

# The Boston Globe

## The homeless and their otherness

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IT'S HARD to find fault with John Frame (["In their shoes: To better understand the plight of the homeless, Harvard student takes to the streets,"](#) See *below*.) for trying to understand the marginalized and excluded from our culture and economy, such as the homeless.

Unfortunately, these temporary immersions, however well intended, create and perpetuate a kind of anthropological bubble around the homeless. Their problems are exotic, or different. Their needs seem like those of a person, or culture, the rest of us are not a part of.

People are on the street for a variety of reasons, but nearly all of them revolve around the fact that our society and economy are not organized around helping people meet basic human needs, such as housing and health (including mental) challenges. Focusing on the otherness of the homeless, as if they lived on a different planet, distracts from directing time, energy, and public resources to providing the poor and excluded with the means necessary to become full beneficiaries and participants in our society and economy.

Jim Stewart

*Director*

*First Church Shelter*

*Cambridge* ■

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## In their shoes: To better understand the plight of the homeless, Harvard student takes to the streets

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CAMBRIDGE - As a student in Indianapolis, John Frame and his friends sometimes bought pizzas and passed them out to homeless people on the streets. One night Frame heard a homeless man say, "So you're going home now, and we're staying here."

The remark was simple, but full of implications. It lodged in Frame's head and wouldn't go away. Later, volunteering at a Cambridge shelter, he befriended homeless people but felt the same divide: the gulf between his life and their lives outside.

So last spring, as he wrapped up his courses at Harvard Divinity School and prepared to fulfill his last requirement, a Spanish class, this summer, the 30-year-old Ohio man had an idea. He moved out of his dorm on Oxford Street, stashed his laptop in a locker on campus, and packed a backpack with a blanket, a toothbrush, a black hooded sweatshirt, and \$150 cash.

Then he started living on the streets of Harvard Square.

For as long as homeless people have been camping out in doorways, their presence has provoked a wide range of reactions, from fear to fascination. Plenty of people dismiss them as urban blight, but others - sociologists, clergy, journalists - have trained a microscope on society's street dwellers, drawn to a way of life so foreign, so extreme in its detachment from norms and expectations, it seems almost incomprehensible.

Many have studied the problem. Fewer have immersed themselves in it as Frame has, taking a street nickname ("Divinity John" or "DJ"), letting go of personal hygiene (two weeks between showers), sleeping on Cambridge Common and panhandling by the Old Cambridge Burying Ground (\$11.12 in four hours). His goal, he says, is to understand homelessness better, and share his experience with others, in the hopes that it might help them bridge the gap themselves.

"For some people it's a mystery - how do I deal with the poverty, the other, in my face every day when I walk by CVS?" he said. "Building relationships with homeless people is a very foreign idea. . . . We don't even talk to our neighbors, let alone people outside CVS."

Frame has lived among the homeless for 45 days; he plans to keep it up for two more weeks, but may extend the experiment. He has befriended some of the neighborhood's best-known street people; on a sweltering afternoon last week, he sat on a bench outside CVS on Massachusetts Avenue - a social hub for the homeless - catching up with his mentors. With their guidance, Frame has learned to stash his sleeping bag in a bed of lilies for safekeeping, to salvage snacks from dumpsters, and to sleep without a bedroom, drifting in and out to the chirp of crosswalk signals and the roar of buses.

Still, for all the hours Frame has logged beside his homeless friends, the gulf persists: He knows his homelessness will end, and he knows when.

“I know I’ll die a bum on the streets, and John will never know that,” said Ken O’Brien, a homeless man who ran a sidewalk bookstall in Harvard Square until recently. “He may see it, but he’ll never know it . . . because he has someplace to go.”

At work on his third master’s degree, with plans to pursue a doctorate and a career in writing and teaching, Frame is quick to admit his limitations. “There’s this difference we can’t ignore,” he says. “I could get an apartment or ask my parents to come and pick me up.” As it is, he escapes the streets regularly, attending his Spanish class three nights a week, where he charges his cellphone and checks his e-mail.

Yet many homeless people appreciate his attempt to know their world - and not all of them see him as different.

“He’s chosen [homelessness], and so have I,” said Neal, a fixture in the Square with his plaid cap, turquoise ring, and 40-ounce bottle of beer.

At a church where a free meal was about to be served, another homeless man voiced respect for Frame.

“I thought he was crazy at first,” said Richie, a muscular, tattooed 40-year-old who described himself as an addict and, like others interviewed, declined to give his last name because his family doesn’t know he’s homeless. “But he’s getting the picture. The textbook is nothing - you have to live it.”

Inside the dinner, where volunteers served plates of chicken, summer squash and corn, another friend cautioned Frame.

“The risk is that [you] could be perceived as playing at being homeless, when homelessness isn’t a game,” said Elizabeth, who grew up wealthy but descended into homelessness because of her alcoholism.

Across the table, a Harvard friend of Frame’s listened intently. Romana Manzoor, who is studying Arabic this summer, met Frame at orientation, and said he is already helping others forge unexpected relationships.

“I’ve fallen in love with his [homeless] friends,” she said. ■