Loren Cruise

_Spare Change News: “A Newspaper with a Conscience”_

INTRODUCTION

People pass them by when they sit on the corner of Boylston and Exeter Street, shaking their Styrofoam cups to make the few coins in it jingle. Hurried shoppers, flustered tourists, and brisk businessmen avert their eyes or hug their purses closer to their chests as they pass. Most do not wonder what unfortunate circumstances forced these men and women to sit on the street with their cup, bundled in all of the clothing they own just to keep warm. They do not consider that the man on the street, calling for spare change, was once a lawyer or a professor. He might have a family, or he might be all alone with no one to help him. That spare change may be the difference between a warm meal and a hungry night.

The homeless are silenced by public prejudice and stereotypes. They cannot yell loud enough to be heard above the talk of those with homes and jobs and money. However, they are not helpless. In 1992, Tim Hobson and James Shearer, along with around twelve other people in the Harvard Square area who were homeless, decided that they were not going to get lost in the system or the cycle of homelessness. With Timothy Harris, a man who worked at an organization called _Boston Jobs with Peace_, they decided to write their own bi-weekly newspaper. They named it _Spare Change News_ and called it a “newspaper with a conscience” (Zaumer, 2011). Soon after it began, _Spare Change News_ merged with the _Homeless Empowerment Project_ (Spare Change News, 2011).
The mission of *Spare Change News* is to empower the homeless and financially disadvantaged by giving them a voice. It informs the public about the struggles, fears, and hopes of the homeless. The organization strives to change public opinion about this issue and inspire those who are more fortunate to give back to the community and help those who need it most (Zauzmer, 2011). *Spare Change News* and *The Homeless Empowerment Project* also created programs to help the homeless learn skills they would need to find work and earn a salary (Spare Change News, 2011). The homeless use these tools, along with their writing and drawings, to create social change.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this investigation into *Spare Change News* are to identify the goals of the organization are, the programs and methods the organization uses to meet the goals, and the results of the work the organization does.

METHOD

In my research, I did not find a fully reliable source because everything written about a subject like homelessness or an organization such as *Spare Change News* is biased in one way or another by the author or speaker’s views on the subject. There is a public assumption among some that those who are homeless are so because they do drugs or are alcoholics, but I found, through my research, that this is not necessarily true. I was able to find primary and secondary sources about *Spare Change News*. I was unable to get in touch with someone from the
organization, so the primary source I used was the organization’s website. There, I found the history and mission statement, as well as information about who was part of the newspaper. Also, I found articles that people submitted to the newspaper about personal experiences, the need for social change regarding the problem of homelessness, and relevant political issues. Other sources were articles in other news sources, such as the Harvard Crimson, Boston.com, and a blog called A Hard Day’s Blog.

Piecing together information from the different sources, I found a profile of the organization that, even when taking into account the writers’ and editors’ strong opinions about homelessness and the Spare Change News, was uniform between all sources. Because there was very little variation in the description of the newspaper, the sources are reliable in the fact that they all agree on the facts presented in the Spare Change Newspaper’s website.

FACTS AND RESULTS

After the paper’s beginning in 1992, the role of editor and president changed multiple times, each new staff member bringing something new to the paper. Only three years after the founding of the Spare Change News, the paper faced financial hardship because of the poor economy, which made people less willing to donate money (Broustas, 1995). The paper did not rely on the sales of the Spare Change News to support itself. Donations from generous individuals and organizations were what kept the paper afloat (Zauzmer, 2011). However, the sales of the paper put money in the individual vendors’ pockets.

The staff at the Spare Change News is made up of different roles. According to the Spare Change News website, there is a general staff, a committee, and a Board of Directors, almost all
of whom are, or have once been, homeless or financially disadvantaged. Vendors purchase newspapers for twenty-five cents and then sell the papers on the street for a dollar each. Some vendors sell up to one hundred in a day, but that is uncommon for most (Bensson, 2005). Student volunteers who write for the paper usually submit their work for free, but the homeless or disadvantaged contributors earn fifty dollars per piece submitted (Zauzmer, 2011).

The goal of this newspaper, as stated in its mission statement on its website, is to bring awareness to the struggles that homeless people face by giving them a voice. In the 2008-2009 homeless census, 7,681 homeless people were counted on the streets of Boston and in shelters, which is higher than the number counted in the previous census (Zauzner, 2011). The Spare Change News and the Homeless Empowerment Project attempt to assist those who are homeless and change public policies so fewer people will join the over seven and a half thousand people already without shelter. It also strives to empower the homeless by giving them a voice and allowing them to express themselves creatively and productively. Through the experiences and thoughts that the homeless share in their essays, stories, poetry, and other forms of art, the public can see the struggles, hopes, and fears of the homeless. The newspaper hopes that this will change the public’s opinion and encourage people to take action against homelessness.

The Spare Change News accomplishes its goal in multiple ways. The first is to directly assist homeless people by providing programs, such as one on how to use computers and another in which homeless people are paid to orally share the story of their lives, struggles, and accomplishments in front of an audience. The latter program is called the Homeless Speakers’ Bureau, and the speakers hope to change public opinion about the homeless (Spare Change News, 2011). Other ways the organization accomplishes its goals is to provide the vendors with jobs when they have trouble finding or keeping other ones. Lastly, the Spare Change News runs
a section in the back of the paper that provides information about services beneficial to the homeless, such as where they can find food and a place to sleep (Spare Change News, 2011).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Spare Change News is an organization with three missions: to help the homeless, to prevent others from becoming homeless, and to raise awareness about the homeless situation. This organization is successful in its first mission because it allows the homeless to speak and be heard. When the homeless write, they are sharing their struggles with others and, though contributing to the paper does not resolve their life circumstances, it allows the writers to improve them. Also, the readers benefit from the paper because it allows them to hear the stories of those they have not listened to before and to relate to the writing. David Jefferson, the executive director, says, “Our vendors have expertise about facets of society that mainstream society typically doesn’t see. We try to be a catalyst through which mainstream society can learn about these human stories” (Zauzner, 2011). Those called “housed” people, who are more fortunate in their circumstances, can hear the life stories of the homeless. The organization hopes that this will provoke action in the public.

The organization offers a short term “fix” for the homeless by providing information about the different services that homeless people can take advantage of, from shelter for the night to legal aid. It also works toward a long term solution by speaking out against or for public policy and drawing the public attention’s to the suffering of the homeless. The organization has hopes to run the paper weekly in the near future and is extending from Boston to Worcester, where it will initially run monthly (Timmerman, 2010).
RECOMMENDATIONS

The organization the Spare Change News publishes the work of homeless people in Boston and Cambridge, and now also in Worcester. This work normally includes stories of individual people’s plights but also hits on broader issues, such as homelessness in other parts of the world, politics, and current events that are important to the contributors. If the publication schedule increases from bi-weekly to weekly, more information can be spread. Also, vendors will have fresh merchandise for their regulars.

When the newspaper expands to other cities and increases production, there will be more jobs available for homeless people. One of the goals of the paper is to “foster… a sense of financial independence [in its vendors] without getting deeply involved in their personal lives” (Bensson & Friedman, 2005). The organization’s expansion will give more homeless people a lifeline that can pull them out of the pit of homelessness, from which it is so difficult to escape.

Stronger, more aggressive fundraising will allow this to happen. It will also make the newspaper more financially secure, so it can continue publishing the papers and spreading information around the homeless community and society at large. The people who work for the Spare Change News know that it is unrealistic to hope to abolish homelessness completely, but their work aims to create better resources for the homeless, to help people avoid being in a situation where they find themselves homeless, and to generate greater awareness of homeless issues.
References


