

This is my first-person account of what it was like to spend a weekend living as a homeless person at Exit 0's Campout for Homelessness back on Nov. 16.

I was skeptical about me and my youth group's involvement when one of the Exit 0 Directors, Paul Stensrud, told me it was a two-night event.

"One day is easy," Paul told me. "It's that second night when you really get a feeling of what it's like to be homeless."

First, with a busy schedule, it's hard to get two nights away. Secondly, the thought of living in cardboard boxes for two nights did not sound at all appealing.

I somewhat reluctantly agreed to bring up the possibility to the youth of Pekin United Methodist Church – stressing that this was not going to be a typically fun youth outing.

They were all on-board, some hesitated with not being able to bring cell phones and not having food at their beckon call, but they seemed interested.

There was only one rule about them attending – they had to each raise \$50 (or at least try) for Exit 0 – and they couldn't ask anyone at the church.

I told Paul we were in and it seemed like we had at least 10 of the 15 regular attendees from our Wednesday youth meeting on board.

Over the weeks leading up to the weekend, the number of kids attending dwindled and by the time we pulled out of the church parking lot that weekend we were down to just five kids. My wife Tonya and I brought the total to seven people attending from our group.

We did raise more than \$300 as some members of the youth group collected but opted to sleep in their warm beds rather than a sleeping bag inside a cardboard box.

We ate supper under the expressway in Jeffersonville. Ironically enough, a group from Pekin United Methodist Church was serving the homeless a meal that night at Exit 0.

That was our Friday meal.

By the time we got to Park Memorial United Methodist Church to set up our sleeping arrangements we were already behind.

It was dark and already cold enough that trying to get duct tape to stick to our cardboard boxes was a challenge.

We managed to get make-shift housing built.

I was all set. I had a nice shelter built, with just one flaw – my feet were sticking out of the bottom.

When I woke up Saturday morning, my feet were so cold that I spent 10 minutes searching for my toes on the ground because I was convinced that they had frozen and fallen off while I slept.

Outside of my feet freezing, it wasn't so bad. Sure I was cold and uncomfortable, but Friday night gave way to Saturday morning and the optimism of serving our Lord in the homeless community had me excited.

We got to go inside the church gym for breakfast, which Stensrud said was a luxury for the homeless, since there aren't many places in the area they can get a warm breakfast.

Exit 0 ensures that at least one meal a day is served under the expressway in Jeffersonville, but good hot meals in the morning are few and far between.

“That’s where the need for a building for us (Exit 0) comes in because we could provide a place they could come and get food,” he said.

Exit 0 actually had a place like that in downtown Jeff. It was a place where the homeless could come and shower, fill out job applications on-line and pick up donated clothing if there was a need.

But elected officials in Jeffersonville halted that venture in its tracks. I’d like to go deeper into why a city spends \$150,000 a year on an animal shelter while giving nothing to the homeless shelter. That is a topic for another day.

We had some donuts and eggs cooked with hotdogs that morning. I wasn’t a fan and I could afford to be picky since A. my homeless experience totaled just one day to that point and B. there were donuts to fall back on.

With my belly full, we headed out to a homeless camp near the Tumbleweed in downtown Louisville.

I had driven on Interstate 64 past those homeless camps more times than I could count, but I never dreamed there were people living there.

Who would have thought that in the midst of those trees and that brush there were homeless people.

The area was a mess and we spent most of the morning cleaning the vacated camps. It was a mess, but Stensrud told us it was an important job we were doing.

“If the health department were to come in and see the mess, they would make the homeless who remain here leave,” he said. “If they come in and it’s not a mess, there is a chance they can stay.”

So that’s what we did. We spent the better part of the day cleaning up those areas. I think I heard we filled more than 220 trash bags – give or take.

That wasn’t just the group from Pekin, but several other volunteers and church youth groups.

It was a great experience. On breaks we got to sit and share with the homeless right in their living space. I was blown away by some of the brutal honesty when they shared.

Some confessed that they were homeless because of mental illness, other said it was their choice because they don’t function well in our society.

There were some who said losing good paying jobs for various reasons led them to the streets and others said it was addiction, either alcohol or drugs that had them there.

We even met a 14-year-old who had spent time being homeless. He now works with Stensrud and his wife Michelle, along with his mother, ministering to other homeless people through Exit 0.

I told the 14-year-old’s mom that he seemed so much older than 14 and she said, “Being homeless, homeless shelters, force you to grow up quicker than most!”

When lunch time came, eggs and hotdogs were sounding pretty tasty – but thankfully it looked as if bologna and vegetable soup would be our meal.

Plus we had a baggie filled with the hottest barbeque chips I’ve ever tasted.

That’s where I started and honestly from that moment on my taste-buds were done.

After that, nothing I ate in the boxed lunch they gave me tasted good.

I ate the Veggie soup because I was queasy from hunger and passed the rest of my lunch on to one of the homeless guys we were having lunch with.

At that point we were probably only 19 hours into being homeless and I still wasn’t hungry enough to humble myself to eat what the Lord had provided.

We finished cleaning and then headed back to our cardboard city for some rest before supper.

Upon our return, we found what the early morning dew hadn't destroyed of our cardboard homes, vandals finished off.

Someone had even broken into our camp and stole some stuff.

Many of the young people were mad, some so much so that they needed cool-down time before they could even be approached.

One person even had their cardboard house set on fire with their belongings in it.

We later found out that the belongings were fine. Those things along with the other stolen items were returned.

It turns out that the fire, the thefts and the cardboard house vandalism was part of the homeless experience.

"We just wanted to give them the feeling of what these people on the street experience," Stensrud said. "They leave their camps and return to find everything gone, or vandalized. That's when the blame-game begins. They start blaming other people in the camp and that's what happened here as some of the youth thought other people in the camp were responsible."

Luckily being a youth leader, they left my house alone, or it could have been that it looked so bad in the first place, they thought it was already vandalized.

All of the residents of the cardboard city spent the next few hours rebuilding their homes. I tried to take a nap, but couldn't sleep. I was both sleep and food deprived and my addiction to Diet Pepsi had me going through withdraws.

Stensrud's wife Michelle finally hooked me up with some Diet Pepsi and as I took that first sip, everything for a moment, felt right in the world.

By supper time, even if the meal would have been eggs and hotdogs, I would have eaten them because I was starving.

Luckily, we had spaghetti and garlic bread and I didn't think I was ever going to get full enough. After my second plate, however, the thought of needing to get up in the middle of the cold November night forced me to put my fork down.

Once you get warm in the sleeping bag and then get up, it's three times harder, if not impossible, to warm back up.

Both evenings of the weekend we got to hear testimonies about how God has used Paul and Michelle and the Exit 0 ministry to change lives.

On Saturday night, Park Memorial Pastor Jim Moon shared a message and then everyone helped fill goodie bags, which Exit 0 distributes to the homeless. They were filled with canned meat, tooth paste, snack-pack puddings, Slim Jims – things that will help the homeless get through a day when there aren't any meals available, or they can't get to them.

Once the bags were filled we had to go back outside into the cold with the news that there would be no breakfast served. We were asked to fast to remember those who wouldn't have a meal that day.

Hearing the word "Fast" made me feel better about loading up on the spaghetti.

By this time our youth group of five went to four as one of them tapped out and headed home. Is it wrong that I wanted the other four kids in our group to join her? If they did, their youth leader would have to return home with them!

The other four wanted to stay and there we were, back in our shabby looking cardboard boxes. All of us except for a man named Rick Missi.

Rick had gotten his hands on some really good cardboard and constructed what looked like a cardboard townhouse amongst a sea of huts.

At some point Saturday night, Stensrud's words about why it was a two-day event suddenly

made sense.

I was never able to get warm or comfortable on the second night, but I did finally get to sleep. I slept so hard that I didn't hear the police officer waking people up to tell them they were on private property.

That was another example orchestrated to give us a taste of the homeless experience.

"Our officer woke them up, shined a light in their faces and then tucked them back in," Stensrud said. "The waking up and the light in the face happens to the homeless all the time, but I've never heard of the police tucking them back in. So it was almost realistic, until he did that!"

I was wide awake by 4 a.m. It was cold and the news that we wouldn't get breakfast had me hungrier than I normally am that early.

Tired and hungry weren't my only feelings, I was also discouraged. I wanted to get up, but my will to do so wasn't there.

In less than 36 hours, homelessness had zapped me of my desire to even get up out of bed.

I remember thinking, "Six more hours until I get to go home!"

Then I realized what if I was homeless? What would I be looking forward to then? When you've got another day of living on the street, not knowing where the next meal is going to be, what do you look forward to then?

It was that realization that inspired me to pull myself up that morning.

I am blessed with a job, a home, food in the fridge, a church family who loves us and is there for us when we need them.

I had to get up because I think that's why God had me there. He wanted me to experience the weekend so I could share with others how hard it is. What their needs are!

I got up and I have to be honest, spent the next couple of hours upstairs in the church youth room. Turns out, I wasn't the only one with that idea as a number of the teens were sleeping on the gymnastic mats in the church's gym.

Our stomachs growling, feeling bone cold and more than a few of us feeling sick, we headed to Louisville.

There is a group like Exit 0 in Louisville that organizes church for the homeless on Sunday mornings. Different groups bring food to be served, there is praise music and someone delivers the message every week

The Louisville water front had never looked so beautiful to me as I watched the most diverse group of people I had ever seen praising the Lord – fellowshiping with one another. As I stood and looked around it was honestly hard to distinguish the actual homeless and those of us who were only there for the weekend.

Seeing that, I had a revelation – that's how God sees us. He sees George the editor the same as he sees Nick the homeless guy! He loves us both exactly the same. Jesus went to that cross for us both. He took the torture and the nails so we both could spend eternity with Him.

After breakfast was served, Exit 0 and another group handed out lunches and crucial items like hats and gloves.

We headed out before everyone was gone. Our group of six was going to soon be down a few more numbers if we didn't leave soon.

We all made it back to Pekin.

When I asked a kid in our group, Joey Vregge, if he'd do the Campout for Homelessness next year he was honest.

"You might ask me in a couple of weeks once I forget how hard it was," he said.

I might mention that Joey had been in a cast with a broken leg for the two-months prior to the camp out and had his cast removed the day we left.

He never complained once!

If someone would have asked me the question I asked Joey, I would have answered the same way – “Ask me later!”

It was a hard weekend. But it was also a blessing to know that God is using people to provide the spiritual and physical needs of these men, women and teens.

They are there to help when the homeless decide or become able to take steps toward putting their lives back together.

People like Paul and Michelle don't plan their ministry around their schedule – they organize their life around their ministry.

They need our help. They need financial support, they need volunteers (not just at Thanksgiving and Christmas) and more importantly than any of that – they need our prayers!

Join me in praying for Exit 0 and other groups who serve the homeless. Pray that elected officials will quit trying to sweep the needs under the rug and start working with groups to help instead of hinder.

Pray that the restaurant manager will wait an extra five minutes before sending the homeless man back out into the cold because he has been there longer than the 20 minute limit.

If you don't know how to pray for them, just pray that God will keep them all safe in his arms.

I will close this story with a selfish request – pray for me. Pray that every time I sit down to a hearty meal, God will remind me that I am only a bad break or two away from eating hotdogs and eggs!

God bless you all this Holiday season.

To find out more information about Exit 0 visit www.jesuscaresatexit0.org or call 502-541-2353.

To help the group in Louisville with church on Sunday morning, call 502-777-7500.