

Christian College Student Spends Summer Break Living With Homeless

✖ Ten weeks ago, 24-year-old Brian Seeley wasn't at all new to the downtown scene in Lakeland, Fla. He'd been there many times before—hanging out with friends, including the city's homeless.

On May 9, the Southeastern University senior decided to do more than just hang out—he went to live alongside Lakeland's homeless. The Long Island, N.Y., native gave up the comforts most college students enjoy—sometimes sleeping outdoors, taking bucket showers and eating with the homeless at places that offer free food—in hopes of building lasting relationships.

“I want genuine friendship with the poor or the people who are down and out right now,” said Seeley, who graduates from Assemblies of God-affiliated Southeastern in December with a degree in practical theology.

Seeley, who ended his unusual missions trip Monday, has had a heart for the homeless for years. He comes from a Christian family and grew up in church. But he rebelled against it when he was 13 or 14, getting mixed up with marijuana and eventually kicked out of school. He was later kicked out of a Christian college for the same reasons.

It wasn't until Seeley went to New Zealand with a friend, who was going there on a Youth With A Mission trip, that he came to Christ. “It hit me that I have all this sin in my life and God wants to save me from that,” he said.

He spent more than a year in the South Pacific doing missions work but eventually returned to New York. Seeley helped out at

a homeless shelter and eventually decided he wanted to go into ministry.

When he first started at Lakeland-based Southeastern in 2008, Seeley began making connections with the area's homeless community. Eventually it turned into serving meals each week along with others from his church, Abundant Life Church of God.

Over time, friendships grew, and Seeley decided he would take 10 weeks this summer to bring those relationships to a new level. "I'm the kind of person that's been coming in to help and that wants to get deeper ... and have a relationship that's more meaningful," he said.

Being in need of someone to show him how to survive on the streets, Seeley found the homeless had as much to offer him as he had to share with them.

"What's cool about being out here and coming on their turf is the ones I had made relationships with, they've had an opportunity to serve me back," he told *Charisma* in downtown Lakeland Saturday. "And because it's been this reciprocal relationship, we've been able to develop a real friendship. It's difficult to make a real friendship when you're always the one giving."

Seeley's friend Jordan Wilson, who is originally from Michigan, also has been living with the homeless off and on. He recently graduated from Mission Florida, a discipleship and leadership-training program that allows students to get some college credit while immersing themselves in ministry work.

Wilson said he follows Jesus' example when working with the homeless. "Jesus left His home, His riches, His kingdom" to help those on earth, Wilson said.

Wilson will soon assist with a residential program called Harvest Life Career Path that's being set up to teach men life

and job skills. The program is a part of the Seed Sowers Evangelistic Association, a Christian organization in Lakeland that, among other things, distributes food in 30 counties across Florida.

Seeley is supporting the efforts to open Harvest Life and has considered studying counseling after earning his bachelor's degree. While living among the homeless he worked one day a week at Tri-County Human Services.

He also used his car to take people to church or their housing. But he still experienced what it's like looking for shelter and food. After stripping himself of many comforts, Seeley said he's seen his own lack spiritually.

He said it's hard to see your vices when things are comfortable. The homeless, however, have taught him a lot about patience and gratitude.

On days when his friends Henry Booker and Donna Leslie go to the labor pool looking for work and leave empty-handed, Seeley said he gets frustrated for them. Yet Booker and Leslie stay positive and joyful, even in downtimes.

Seeley said his homeless friends, who have almost nothing, offer what little they can—whether it's shelter or food—when they see someone in need. “Someone who's gone without shelter ... they'll take you in because they know what it's like out there,” he said.

Living among the homeless has given Seeley a lot to think about. “We have these big houses. We have lots of room, but we for some reason don't make that effort [to help the homeless],” he said. “It's a little too radical maybe ... but maybe it's because we haven't experienced being homeless.”

His time with the homeless also has shed light on some of the stereotypes people have about those living on the streets and in shelters. Seeley said many people think the homeless want

to be on the streets. But after talking with many and hearing their stories, he said this just isn't the case.

Some people had family issues growing up that caused them to go from place to place, Seeley said, and many eventually turned to drugs and alcohol to deal with their hopelessness.

"A lot of times they want so badly to get over it and move on, but they're bound," he said. "That's really sad. Instead of seeing them as the victim, the harassed soul, we see them as this bad person."

For Donna Leslie, who befriended Seeley and Wilson, saying they're "like brothers" to her, life has been rough, especially since July 1990 when social services workers took her 13-day-old baby girl from her. She said she began using drugs and was addicted for years.

Leslie beat her drug habit and has worked through the years, but since she lost one job several years ago, she's become a ghost in the world of employment.

"Every since, I've not been able to get a week's worth," she said. "I'm used to working seven days a week, 12-hour shifts. It's killing me."

Leslie, who said she became a Christian about 10 years ago, still keeps the faith, though she said it's hard on the streets, especially for a woman.

Seeley said another misconception about the homeless is that they don't have any money. Many do work—even if it's only a day or week at a time.

There are some who also won't visit a shelter or take food from anyone. While it may be possible to get a place of their own for a time, many homeless can't sustain it because the work doesn't last, Seeley said.

"It's no wonder people just end up despairing ... so some people

just settle in here and kind of deal with it, and I can't blame them for it, but they get blamed for it though," Seeley said.

Seeley's hope is that individuals and churches will make deeper connections with those around them.

"My heart is that if we could all become more personal in our approach to one another and specifically the homeless," he said. "I think that's part of what being a Christian is—breaking those barriers."