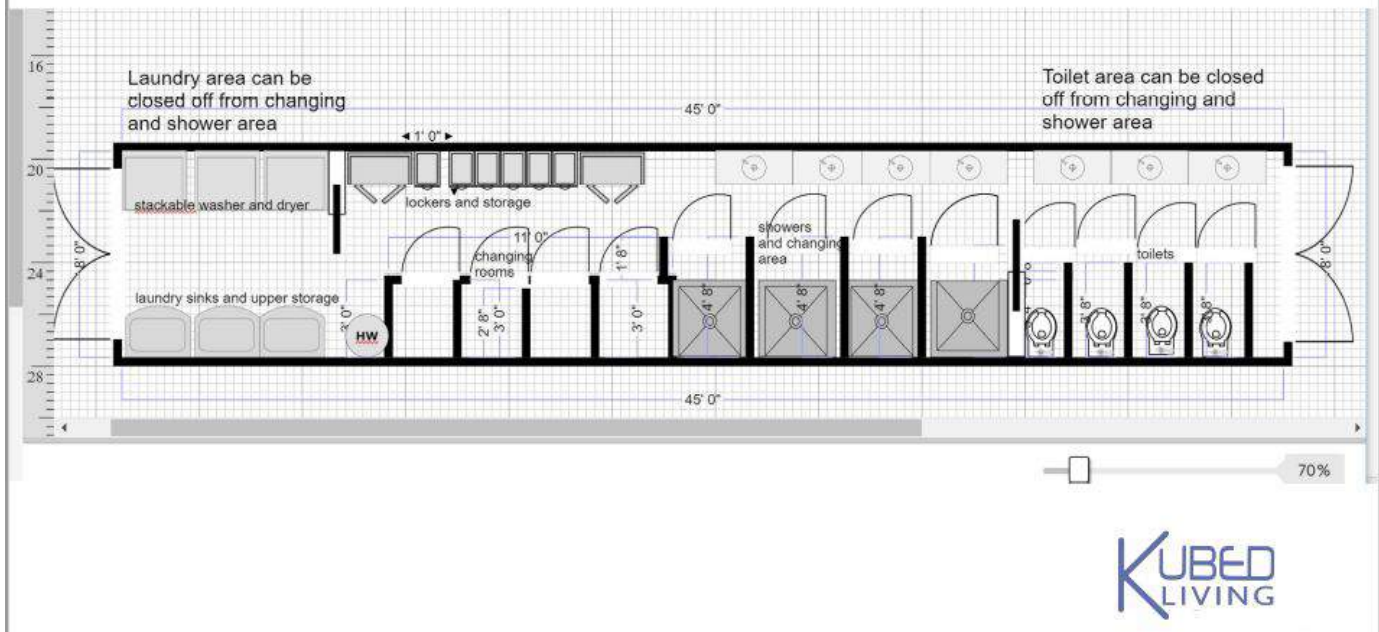
An Urban Rest Stop

Charles had married later in life, but when his wife died, his grown-up step-daughter, whose name was on the mortgage, kicked him out and he became homeless. Social workers helped Charles file for his retirement and Social Security, and now he lives in an apartment. Doctors said if Beth had ignored Charles like the other passersby and not reached out to Officer McDonald, Charles would have died on that bench.

Stories like this are all too common, and Beth makes sure she learns everyone's story. If someone tells Beth that he needs steel-toed boots or a chef's jacket for gainful employment, Beth supplies whatever was requested.

Over the years, she has learned many lessons. The most important is that the homeless never get to choose. They are always given items, never allowed to pick for themselves.

Proposed design for an URBAN RESTSTOP



After her second year, she offered them the opportunity to choose their own blankets.

Other requests were far from extravagant. Imagine not having little items we often take for granted – Q-tips, Band-Aids, nail clippers, backpacks to house their few belongings.

“The homeless seldom take off their shoes. They sleep in their shoes because they’re afraid someone is going to steal them,” Beth explained.

One individual kept asking for sleeping bags week after week. Beth finally asked what he was doing with them and he revealed that he was handing them out to other homeless people, so they didn’t have to sleep on newspaper.

Today, Beth has touched over 17,000 lives, donating over 7,500 blankets, thousands of hygiene items and backpacks, shoes, socks, and sleeping bags. Yet the most common human need can’t be solved by warm blankets, toiletries, and essentials.

Inspired by Urban Rest Stops in Seattle, Beth wants to create a 45-foot container, an Urban Shelter, a safe structure for the homeless to shower and wash their clothing.

She already has two staffing companies lined up, eager to help them find jobs.

“Some of these people are veterans, many have skills. I can help them get their resume ready. I have a clothes closet.”

Beth has been told that the Urban Shelter needs to be south of the interstate, south of Trinity.

“I’m trying to solve a community problem by getting the homeless cleaned up, getting them a job, getting them off the street, but that starts with the Urban Shelter. I’ve got the drawing – it’s amazing – I’m just trying to find a place to put this. It’s become a burning passion in my heart. We just need funding and we need land to get this Urban Rest Stop built. It makes me mad when people think that every single homeless person is a drunk or bum, because everyone has a story. Sometimes, you just need to take the time to ask what it is.”

To learn more or to contribute to Beth’s fundraising for the Urban Shelter, visit www.blanketampabay.org or <https://www.facebook.com/blanketforhomeless>.

About the writer

Deborah Bostock Kelley is a journalist, playwright, producer, director, actress, author, Broadway World theatre critic, owner of [The WriteOne Creative Services](http://TheWriteOneCreativeServices.com), & founder of Life Amplified variety showcase for charity.

