

Ohio Pastor Finds Spiritual Renewal in Homeless Experiment

✖ Ryan Riddell has sold hundreds of homes. But the Keller Williams agent—and pastor of a local church in Dayton, Ohio—spent the month of January homeless.

No, Riddell wasn't behind on his mortgage. He willingly took to the cold streets of Dayton—leaving behind his wife and three children—to follow his heart in a campaign to raise awareness of homelessness.

“I felt the Lord leading me to do this,” Riddell says, still sporting the beard that grew on his face during his experiment.

Riddell got the idea at a Francis Chan conference.

“I felt convicted to do more than just talk about people that are hurting, dying and lost. I felt compelled to do something to help these people,” he continues. “Jesus became like us in order to reach us. For me, this was a spiritual renewal.”

Beyond raising awareness of the plight of the homeless, Riddell was also working to raise support for New Family Tree Ministries, which provides furnishing and transitional housing for kids who are aging out of foster care. Riddell reports that Dayton's homeless shelters are filled with 18- to 21-year-old kids who came out of the foster care system.

Riddell accomplished his goals by sleeping in a van for 30 days in Dayton's freezing weather—not a fancy custom van, but an old paneled van. He fully experienced homeless life, including searching for public restrooms. He took two showers a week. Before the end of the 30 days, he appeared fully like

his homeless brethren.

"I learned through this that people have a face and a name. We drive through town and think these people have self-induced problems," Riddell says. "A lot of times they do, but, man, sometimes they do not. I've not been very sympathetic to the needs of these people. I had ignored them. But the Lord showed me that these people are real and they all have a story. They have a face. They have a name. They have a soul."

Joe Walusis, a fellow agent in the Dayton-Southeast Market Center, says his colleagues prayed for Riddell's safety every day. "We are in awe of what Ryan has done and we back him 110 percent," Walusis says. "He has a nice home and a nice family. I'm totally amazed of his courage and his accomplishment."

Riddell developed relationships with a number of homeless people during his 30 days on the streets. He says the people embraced him and his quest to raise awareness for his plight. And raise awareness he did. ABC's Diane Sawyer called him. The Washington Post interviewed him. And several local television and radio stations followed his story. Riddell also posted video blogs every day to document his journey.

"The homeless people embraced me because they have no voice. There is no one crying out for them. They hug me, love me and thank me," Riddell says. "Now, my goal is to raise support for the homeless and aged-out foster kids through speaking engagements. I'm also working directly with nine kids to help them find homes and jobs."