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'This year one family made a quarter-million-dollar gift to us. And a homeless man gave us two cents. That's the range.' (NCR photo/Teresa Malcolm)



by Mark Redmond

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As the director of a nonprofit organization in Burlington, Vermont, that helps homeless and at-risk teenagers, one of my principal duties is fundraising. With fewer federal and state dollars available, we have no alternative but to ask individuals, companies and foundations to donate so we can keep our doors open for those youth needing our services.

A few years ago, a restaurant a few blocks away from our shelter held a Free Burrito Day, with all proceeds going to our nonprofit. I was grateful and volunteered to help in whatever capacity they desired. Local celebrities, including the mayor, the University of Vermont hockey coach and others, stood behind the counter rolling burritos, while I stood there holding a large bowl that had "Please donate" taped to it.

It started at 11 a.m., and immediately a long line of people formed, college students, businesspeople and families. Most of them were receiving their burrito and then putting one or two dollars in the bowl, some people larger amounts, while others put in nothing, which was fine since there was no requirement to donate.

But at one point, I saw three men in line whom I recognized as being from Burlington's homeless population. They were dressed practically in rags, were unwashed and unshaved. They looked to me to be inebriated to some degree, although acting fine, not acting out in any way.

The restaurant manager had previously given me several "Get Another Free Burrito" cards to hand out to whomever I wished. This seemed like the perfect opportunity, so when the first homeless man came through and was handed his burrito, I offered him one of the cards. When I did so, he responded with a smile that I will never forget. Beatific is the only word that comes to mind. He was delighted and grateful beyond words.

Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out two pennies, and began to deposit them into the bowl I was holding. My first reaction was to pull back and say, "That's okay. You don't have to do that. This isn't meant for you."

But I didn't. I resisted that impulse, recognizing that this perfect soul, as homeless and poor as he appeared, had as much right to give back as anyone else, and to

deny him that would be to deny him dignity and love.

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He put the two pennies in the bowl. I smiled and thanked him. As he walked away I could not help but think of the Gospel story in which a poor widow at the temple came and donated two small coins, and Jesus responded, "This poor widow put in more than all the others; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

A few months later, I convinced one of the wealthiest people in Vermont to come and see our shelter and everything else we offer to homeless youth. I had heard that he had recently made a six-figure gift to another nonprofit, so I planned to ask him to do the same for us. After touring him through, I asked if he would donate.

"What's the range of giving?" he asked.

I thought for a moment and responded, "This year one family made a quarter-million-dollar gift to us. And a homeless man gave us two cents. That's the range."

He looked at me quizzically, eyebrows raised, but didn't say anything.

I then added: "And both gifts mean exactly the same to us."

[Mark Redmond is the executive director of Spectrum Youth and Family Services and the author of *The Goodness Within: Reaching Out to Troubled Teens with Love and Compassion*.]

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