

MGR Foundation to Broadcast Stories of the Homeless

By: Ashkar Mando

In a corner, a group of homeless individuals are engaged in a heated discussion about cocaine. With their personal possessions stored in tattered gym bags close by their side, the group talks and laughs as they discuss cocaine and homelessness. With blank sheets of paper before them, the homeless of Lower Wacker Drive compile a list of thought provoking questions about homelessness to ask the MGR Foundation volunteers. "Last week went well. We had our volunteers ask questions last Sunday and today the roles are reverse," said Jessica Maiorca, CareTeam program director of the MGR Foundation. "It is really interesting to see that wall come down between the two."

CareTeam is one of the many programs offered by MGR to diminish social barriers between generations and foster social consciousness through community involvement and mentorship. Its mission is to construct innovative services and to challenge social injustice and ignorance.

With this mission in mind, Maiorca and her crew produced the Oral History Project that has its volunteers directly involved with those they serve. "Instead of cleaning their tables, or ignoring them, you are directly involved with them. You are learning from them, you are hearing their stories." The premise for the Oral History Project is to collect recorded interviews between the homeless of Lower Wacker and the MGR Foundation volun-



(From left to right) CareTeam Director for the MGR Foundation Jessica Maiorca, MGR volunteer Maria Garcia, and Facilitator for StoryCorps and volunteer for the MGR Foundation. Garcia, a resident of Melese Park, finds the Oral History Project a valuable source to communicate with the homeless and dispel preconceived notions about homelessness. "This was an educational experience. To at least know a little bit about their lives and to know what makes them different than me," said Garcia. "In the beginning I felt sorry. I wanted to know why their lives took this turn and I wanted to do something about it."

teers in the hope to bring the social issue of homelessness to light and share their stories with the masses. The end goal is to create an art exhibit in October that will play the recorded interviews in the background and display pictures of the individuals who live on Lower Wacker.

"They, the volunteers, have said it was an eye opener. Some of the volunteers were surprised at how easy it is to become homeless in the city and how if you're not set up in a solid and stable environment...we are dealing with people who have witnessed their mothers beaten up or their fathers killed or family member with a drug addiction. Of course if you are a little kid watching that...how is it not going



Julie Segraves (left) and Larry Lester (right) partake in a recorded interview designed to demystify the homeless population as well as detach the social stigmas that go along with being homeless.

to influence you," said Maiorca. "It also helped volunteers and myself to not lump people into categories and you begin to wonder where the intervention could have been to prevent this person from getting to where they are."

Each participant has a heartbreaking story, each have reasons and mistakes that lead them down this road. However, each are trying to make it through another day and view the Oral History Project as a catalyst for social change where communal understand-

ing can take place. "It's past teaching and past them teaching me what they need to know. This is the first time I've done training with homeless people. We place an emphasis on not bringing preconceived notions to the table," said Hilary

Marshall, facilitator for StoryCorps, a national project aimed at inspiring citizens across the country with stories of people from various backgrounds, and is a volunteer for the MGR Foundation.

Marshall jumped on board after viewing the Oral History Project on a volunteer website. "I just loved the idea of the Oral History Project. I called Jessica and met with her to discuss the project." As her role, Marshall worked with volunteers and the homeless to create a cohesive dialogue about past experiences, childhood, drug use, even about love life. Marshall created guidelines and directed both parties through the interview process. "You have to be an active listener. You have to listen to what the other person is saying and understand," said Marshall. "People find it validating when you open up. You don't have to ask them about their life, just ask them about their day. Just spend six seconds with them and not brush them up."

The MGR Foundation is a non-profit service that develops programs to serve at-risk communities. Current programs focus on health and well-being, education and youth development, volunteering and community development as well as arts and humanities. The foundation was created in memory of Marilyn G. Rabb, stepmother of the MGR founder Lionel Rabb. If you are interested in learning more about the organization or volunteering opportunities, call the MGR Foundation at 773-313-0075.