

How This Entrepreneur Is Solving Homelessness One Person at a Time

Inc.com, by John Boitnott, Journalist and digital consultant, @jboitnott, August 9, 2016

Miracle Messages lets homeless people record video messages to long-lost relatives, and it's getting them off the streets.

This is the latest in my series of posts spotlighting underrepresented communities around the world and the entrepreneurs trying to help them. In this installment, I talk to the Founder of "Miracle Messages," a San Francisco nonprofit reuniting homeless people with family they haven't seen in years.

Homelessness is seeing a slow decline across the U.S., but some areas of the country are seeing spikes or high levels that won't go away.

According to a November 2015 HUD report, homelessness around large U.S. cities increased by 3%, despite dropping 2% nationwide. Los Angeles, for instance, faces one of the nation's toughest challenges with homelessness, seeing an 11% year-over-year increase as of January.

California Governor Jerry Brown recently backed a \$2 billion plan that would fund 10,000 to 14,000 housing units for California's homeless. Los Angeles also wants to spend \$1.87 billion to provide housing to the homeless, but is still searching for ways to fund the plan.

Solving One Problem at a Time

Plans are great, but they can't make a difference until they become real. In the meantime, there are still those out there who need--and want--help.

San Francisco is also nationally known for its ongoing homeless problem, and one non-profit that's looking to solve homelessness there one case at a time is Miracle Messages. They try to connect homeless people with their long lost families.

People who work on the front lines helping the homeless say connecting them to their families is one of the best ways to get them off the streets for good. Through a network of volunteers, Miracle Messages does just that, by letting people film video postcards to reach out to family that they've lost touch with.

Miracle Messages lets homeless people record videos intended for family members with whom they've lost touch.

"We post the video or the handwritten note onto our social media feed as well as contact our network of volunteer detectives who are 40 or 50 people across the country who have said that they want to help individuals experiencing homelessness locate their long lost loved ones," explains Kevin F. Adler, the organization's founder.

You might assume these volunteers are using some kind of sophisticated software to track down relatives of the homeless. But that's not how it's done. Instead, volunteers use resources available to anyone and everyone: Facebook, Google, and local police departments.

"We'll then locate the loved ones or have some pretty credible leads. We'll share the video with the family, with the friends and invite them to record a Miracle Message response so that they can have a video response back to the relative," Adler says.

Every Person Helped is Worth the Effort

It's not what you would call a large operation just yet, as the organization has only recorded messages from about 75 individuals. But of these, there have been nearly 20 reunions--

many of which have helped those individuals secure stable housing with family or friends. It's not about how big the numbers are once you're talking about real people living on the streets. Adler says even just one person who finds their way home makes the whole thing worth the effort.

In a video posted to Facebook in early July, Miracle Messages shared the story of a man living on the streets of San Francisco. After recording a video message to his niece in St. Louis, a volunteer was able to find her and get the two on a call. Once reconnected, Miracle Messages quickly worked with Homeward Bound--an organization that funds travel for homeless who have reunited with a loved one willing to take them in--to get him on a bus to St. Louis that very day.

Reducing The Cost of the Homeless

While that is just one lightning quick success story, Miracle Messages has a huge benefit to its formula for getting homeless people off the street: reduced cost.

"The cost of a reunion all in with the organizational costs for Miracle Messages, salary, staff time, it's just around \$5,000 in terms of where we're at now," Adler claims.

Back in 2012, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan stated that it costs about \$40,000 a year to fund a homeless person, with the costs of shelters, emergency room visits, and jails being factored.

That type of savings inspires Adler too. In his prior entrepreneurial endeavors he founded a couple of education technology startups that helped underserved communities. He, like many other San Francisco residents, saw just how ingrained the homeless problem had become, and sought to make a difference.

In my interview with Adler, we talked about how, even as San Francisco succeeds in getting folks off the street, new ones seem to just keep coming in. It's a trend that Adler and his team are eager to keep tackling.

If they can achieve greater scale, Miracle Messages could put a dent in the cost to the public, and get people safely off the street. A true win-win.

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