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SEATTLE SPEAKER MAKES HOMELESSNESS "KNOWN" AT TEDX

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By Meredith Tillery



If you are anything like me, you were probably introduced to TED Talks by professors forcing you to watch them in class. What started as something you had to watch eventually turned into something you chose to watch instead. Since then, you have been encouraged, thought about things in a new way and yes, even laughed at some of the things you have heard from your dear friend, TED.

I recently had the incredible opportunity to think about things differently, be encouraged and laugh because of TED. Only this time instead of watching TED on my computer screen, I got to watch in person.

Over the weekend, TEDxRainer rounded up its fifth year at McCaw Hall in Seattle. From penguins, to coffee, twenty-one speakers took the stage bringing a new perspective to a wide range of topics. Each of the topics answered the question of what is known and unknown.

One speaker in particular stuck out among the rest as he earned a standing ovation at the end of his deeply impacting talk. Seattle Architect, Photo-Journalist and Community Activist Rex Hohlbein brought a new focus to homelessness.

Hohlbein told the story of a homeless man named Chiaka Howze who he found lying asleep outside his Fremont office one morning in 2010. Howze had two carts filled with paintings he had created but was unsuccessful in selling.

Hohlbein invited Howze in for tea where he asked to share a children's story he had written. As Howze sang, danced and acted out the story Hohlbein was so moved he began tearing up.

He invited Howze to store his paintings in the shed out back, as well as live there... if he wanted. In a short amount of time, Hohlbein and Howze became friends.

After looking at Howze's art, Hohlbein offered to create a Facebook page in hope of helping Howze sell his art to begin earning a living. His art grew a substantial following as he began selling paintings to individuals from Seattle to Bellevue.

Comments were left from people all over encouraged and amazed by Howze's work. One day in particular, a comment by an 18-year-old girl was left. In her comment, she wrote that she had found her dad who she had not seen in ten years.

This 18-year-old girl was Howze's daughter back home in Philadelphia.

With tears streaming down his face, Howze told Hohlbein he needed to go home... and he did.

Hohlbein told another story of 23-year-old Crystal, who moved to Seattle to escape abuse. When Hohlbein first met Crystal he said she looked like any ordinary girl at that age. Time passed and a few months later Hohlbein ran into Crystal who had become nearly unrecognizable. She was missing teeth, had lost a great deal of weight and was living under the 520 bridge.

One night, Crystal brought Hohlbein to her home to show her friend where she was now living. When they arrived, overwhelming fear took over Hohlbein and he told Crystal they had to leave.

Once outside the bridge, Hohlbein asked Crystal how she was able to live under the bridge. She responded by telling him that nothing

under that bridge could be worse than the different forms of abuse she experienced growing up.

"No one chooses to be homeless," Hohlbein said, "Everyone has a profound reason for being there." He went on to explain that if we as individuals choose to, "just say hello" to the homeless, we have the opportunity to make a profound difference not only in their lives, but in ours as well.

Experiences outside the classroom allow us to learn as a community rather than with just our peers. They force us to change our perspective, shining light on topics we otherwise would probably overlook.

Out of the twenty-one talks I heard, I left feeling greatly impacted. With a lump in my throat and a different outlook toward the homeless, that in itself was worth it all.

For more information visit facinghomelessness.org or check out the [Facebook page](#).

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