

“I mean, really cold”



Cold. It isn't a feeling that many of us seek out on a regular basis, but I did recently just so I could share the experience with you. Because I am someone who runs from my car into the building I am trying to get to as fast as I can, being cold ... I mean, really cold ... isn't something I ever let myself become.

I dressed as I would on a normal work day, adding a winter coat and gloves because I knew I would be out a while. An hour to be exact. And I walked out of my front door, letting it slam gently behind me, and walked down my sidewalk toward the street. The cold air immediately hit me and I was overcome with a feeling that this was going to be a very long hour. I also hadn't thought about a destination, because I didn't actually have one. My goal was simply to see what it would feel like to be out in the cold for an hour, because the youth we work with are often out in the cold for much longer than that. Little did I know then that my life would be forever changed in 60 minutes.

It started out easy enough. Of course, I was walking slowly, as it had just snowed and my street was slippery. I didn't wear boots, but had on tennis shoes and thin socks. My legs started feeling coldest first. Obviously, I hadn't worn thick enough pants either. I started thinking about the youth who come to the door of HOPE 4 Youth after fleeing an abusive family or getting kicked out in the dark of night with the clothes on their backs. People I talk to often think when a young person gets kicked out, it must always be their fault. Not following the rules, not doing something they were told to do, or because they themselves are on drugs and deserve to be kicked out. More often than not, young people are kicked out because of their parents' mental health issues, addictions, violent tempers and their lack of empathy when their daughter gets pregnant "too early" in their eyes or their child comes out as LGBTQ. Suddenly the place they called home, no matter how bad it was, is no longer a place they are able to go. And so, they are out in the cold, scared, alone and trying to figure out what to do next. The difference for me here was that I knew I still had a warm, safe place to walk back to in another half hour. I knew that I was going to be OK and I was not unsure of what was going to happen to me. I was just cold. That's it. Nothing more. Thinking about this as I walked down a safe street, on a sidewalk in a neighborhood I knew well, and thinking how different my walk would be if I was scared and in a place I didn't know brought tears to my eyes. I thought of Jason, Miranda, Beau, Justin ... and the hundreds of other young people who came to us last year alone. The cold they felt on a regular basis must have been unbearable at times. But they kept going. They are some of the most resilient people I have ever met. The cold, quite honestly, was always the least of their problems ...

By now I was very cold and I knew I still had 15 minutes left. And the very second I remembered that, I thought of the fact that I knew I was going back to my warm home within minutes, where I

would be greeted by my cat and a hot cup of anything I wanted - coffee, cocoa, cider. And I could immediately turn up the heat in the house, sit in front of my space heater and have my pick of blankets. I would pass through my kitchen, filled with food options. I could turn on the Hallmark Channel and watch holiday movies and be back to my safe, warm life. And they don't have any of those options.

Typically, by the time they arrive on our front steps in Anoka, they have been alone, scared and on the streets for much longer than 60 minutes. They come hungry and we feed them. Dirty and we provide them with washers, dryers and a hot shower. They need the basics - to brush their teeth, comb their hair, find a job, figure out where they will sleep tonight ... and tomorrow night ... and next week. And we help them. But we can't help them without your help. This community continues to respond to the needs at HOPE 4 Youth. As we grow to meet the growing need, your support is more important than ever.

I assure you, I didn't do this exercise for fun, although it was eye-opening. HOPE 4 Youth's annual Out in the Cold 4 Youth takes place in just a few days and we need many more of you to sign up to participate. One hour, out in the cold, to raise awareness and needed funds to keep our doors open for those that seek to get out of the cold. Will you join us? It may just change your life forever like it did mine ...

You can sign up at HOPE4YouthMN.org/C4Y.

-Lisa Jacobson