

March 2022 Speaker

Leah den Bok, Photos and Stories of Homeless

The remarkable Leah, who has photographed and recorded the stories of the homeless since 2015 when she was just fifteen, titled her presentation “But Still We Can Do Something,” a synopsis of her purpose. The expression, she noted, was originated by American clergyman and author Edward Everett Hale (1822-1909): “I am only one but still I am one. I cannot do everything but still I can do something and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

Leah’s magnetic, award-winning photographs of the faces of people experiencing homelessness in Toronto primarily, plus New York, Washington and Brisbane, Australia, have been praised in articles and TV profiles as “gritty, stark, stunning, haunting, humanizing, beautiful.” She has taken “several hundred” and compiled them into a series of books, *Nowhere to Call Home*. The most recent, her fourth, published in December 2021, focuses on the grim impact of COVID 19 on the homeless. She gives 100 percent of the profits from her books and exhibits to homeless shelters. “I have two goals: to shine a spotlight on the plight of homelessness and to humanize people experiencing homelessness because so often they’re seen as subhuman. They’re often treated hatefully. During COVID there were complaints by the general public about no toilet paper, waiting in line at supermarket checkout, washing hands. Those experiencing homelessness have no toilets, are jobless or unemployable, often have nothing to eat, no showers.”

To support herself financially Leah does fashion and portraiture photography.

Leah has a personal connection to homelessness; her mother Sara, born in Calcutta, India, homeless at age three, was given shelter by Mother Teresa. “Otherwise, my Mother wouldn’t be alive, nor I.” At five, Sara was adopted by an Ontario couple. Leah applies Mother Teresa’s teachings: “If you judge people, you have no time to love them. The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love.”

Leah snaps pictures while her father Tim interviews. They pay \$10 and a session is five to ten minutes. Since the pictures are taken outdoors, legally permission by the subject isn’t required but Leah and Tim do it as a “courtesy.” Leah does black and white photography only --“better for depicting expressions, eyes, wrinkles, gestures, personality” - with a plain black or white backdrop – “doesn’t distract -;” natural light – “raw, dramatic effect. I regard myself as an artist, too.”

“Most people experiencing homelessness open up to us, pour out their hearts, hold nothing back. Mental illness, sexual abuse, violence, family dysfunction, addiction. At first, I wondered why they are so open; then I realized that so often they are ignored. Their stories are tragic, heart-breaking, I find it very difficult but no matter how hard it is to hear them it’s important to me to keep going, to change perceptions.” She showed and recounted striking examples of her work. She posts her pictures on Instagram and is gratified that family and past friends of some of her subjects have contacted her. She recited a poignant thank you poem written by homeless “Mark,” who “lives” in a rat-filled alleyway: “It’s cold outside/ But not as cold as people passing by without so much as a hi/ Then out of the cold, out of the blue, there came you.”

She closed with this message: “Treat them with respect and dignity. Give to organizations that help. Pressure governments to build more affordable housing [which UWCNY is advocating]. Even if you can’t do everything, you can do something.”

Susan Goldenberg