

This World Cup has one goal: end homelessness

Stephen De Tarczynski | Inter Press Service | Dec. 31, 2008



(AFP/William West)

The 2008 Homeless World Cup, held Dec. 1-7, saw a total of 56 teams competing in 300-plus matches, with organizers estimating an overall attendance of around 130,000 spectators for the week, with 50,000 alone for the final day.

The competition has grown exponentially since it was first held in Austria in 2003, when 18 teams competed. This year saw a separate women's competition play for the first time, with eight nations participating.

The Homeless World Cup -- scheduled next for Italy in 2009 -- has triggered grass-roots street football programs involving more than 30,000 people across more than 60 countries. Organizers point to research that indicates that more than 70 percent of Homeless World Cup players make significant, positive changes in their lives, including moving into homes, jobs or education and addressing drug and alcohol issues.

Mel Young, a 55-year-old Scotsman who is the Homeless World Cup's president and cofounder (with Harald Schmied), spoke with Inter Press Service in Melbourne.

IPS: The advertising slogan for the 2008 Homeless World Cup is "56 teams, one goal." What is that one goal?

Mel Young: The one goal is to end homelessness. The goal is that afterwards people are not homeless anymore. Personally, I don't think there should be any homelessness in the world and this is a practical way, a grass-roots way of creating a change.

Is ending homelessness achievable?

It would appear to be impossible because there are 1 billion people homeless in the world, but I don't see why it should be. I think we have to change our attitude towards it and towards poverty. We've created a system where the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, where one person is richer than one country and where people die because they can't get to water. Now, that's not sustainable for the world.

The human race is incredibly resourceful. If we put our minds to it we can do a lot and so if we decide to end homelessness, we can end homelessness. ... In some ways this global financial crisis is maybe asking some questions of us all about the kind of values that we should have. And maybe we need to return to some of these basics.

Have you been surprised at the growth that the competition has achieved in such a short time?

Staggered. It's way beyond anything I imagined, in size, in terms of impact but also in things like media interest. That's been a side that's interesting because media normally present homeless people as negatives and they now present them as positives. And I think that goes the same for people who are watching the games.

Do significant life changes for the players come just from football? Is it just being involved in the sport itself?

Soccer is a very simple game to do; anybody can do it. It's a round ball, people kick it around. ... You can be rubbish at it or you can be brilliant at it. But the sport is about a psychological change taking place. When you're homeless you're very isolated. ... If you look at sport it's all about teamwork, it's all about inclusion and support. ...

We are creating families around football, something in which they can belong. That is a very, very powerful tool. Many of these people have absolutely wrecked self-esteem and are very low on confidence. When you're like that, even if opportunities emerge like potentially having a house or potentially having a job, you don't get it because you don't have the confidence, so it's about instilling confidence.

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