

Jaden Knapp | Degage

This summer I worked at Degage, a women's shelter located in downtown Grand Rapids. My main job there was to sell bakery goods from the Open Door Bakery shop. I also worked in the kitchen on Fridays, preparing lunch and breakfast for the women staying at Degage. On Tuesdays my job was to open lockers and sign in the ladies for their overnight stay. Each of my jobs allowed me to interact with the shelter stay women in a different context and get to know them a little better.

Once I got to know the ladies on a name-to-name basis it was harder to watch them in their lowest of lows. Even still, I enjoyed having inside jokes with them just to lighten things up. One of the women thought that I looked like Napoleon Dynamite and it caught on pretty quick. Having some laughs with them brought some humanity and connection into our interactions.

During my time at Degage I gained humility and respect for the homeless population that I interacted with. I didn't have any strong preconceived notions about Degage or the people they serve but I was surprised by a few things. For example the patrons staying at Degage were very respectful outside a few incidents and the workers operated at a very high level of organization to run the place.

Something I shared at our GVN book meeting was how impressed I was with the full-time workers at Degage. They showed so much compassion and love to the patrons even when they weren't always being treated fairly as employees. Staying at a shelter can be a stressful environment so it is not uncommon for the shelter stay women to have outbursts. My coworkers went above and beyond to make sure the women were safe and progressing in their lives. Another insight I appreciated from the book meeting was that the people in compromised situations such as the shelter stay women at Degage have to want an improvement in their lives; it can't be forced upon them. Because the homeless community is tight knit and it can be difficult to leave a certain comfort in that. Of course that psychology is not the case for everyone but I think there's some truth in it.

My favorite part of the book we read as a part of the program '*Tattoos on the Heart*' was the author's retelling of his experiences as a chaplain in Bolivia. He was sent there right out of seminary to gain experience in the real world. Well at the time he didn't know a lot of Spanish but he had a translation to do mass with. Unfortunately, he forgot this translation when he was doing mass for a mountain village that hadn't seen a priest in over 100 years. He struggled through the words and had a super embarrassing experience but after everyone left an old local man came up and showered him with rose petals, a gesture of respect in that culture. I took two main points away from this. First, not every part of serving will be perfect so we persevere through the mistakes. Next, to pass on compassion, one of the main themes of the book. Even though the priest messed up the old man showed compassion. The priest was able to bring this compassion back to LA where he rehabilitated a community scarred by gang violence.