

## Voices from the Serving Center

I started volunteering at the Round Rock Area Serving Center a little over two years ago. I work there as a Client Receptionist (a CR), handling intake of new clients and qualifying returning clients for the various services the Center offers – groceries from the Food Pantry, clothing and furniture from the Center’s resale shops, financial assistance with things like rent and utility bills, and so on. I am a regular on the Friday morning shift, which runs from 10 to 1, where I see between 9 and 12 clients every time I go in.

Who are our clients? In the Center’s Mission Statement, clients are described simply as “those in need.” During training I heard a lot of statistics that presented a more detailed picture. We serve primarily the “working poor,” I was told. About 60% of our clients are employed; of those, about 20% have two jobs, or there are two incomes in the family. The problem is that their jobs pay so little or their hours are so restricted that they and their families fall near or below the Federal Poverty Guidelines. For a family of four, for example, that means an annual income of less than \$25,000.

In addition to the 60% who are employed, 25% of our clients are elderly, meaning 60 or older, and living on fixed incomes that place them, too, among the officially poor. And the other 15%? – those are people with some disability that prevents them from working. To get by, they rely on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or some disability insurance benefit or both, no combination of which seems to pay enough to lift individuals or their families above the poverty line. In 2019, for instance, SSI is capped at \$9252 per year for individuals and \$13,884 for couples – and for most people it pays less than that, often a lot less.

I don't question these statistics. In fact, looking back over the last two years and the 998 client interviews I've had during that time, I'd say those numbers are generally reflected in my experience. But a statistical model of our clients, no matter how accurate, is necessarily abstract: it doesn't breathe; if wounded, it can't bleed; it's all but voiceless and it has no personality, no individuality at all. And what I really want to convey to you today is a glimpse of at least a few of the individual clients I've encountered at the Serving Center, how they have breathed into my life, and as often as not, helped me more than I have helped them.

On Fridays, when I go in, I sign in on the Center's tracker, pick up my badge and head upstairs to my office and the Client Waiting Room, which is usually full. Clients are seen in the order in which they arrive, so they are eager to get their names on the sign-in sheet as close as possible to the top. There are supposed to be three CR's on every shift, and when we're fully staffed, the wait is generally less than an hour. All the same, I usually begin my conversation with clients by thanking them for their patience. I've learned to say that in several languages.

Not, however, in Armenian, which is the language I needed, as it turned out, the Friday morning I met Mr. Moulaminian, a man in his early 70s with thick, entirely white hair and an impressive white beard. When I greeted him in the Waiting Room, he said gravely – in a very deep voice – “Thank you, Sir.” He smiled, and I smiled. We walked toward my office and when we got there, I thanked him for his patience. In the same very deep voice he said, “Thank you, Sir.” I then asked him how we might be of assistance, and he said – in a very deep voice: “Thank you, Sir.” I glanced at his folder and saw that he had been born in Istanbul. So, mentally patting myself on the back for being so clever, I got out my phone, summoned Google Translate, and asked it to say “Thank you for your patience” in Turkish. But when Mr. Moulaminian heard that, he shook his head. Another glance at the folder told me he had come to the States after living for a number of years in Germany, so I dredged

up my Schuleddeutsch and thanked him for his patience in German. Mr. Moulaminian shook his head. At that point I took the time I should've taken at the beginning, and read further down the first page in the folder. "Client knows only a few English words," it said; "native language is Armenian." But when I switched Google Translate to Armenian, and once again thanked Mr. Moulaminian for his patience, I ran into a new problem: he *replied* – and Google Translate had not a clue what he said. Now *I* did the head shaking. We sat there for a few moments, smiling at one another, and then suddenly Mr. Moulaminian burst out, "Food!" Then we *really* smiled. I quickly checked the documentation in his folder, found everything was current, and wrote out a Food Pantry voucher for Mr. Moulaminian. He took it and – in his very deep voice – said, "Thank you, Sir." Mr. Moulaminian, a man who goes through life greeting everything he hears with a "Thank you."

On another Friday I go in and there are only seven or eight people in the Waiting Room – lots of empty chairs. My eye is drawn to a couple, my age or older, because unlike everyone else, they are standing up. Both of them are tall and slim. The man is wearing overalls with a faded plaid shirt that he has buttoned up all the way to the top; he is holding a worn straw hat that reminds me of one I wore as a teenager the two summers I spent mowing hay. I don't, now, remember exactly what the woman was wearing but it was a shapeless dress, very modest, and dark. I remember her hair was pulled back away from her face and gathered in a bun behind her head. Still thinking about them, I reach for the next folder and call for a Mr. Wilson. The man in the overalls says, "Yes." I introduce myself and we go to my office. There I hear a bit of their story. The Wilsons were a farming couple before illness prompted a move into town. They have a reserved manner and in speech are formal. I ask, but they can't bring themselves to call me Dennis. It's Mr. Murphy. I see in their file that they haven't been to the Center in almost two years. I ask them what brings them to see us today, and Mr. Wilson says they need a few things from the Food Pantry. "Our garden hasn't been much this year, and we haven't eaten in a couple of days. That's why we decided we should come in." "Now, we won't need a whole grocery cart of

food," Mrs. Wilson adds, "just enough to get us to next week, when he gets his Social Security check." "The thing is," Mr. Wilson continues, "we only come here when we have to; we don't like feeling that we're taking food away from people who really need it."

"People who really need it." In two years I've heard more expressions of concern for "people who really need it" from clients than from citizens here, some of whom think the Center is all about giving "handouts" to a bunch of "freeloaders."

Well, Friday comes around again and I go in. The Waiting Room is packed and the first couple of hours are very busy. There are three of us working that day, and still clients are having to wait a long time to see someone. For my eighth or ninth interview that morning, I call Judith Harrison. When I introduce myself in the Waiting Room, Ms Harrison doesn't say anything, and like some other women I have met there she seems reluctant to shake hands. We go to my office, I thank her for her patience and I ask, as I all too routinely do, "How are you this morning?" -- and she starts to cry. She cries, and continues to cry, sometimes easing down to sobs, for nearly 10 minutes. I don't know what to do; the training I received hasn't prepared me for this. Ms Harrison is a transwoman. Can I comfort in some way? Should I presume? I decide simply to be there. I wait for her. And finally, she begins to tell me her story. There were early years spent as "Jimmy" with a father who wanted a football-playing son; a lonely adolescence full of confusion about identity; college years complicated with a last-ditch effort to fit in and, as her father urged, "be a man!" When Ms Harrison decided to become her true self, her father had disowned her and forbidden her mother to take her phone calls. Ms Harrison felt alone, cut off from her family and without any real friends who knew her as a woman. Her employer had seemed OK with her transition, but when she had suffered a complication, been hospitalized for a while and missed work for a few weeks, she'd been fired. Since then a three-month job search had turned up only one interview,

and that had led nowhere. She had run through her savings, lost her apartment, and was now living in her car, subsisting on bread and candy bars. “So I’m hungry,” she tells me, “I am so hungry.” Hungry for many things, my clients

It’s a Friday, and I go in . . .

My first client that day is Libby Johnson. She beams, Libby does. She’s originally from Louisiana and there’s still something of a New Orleans cadence and accent in her voice. Picture her here: 60ish, simply dressed, unadorned; slender with the thinness that comes from years not of exercise and dieting but of what’s antiseptically referred to as “food insecurity.” But Ms Johnson is genuinely happy, happy from deep within. When she says she feels blessed, you believe her. She is an extraverted disciple of Jesus who truly does love him and radiates her love of this fallen world and all us sinners who inhabit it. In the Waiting Room, she engages everyone around her, spreading the Word in a way even the most antagonistic sinner can scarcely object to. It’s so obvious that she loves YOU. When we’re together, she expresses her needs very modestly – she’s quick to move on to other topics. The first five minutes or so I can’t get her to tell me how she is feeling, or even whether she has had anything to eat in the last 24 hours. Instead, she tells me the things she like about me. She thanks me for everything I do at the Serving Center and how I do it. She says she’s sure I’m a Christian because I have a servant’s heart. After even a half-minute of this, I realize that actually she is describing herself: I could repeat word for word what she’s saying, and it would be an accurate description of her. I do bask in the warmth of her expression but it’s not because she’s saying nice things about me: it’s because her affect, really her own self, is shining through her words, it’s that beaming that seems to come from within. She reminds me of Melanie, the honesty and depth of Melanie’s faith, the love that seemed to radiate from her. And like Melanie, Libby is a hugger. After I write out a food voucher for her, she stands up to go but doesn’t turn toward the door before

saying, "Let me hug you, darling. God loves you, you know that." And she makes me feel like she knows what she's talking about.

Then it's another Friday, and I go in . . .

The morning begins with a flurry of short interviews. All client documentation had been refreshed the previous month, so most interviews are just a matter of verifying a few details and writing out a voucher. Then I meet Tamika White. Ms White is tall, at least 6'2", and still, at 41, probably as athletic and youthful as a single mom with four children can be. She smiles easily, laughs often, and radiates a happy self-confidence. I see from her file that she is here for groceries and a clothing voucher for her family, but that's not what she wants to talk about. "What I'm wondering," she begins, "is whether the Center would help me with my ministry." Well, I don't know, I say; tell me about your ministry. "I want to help old people clean themselves up. I've worked in home health for nearly 10 years, and I know how to help frail, elderly people take a bath or shower. I've done it hundreds of times. That was my job. But I don't want to do it for money any more. I want to give it away, you know, as a ministry. I don't think I can do it more than one day a week, and probably only for six hours at a time, but that would still be two or three people I could help every week, you know? And listen: being really old is hard, people don't feel like themselves, and when they're dirty and don't have a way to clean up, life seems even worse. But you get someone a bath or a shower, and you change the way they feel about themselves – and maybe the world. That's what I want to do, help people clean up the outside so they can feel better about themselves on the inside, happier to be alive." Wow, I'm thinking to myself, what a calling, what a ministry! It's almost like baptism. How can the Center not be supportive? A little later Ms White goes on her way, food and clothing vouchers in hand, but I know this has been one of those times when I've been given so much more than I've offered.

Not every time, but nearly every time I do client intake at the Center, people like Tamika White inspire me, teach me, humble me.

Well, finally, it's not a Friday but a Wednesday when I'm substituting for someone on vacation. I'm already upstairs headed to the Waiting Room when I see an older man with gleaming white hair and a truly wonderful white beard. "Mr. Moulaminian," I say, reaching for his hand. He looks at me and comes out with "Remember?" And I say, "Of course I do. It's wonderful to see you again." He beams. "Thank you, Sir."