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## Twelve hours on the street

By walking in the shoes of the homeless, one Illinois Wesleyan student's personal beliefs are challenged.

By Liz Peterson, '03

I would say that “shocked and appalled” would be good words to describe how I felt when Professor Shaw explained our assignment that first morning in Washington, D.C. There had, of course, been hints. In retrospect, his instructions to wear our work clothes for some unspecified “volunteering,” the curiously blank schedule for the afternoon and evening, and his urging us to eat a big breakfast all seemed suspicious. But on this first day of the trip, we were naïve and trusting.



IWU students helped prepare and serve lunches distributed to needy individuals through non-profit organizations. *(Photo by Greg Shaw)*

The task seemed horribly daunting as he explained it to us. We were to spend the day in an unknown city with nothing but one dollar, a poor-quality map of the city, and a long list of tasks to accomplish. We were to find food, clothing, shelter, and health care, write resumes, find jobs, travel to locations spread miles apart all over the city—all with no resources but our own ingenuity and our strong, youthful legs. Of course, is this not what a homeless person must face and overcome day after day, without the promise that it will be over in a mere 12 hours?

My two partners and I spent hours traversing what seemed like never-ending circles around the city in search of soup kitchens, shelters, public clinics, and more. It was frustrating to find, again and again, that the place we were looking for was closed or had moved or didn't offer the services that we needed.

Yet, at the same time, it was inspiring how people who had so little were going out of their way to help us, by giving directions, a little insider advice, or just some well-intentioned warnings to stick to better areas of the city. We spent the day blundering through some of the worst neighborhoods in D.C., as that is inevitably where most of the services were located, and never once did we receive so much as an unkind word from anyone.

By the end of the day, I was feeling horrible. It is amazing how quickly lack of food can drag down a person's optimism. By late evening, I was sprawled out on a bench near the Capitol, feeling sorry for myself, exhausted from the miles that we had walked, and listening to my stomach growl with hunger. I have to admit that at one point I was near crying from the incredible bleakness that a life like this must actually hold for those who live it every day, and I

wouldn't consider myself to be a weak person. It gave me a new respect for those who persevere through hardship long after I would have given up.

I feel like I went on this trip with a different perspective than many of the students and therefore the lessons that I took away were different. Rather than going as a political-science major wanting to learn about welfare-reform law, I was a sociology student wanting to affirm my decision to go into social work as a career. This trip illustrated for me how policy decisions made up on Capitol Hill affect the everyday lives of so many people in a profound way.

This experience also showed me how many problems there still are in our society and made me feel as if I am someone who can and should try to improve the world, at least in some small way. This trip taught me a lot about myself, my personal beliefs and the way that I want to spend the rest of my life. I don't think that it would be an exaggeration to describe my May Term experience as life altering. How many people can honestly say that?

*Liz Petersen '03 is a sociology/women's studies double major from Downers Grove, Ill.*