



Embracing The Invisible

Giving a voice, and a face,
to America's homeless

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Lynn Blodgett, a college dropout who runs a Fortune 500 IT company, sees the invisible—and photographs them. His remarkable portraits of the homeless will be the look and feel of a November national public-awareness campaign to aid the unsheltered. There's a linked soundtrack, too—a moving CD of rock stars jamming with homeless musicians—and maybe even a concert near you.

What must they think?

Here comes Mr. Geekyfiftysomething, smelling of a boardroom, necktie wagging like a madman's tongue, sleeves rolled up on his white shirt. He drags a crazy expensive Hasselblad and a roll of what looks like white butcher paper out of his pickup truck or Mercedes, whatever he drove that day. Now he's humping it through the worst neighborhood in Newark, after hours, film-noir shadows stretching, the homeless scattering from his approach like wild cats, or else staring, unblinking. Who wears a white collar into these mean streets and isn't a priest?

Lynn Blodgett, president and CEO of Affiliated Computer Services, the 432nd-ranked Fortune firm, has draped the white paper over an outhouse in the late afternoon shade. He's handing out \$10 bills to any of the wary homeless who will simply stand in front of the backdrop for a quick photograph. The roll of bills draws a crowd, as it has in the dozen or more cities where Blodgett has photographed the invisible army, America's homeless men and women and children. He's given out \$30,000 of his own money, he reckons, to capture the faces that most people in the richest nation on earth won't even look at.

"I say to them," Blodgett explains, "I want you to tell your story. I don't know if you're mad or cursed or brokenhearted. The only thing you have are your eyes—you have to tell me your story just with your eyes."

These eyes that stare out from Blodgett photos have a holiness about them, offering an undeniable glimpse into

souls that bear witness to sadness and sights most of us, God willing, will never see.

The photographs, compiled in the recently released book *Finding Grace* (Palace Press), will almost certainly bring Blodgett fame, the way portraits of unforgettable American faces made Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans famous. The luminous prints convey the dignity and humanity of tattooed men, weatherworn women and resilient, even sunny, homeless kids, and they're powerful enough to already be raising awareness and funds for the homeless relief efforts the photographer supports. (A first offering of signed prints recently sold at Sotheby's for more than \$20,000, and Blodgett has pledged every penny of this and all other earnings from his photography to homeless causes.)

The project also throws down a social and spiritual gauntlet. Call it the debut of a completely new form: the Fortune 500 CEO-driven social consciousness book. "I do hope I inspire more CEOs to be more personally involved in this kind of work," Blodgett says. "Business can be pretty desensitizing, driven by the demands of shareholders and markets and customers. But to be directly engaged with people who need help—it can save your heart."

What's that sound?

Blodgett's work has found its way into association with another initiative for the homeless, this one musical.

John McGah, 38-year-old founder and Executive Director of Give US Your Poor—an advocacy group for the homeless based at UMass Boston's McCormack Graduate School—played in a little-known rock band for a decade; when *The Wait* finally called it quits for marriages and jobs, McGah took work conducting homeless research at the University of Massachusetts.

"I got sucked into the homelessness issue and saw the extent of the problem," he says. "And I saw the myths were just that—myths. I thought they might be dispelled through some artistic approach."

He began conceptualizing and working on a documentary film called *Give US Your Poor*. The film has still not been completed, but in the course of McGah's research he issued—through the nation's network of shelters and homeless care organizations—a call for original songs by homeless musicians for use as a possible soundtrack. After much culling of the many songs he received, McGah used musical and professional connections to mail a demo of the works to a number of artists.

He got a call from Natalie Merchant.

"I get asked to be part of a benefit recording once a week," Merchant says. "What was arresting about this one was the chance to work with unknown artists—and these who were homeless."

Merchant, who once worked for a year as a daycare volunteer in a homeless shelter in New York, wanted to produce not one, but a half-dozen of the tunes. She was especially struck by the bleak honesty of "There Is No Good Reason," written by a 15-year-old Nichole Cooper while in a shelter in Duluth, Minn. Merchant ultimately spent her own money to come to Q Division Studio in Somerville, Mass., to work three days with homeless musicians, including Mighty Sam McClain and Ms. Cooper, to record the songs. "I strongly believed these homeless artists deserved the privilege of working in a great studio," she says.

While Merchant took the lead, McGah found another music-industry contact, Appleseed Publishing head Jim Musselman, the guiding hand for last year's critically acclaimed *The Seeger Sessions*. (Musselman gave time and money generously to McGah's CD effort, and gets credit in large measure for the project).

Musselman shuttled songs to Bruce Springsteen and Pete

Seeger. Soon, Jon Bon Jovi joined the cause and, before long, McGah found himself with an unexpected all-star lineup of artists: Keb' Mo', Bonnie Raitt, Dan Zanes, Jewel, Sweet Honey in the Rock and others, plus contributions by actors Danny Glover and Tim Robbins, all performing with homeless musicians or doing their songs and spoken word. The CD has a buzz, and McGah is shopping it to big retailers for marketing this fall.

The snowballing support for a homeless-relief CD naturally got the attention of Blodgett, who flew to Boston and met McGah. The two men instantly recognized a complementary chemistry—synergy, in corp-speak—to their projects. Though unable to work out a joint release of book and CD, Blodgett and McGah have a loosely linked commitment to support one another. The pair has also formed—with Raoul Goff, the CEO of Palace Press, and David Langness, vice president of public relations at Santa Monica-based Fraser Communications—the Finding Grace Institute. The organization is dedicated to the raising and distribution of funds to help fight homelessness across the nation.

Merchant will give a kick-off benefit concert for Give US Your Poor in Boston on Nov. 16, with guest performances by McClain, Mario Frangoulis and others. The show is a coming-out for the renovated Strand Theatre, a historic art-deco venue where entertainment greats of the past century, such as Cab Calloway, once performed. Songs from the CD will be the evening's fare, and Blodgett's photos, blown up to huge dimensions, will backdrop the show.

Other concerts are in the works for major cities, with stars on the CD playing alongside homeless musicians. Meanwhile, Blodgett's photos will be used in the national Help the Homeless campaign, a major effort sponsored by Fannie Mae and United Way, and participants in the Nov. 17 HomeWalk marches in a number of cities will see the photos in major exhibits.

It all means that the spotlight on homeless relief, after years in the "off" position, will switch back on in November. For McGah, it can't come a minute too soon. He tells the story of Julia Dinsmore, a poet who was formerly homeless. She was "fiddling on the web," McGah says, when she came across the liner notes for the CD. Dinsmore has a spoken-word piece on the compilation, read by Danny Glover. She also has a 21-year-old son living in extreme poverty.

"Julia told me she burst into tears," McGah says. "She immediately called her son and said, 'Hang on, honey, there's this CD coming out, it's got an important audience. I can see a ship in the distance.'"

McGah pauses thoughtfully after this story.

"I sometimes get caught up in the sexiness of Springsteen and Bon Jovi and Natalie Merchant, all that. Then I hear a story like this, and I focus again. We have to keep our eye on the ball. That's what this is all about."

There's a slight thickness in his throat as he continues.

"It's such a complex issue, but we do have the resources to end epidemic homelessness. There's just not the will. At least not yet. But we don't have to research this and find a miracle cure. We can just end it."