

A Gift From a Homeless Man

By Stephen England

from Northland Family Center located in Flagstaff, AZ

Last night, as I was taking down the clothesline in the square lit by streetlights, in a bit of a hurry because I'd been at it since 7:15 that morning, distracted by my own preoccupations, I heard a voice from behind. "What about the kids?" I wasn't really paying attention, so I think I responded, "What's that?" The voice said, "Do you take donations? What about the kids?"

I turned around to see a man who looked to be about 50, but probably was no more than 35 or 40, standing there, disheveled, dirty and unshaven, holding a walking stick, and his duffle bag on the ground beside him. "Sorry," I said, "but I don't think I understand what you're asking." His questions seemed normal enough, but I think it was the incongruence of his appearance along with his questions that got in my way. "What was that again?"

"I've been around here off and on today and I've read a lot of these t-shirts. The ones about the kids break my heart. Reminds me of my old man. He was rough. A hard man. So I was wondering about those kids, if you take donations."

"Sure. That's how we operate, on donations." He stuck his right hand in his pocket and pulled out a wad of money and some crumpled bits of paper. He took his time pulling out each dollar bill and counted eight. "I got eight dollars here. I need some for food, but I can give you four."

In that moment all my preoccupations vanished and the pettiness and cruelties of the world took a vacation. "What's your name," I asked? "Dave." " Well, Dave, you should keep your money. Four dollars won't buy much to eat." "Nah, I'd just spend it on beer or something. Keep it. Give it to them kids." I put the money in my pocket and shook his hand. "Okay. Thanks, Dave." He picked up his bag and started off across the square toward the north. I turned to go back to the clothesline, remembering a sermon I'd heard as a kid: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." I looked to my left, expecting to see Dave ambling the way homeless men do across the remainder of the square. He was gone.

A donation was made to the Children's Shelter this morning in homeless Dave's name.