

Finding hope for a ‘kind of scary’ man

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There’s been an awful lot of talk lately, and promises made, about affordable housing and homelessness in Charlotte. Unfortunately, we’ve been talking about these issues for a long time. Most of what gets discussed is pretty sanitized and focuses on numbers and data. I rarely see real stories about real people, which is odd because that’s really what this is all about.

Back in 2013 when I was on City Council we were still talking about it. Not much, I admit, but there was the occasional chatter.

About a week after being elected to Council, there was a morning knock at our door. My son came rushing back to the den and said, “Pop, there’s a man here to see you and he’s kind of scary”. So I went to the door and the “kind of scary” man introduced himself as Ernie. He apologized for dropping by my house and asked if it was appropriate, did I have a moment to chat? So I grabbed us a muffin and a cup of coffee and we sat on my front porch.

Ernie said he might be constituent of mine, even though he was homeless. He said the bridge under which he lived seemed to be in District 1. He had gone to the library to find out who represents him.

He told me he was a veteran from the second Gulf War and after an honorable discharge, he’d come to Charlotte to take a job as a welder. He said he lost that job and many others since. When I asked what happened he said that he normally was too embarrassed to discuss it, but he since knew I worked with maltreated children, he revealed he had mental illness and it had led him to on again off again substance abuse. I remember his exact words, “It’s been one hell of a bad ride man.” I kept staring at his scars and the tattoos all over his body. He told me about his desire to be normal again and have a reason to wake up every day. He said he was just hoping for another chance.

When I asked him how I could help, he indicated that he had been on a waitlist for a long time at a supportive housing initiative for chronically homeless called Moore Place. He said that a lady there recently told him City Council might partner with them to dramatically expand the facility. I said, “So you’re here to lobby me?” And he said, “Well if that’s not a bad thing I guess so. I’m really just asking you to help me”.

I promised I would try.

So off I went to find out what I could do to help my constituent. What I discovered was sobering and confounding: 2,500 people on any given night homeless in our county (some say three times that if you count those living in cheap motels and other people’s homes). I visited Moore Place, spending a day with staff and residents. And I was amazed. I found out firsthand the goal of eradicating chronic homelessness was very achievable and made all the financial sense in the world.

I also discovered there were influential folks in our city who were concerned about doing too much around homelessness, because they worried if word got out that Charlotte was a city with lots of resources, homeless people would flood in from all over the region.

The night of the vote I looked for Ernie in the gallery. He wasn’t there. In fact virtually no one was there. In my comments I quoted the poet Horace, “Quid rides? Mutato nomine, de te fabula narrator,” which means, “Why do you laugh? Change the name and the story is told of you.” Indeed, the story is told of each of us.

The Council voted unanimously to contribute \$1 million to the \$4 million project. Our community stepped up. I had kept my promise. And Ernie, wherever you’re reading this, it was indeed my honor to represent you.