You see them everyday. As you drive to work, ride the bus, on the train. You may see them as you walk down a street, huddled under a blanket or scouring for food. They are part of everyday life, yet most of society shuns them. The homeless of any city, including Dallas, have been called a problem, a nuisance. They are often ignored. Society’s indifference has been the same towards them for many years. But sometimes, someone comes along who wants to change that.

Seventeen years ago, Pam Nelson and her husband were looking for a new home in Dallas. During that time, she received a phone call that would change her life forever. Louise Kahn, a Dallas philanthropist, contacted Nelson about a new program. Mrs. Kahn had seen other cities promoting art programs for the homeless, and she wanted to do the same in Dallas. Kahn explained that she had seen some of Nelson’s artwork and thought she would be the perfect person for the job.

Like most people, Nelson had never met or spent time with a homeless person. The thought of being around them, much less teaching an art class for them, made her feel uneasy. Yet, it was as if fate was pulling her closer to the homeless. Nelson and her husband had bought a red brick building in downtown Dallas, refurbished it, and made it their home and art studio.

Nelson’s home sits across the street from First Presbyterian Church, which provides meals and other services to the homeless through its Stewpot program. Every day, she watched the homeless saunter by. She saw them sleep on the church steps and in the church parking lot, drink water from a fountain in the church garden, and she heard their conversations and squabbles on the sidewalk across the street.
The fears Nelson had vanished the day she opened the art program to the homeless and interacted with them personally.

“These impoverished people reminded me of some of the time that I spent in my grandmother’s thrift shop as a child. I would spend every day helping my grandmother,” said Nelson. “Many people living in poverty would come to the thrift shop to buy clothes. Some found they could not even afford to buy a three-dollar T-shirt.”

It was during this time that Nelson witnessed her grandmother’s generous nature.

“Oh, we’re having a sale today. That item is only…” her grandmother would say. That familiar phrase always ended with the customer leaving with what they needed.

Now it was Nelson’s opportunity to do the same. For an entire year, Nelson hosted an art class once a week for the homeless. During this time, she saw her fellow artists grow, and she experienced her own growth. Rich or poor, art was therapeutic for everyone involved.

Nelson saw how creating art helped her fellow community of artists clear their minds of all the chaos in their life, and concentrate on making something beautiful. Art lifted their spirits, enabled them to communicate nonverbally, and restored their sense of self-worth. Nelson saw those coming into the art program change, gaining pride and dignity in their creations.

Art also served as a mental therapy to the artists.

“The art program has…been a very beneficial thing to the mental state of a lot of clients,” said Martha Laws, a thin, middle-aged art program participant wearing a flowered visor. This may be due to the calm environment the art program has, or that
creating art itself involves letting feelings travel from the mind onto the canvas, relieving any frustration or intense emotions.

The homeless on the streets are often victims of at least one of three factors. The first is economic. With the recent recession, many people have lost their jobs and their homes. In fact, the number of people in Dallas that are homeless due to a lost job is 43 percent, and the number of homeless who cannot afford a home is 27 percent.³

Some homeless may experience economic hardship because of a medical condition or other personal crisis. Another factor is mental illness, which is common among the homeless and can make employment difficult. Approximately 22 percent of all homeless in Dallas have some form of mental illness.³

Lastly, substance abuse is often a way to deal with trauma and personal loss, such as a homeless veteran coping with the aftermath of war or the death of a loved one. One third of all homeless are veterans.⁴

One homeless artist, Luis Arispe, retired from the U.S. Army after serving in Operation Desert Storm. He began using drugs and eventually lost everything. During a recent visit to the art program, Arispe’s vibrant painting of butterflies serves as a reminder of art’s metamorphic ability to transform lives.⁵

When Louise Kahn, who conceived the idea for the art program, died in 1995, it came as a shock to Nelson and also left her with no money for art supplies.⁶ Kahn had been funding what is now known as the Open Art program. The program had not been included in her Last Will and Testament. Nelson knew this program was important, and managers at The Stewpot agreed. After consulting with the church, Nelson learned that
the program that had begun on an art supply cart, would now be held in three classrooms solely devoted to the art program.

With the new space came new people. Word spread about the benefits of the art program for the homeless. It was a place of quiet, relaxation, transformation, normalcy, beauty, community and creation for people who are confronted with crime, drugs, chaos, sadness, and victimization. Eventually, the program drew ten to 20 people per class. New volunteers came and this new venture began to soar.

The artists stayed busy, producing more artwork than there was room to store. After all, the artists were homeless and didn’t have walls to display their talents. Some began to ask if they could have art shows or galleries. A new Stewpot employee named Cynthia Brannum offered to help. She began working with the Dallas Public Library, art studios and galleries in Dallas to showcase the work of these little-known artists.

Through art exhibits, both Nelson and Brannum noticed that unlike on the streets, the homeless artists would not be shunned or ignored. Rather, many potential customers would approach them and start a conversation about the artists’ work. Art was bringing people together in conversation, creativity and across all socioeconomic boundaries.

Many artists were able to sell their work, boosting their self-esteem. In fact, a select few artists have been able to make a career out of painting. Previously homeless Cornelius Brackens, Roosevelt Wilkerson, and Charles William all own either an apartment or house now.

Some of the art made has been bought by well-known people. During former President George W. Bush’s term in office, a painting by Cornelius Brackens hung in the White House. President Bush has even given a piece of art featured in one of the Dallas
art exhibits to the Pope. Additionally, a painting by artist Charles William is on display at the Pentagon. Charles William said the art program gave him the confidence he was lacking before and “taught me a lot about myself.”

All of these examples were not by pure coincidence, though. Growing up in West Texas, Nelson and former First Lady Laura Bush were playmates and they have stayed in touch ever since. One Christmas, Nelson sent Mrs. Bush and her husband a painting from the art program that she had bought. This intrigued the Bushes and they attended an art exhibit soon afterwards. Realizing the talent of the artists in the Open Art program, the Bushes occasionally attended their art shows.

Over the years, Nelson noticed that the pieces her fellow artists made and sold gave the artists a sense of contributing to the working world – an experience they would otherwise not have had. Many times a student will call Brannum, who is now the director of the Open Art program, to inform her that he will be late or unable to come to class. Once, Brannum replied that she was not his boss, but rather a fellow artist. The person responded by saying kindly but sternly, “No, you’re my boss.”

The artists feel invested in their work.

“Most of the homeless feel they can only take the charity given to them,” Brannum said. “However, art offers them the chance to earn their own money, and have a choice to buy a new dress or some name brand food without the use of food stamps.”

Today, a visit to the Stewpot’s Open Art program is like stepping into an artist’s fantasy. The hallway is a menagerie of colors with walls lined in pictures depicting flowers, self-portraits, biblical characters, landscapes, clowns, dogs and other vibrant images. The artists’ techniques resemble the works of famous artists. Collections of
Picasso-like characters and Grandma Moses-style scenes join pencil sketches, primitive and abstract art; each conveying a compelling story. A resident green-eyed cat with a raccoon-striped tail roams the hall.

Upon entering the classroom, smiles and laughter greet you from the mix of volunteers, artists, and staff. The atmosphere is relaxing and inviting. Homeless and volunteer artists can be heard critiquing one another’s work, all while joking and teasing each other about past events. A vibrant array of colors left by brush strokes adorns the tablecloths. Pictures are displayed across the room, and shelves are overflowing with both frames and paintings. Brochures of Nelson’s art hang in the classrooms to inspire her fellow artists.

The number of clients at the Open Art program at The Stewpot has grown to more than 400. Although Nelson cannot volunteer consistently anymore due to personal caregiver responsibilities, she still visits when she can. Watching old friends learn to make a living through art, meeting new fellow artists and experiencing the community of artists through the Open Art program provides her with a sense of satisfaction and joy. For many years to come, Nelson and the Open Art program will exist as a symbol of hope among the forgotten and ignored of Dallas.
REFERENCES

1 Lothrop, Katherine. Interview with Pamela Nelson. Personal interview. Dallas, Texas, June 22, 2011.

2 Lothrop, Katherine. Interview with Cynthia Brannum. Personal interview. Dallas, Texas, June 22, 2011.


