MORE than bread ALONE

LAW ALUM HELPS START the first book club FOR THE HOMELESS
In November 2007, Boston lawyer Peter Resnik was driving his client Robert Day to a courthouse in western Massachusetts. It was pro bono work. Day was a homeless veteran sleeping in a doorway on Tremont Street. Resnik was helping him clear up an old traffic ticket standing in the way of public housing. As the wind-stripped landscape raced by outside and the pair got to talking about Thanksgiving, Resnik felt the distance between him and Day shrink.

“Turkey soup was a common element in both our families,” recalls Resnik (LAW’70). “So many parts of Rob’s life seemed so normal. He was in the army a number of years and served in Europe. He was aware of what was going on in the city, in politics, in sports, and literature.”

Resnik and Day had met some months earlier on Boston Common, but a friendship was taking shape in that car, a relationship that would yield something neither man could have anticipated, a literary movement of sorts: book clubs for the homeless.

**THE HOMELESS VETERAN**

One of six kids, Day grew up in Woburn, Mass., and attended Catholic school. His dad was an auto parts salesman, his mom a housewife. Except for a six-and-a-half-year army stint, part of it stationed in Germany, he’s called the Boston area home all his life. After his discharge, Day worked in local warehouses and as a courier driver. But in his early 40s, he lost his receiving and handling job at a label company in Everett. It didn’t take long to fall behind on his rent.

“I kinda blew through my savings account,” he says, his blunt face capped by thin blondish-gray hair. “I’m getting to the age where it’s hard to get employment. They’re looking for younger people. And now with the economy the way it is . . .”

Day bedded down in city shelters, including the Pine Street Inn, Boston’s largest shelter, and then moved to the street, which he found less restrictive. For many homeless, shelters can be off-putting because of strict rules, crowding, and occasional visits by police, warrants and photos in hand. Even in winter, Day curled up in a sleeping bag in the doorway of the Army Recruiting Station, on Tremont Street near the McDonald’s, with his friend Chris. On colder days, they found warmth in church pews, public libraries, and big-chain bookstores. For the next six years, the days bled into one another, broken up by occasional volunteer gigs at downtown missions and outreach programs.

“I’d wake up around 5:30 or 6,” recalls Day. “McDonald’s opened at 6 and if we were still asleep, the overnight janitor or counter lady would make sure we were up. We’d use the facilities, get a cup of coffee, stay there a little bit. Then I’d go to the back of the Visitors Center on the Common, saying hi to everybody, striking up conversations, getting to know people.”

The Boston Common is a popular hangout for the homeless, with its shady greens and benches and proximity to several churches, the busy Park Street T station, and generous tourists seeking out the Freedom Trail and the Swan Boats. Members of the homeless community can receive outdoor Communion every Sunday afternoon by the Brewer Fountain. Each morning, Day greeted visitors and fellow Bostonians with a smile and a hello—“stemming,” as it’s known. Although Day says he never shook a cup or held a cardboard sign.

“But you’d know that’s what I’d be doing,” he says. “I wouldn’t do it all day, maybe two or three hours in the morning. I’d be happy if I got money for coffee and tobacco. That’s how I met Peter.”

**THE LAWYER**

For years, Resnik, a tall, unassuming civil litigation defense attorney, had been walking from his Back Bay condo to his State Street law firm, McDermott Will & Emery. He made a nice living trying high-profile product liability cases, mostly representing manufacturers of pharmaceuticals, medical devices, and biotech products. When he had extra time, he took the long way home through the Common.

When Peter Resnik, a civil litigation defense attorney, had time to kill, he took the long way home through the Boston Common. That’s where he ran into Robert Day, a homeless veteran with a keen interest in literature.
After losing his job at a label company in Everett and falling behind on rent, Robert Day ended up on the street. Over the last two years, members of the book club, including Resnik (left photo) and (right photo, from left) Ned Carleton, Day, and Damien Moye, have read best sellers such as *Three Cups of Tea* and *The Help*.

“I’d see homeless people and I’d walk by them,” Resnik says, sitting in his high-rise office, the glass windows framing a sweeping scene of the Common and Back Bay, the Charles River rolling toward the Atlantic. “Sometimes I’d give people something, sometimes I wouldn’t. I had no meaningful interactions.”

Resnik’s path took him past the spot Chris and Rob had staked out, and he returned their hellos. The exchange became routine, the door cracking a little wider each time. Little by little, Resnik ventured in, stopping to discuss the weather or sports, and eventually life on the streets. One day, he ribbed Chris about his New York Giants jacket.

“I kidded him, ‘You’re brave to be wearing that jacket on Boston Common.’ And Chris said, ‘Where I get my clothes, this isn’t a New York Giants jacket. It’s a warm jacket.’”

That exchange burrowed in Resnik’s mind. Depending on a person’s circumstances, he realized, the same reality can carry radically different meanings. That the centrifugal forces—jobs, education, health insurance, family, leisure activities—that keep lives pinned safely in place also create a sense of blur. Those standing still, cold, vulnerable, tend to dwell in our margins and blind spots. To see others, we need their definitions, a common link. When Day and Chris invited Resnik to a gospel-country concert in Copley Square, where they were volunteering as ushers, Resnik said he’d be there.

“It was really nice,” Resnik says. “After, my wife and I walked home. It was a cold day and we had this uncomfortable feeling: we were going back to our warm condominium and...
those guys were going back to sleep on the street. I decided to see about helping them get housing.”

As the men spent more time together, talk sometimes turned to books. Resnik, who had majored in English at Yale, had just finished Water for Elephants, a 2006 novel about a nursing home resident recollecting his Depression-era days in a traveling circus. Resnik loved the story and loaned the book to Day, who also took to it. The two men talked about the characters, the differences, and similarities, between yesteryear’s hard times and today’s.

“When I finished it, Peter said, ‘What’d you do with the book?’” Day recalls, with a raspy chuckle. “I said, ‘I gave it to that guy over there.’ Then Peter gave me The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns, and he noticed I gave those books out after I’d finished them, too.”

A lightbulb went on.

“What I didn’t understand then is that being homeless is a very isolating experience,” Resnik says. “As hard as the nights are, being cold, sleeping in an alley or a shelter, the days are difficult because they’re meaningless. They’re empty. They’re boring.”

When Resnik wondered aloud whether members of the homeless community might be interested in starting a book club on the Common, maybe with lunches, Day took to the idea right away. But he waved off Resnik’s suggestion of outdoor meetings with meals. He knew folks would show up for food, not literary conversation. Plus, the cold was coming. Day sought out an outreach worker he knew for advice, an Episcopal deacon named Ron Tibbetts.
THE DEACON
In a former life, Tibbetts, a Norfolk, Mass., native, was a construction worker and an electrician, but a 1990 car accident left him with 27 stress fractures in his back, ligament damage to his knee, and temporary brain damage. His career was over. The father of two young children saw his house slip into foreclosure, his days haunted by the death of one of the high school students in the other car.

Tibbetts fumbled for several years until he forged a path into a life of service, joining the Episcopal Church and eventually heading up Neighborhood Action, a venerable outreach program that began by catering to the poor and homeless around Scollay Square (now Government Center). In 2009, budget woes, among other things, claimed Neighborhood Action and Tibbetts started Oasis Coalition, a collection of services for the homeless community. Ironically, it, too, is without a physical home, and Tibbetts operates out of several local churches.

According to Boston’s annual census report, in the winter of 2008–2009, 7,681 men, women, and children were homeless in the city, an 11 percent spike over the previous year. The number of homeless families leaped by 22 percent. The number of homeless men and women, including work opportuni-
ties, which might take away everything they have, including work opportuni-
ties. The economy plays a significant role. There are too many reasons to put a good definition on why people are homeless.”

Tibbetts, an engaging 57-year-old with an easy smile, knew Day well and considered him an energetic volunteer. But when Day floated the idea for a book club, Tibbetts pictured the two of them sitting alone in an empty room, stuck with a bunch of books.

“To be perfectly frank, my first response was, ‘A what?’” Tibbetts recalls, his voice leavened by a Massachusetts accent. “My place of privilege has me saying, ‘Shouldn’t these people be busy worrying all day about their next meal, a pair of sneakers, warm clothing?’ But the passion in Rob’s eyes, the conviction in his voice, had me saying, ‘OK, let’s explore it.’”

When Tibbetts later asked a homeless church volunteer about joining, he says, “the man replied, ‘Imagine that, someone finally realized that the homeless can read, too.’ That’s when I knew it was right.”

Resnik said he’d cover the books and spring for coffee and donuts. Tibbetts agreed to secure a room and lead the discussions. So one morning in September 2008, Resnik, Tibbetts, and about eight homeless and formerly homeless men and women, including a former U.S. Marine drill instructor and another Yale graduate, gathered in the parish hall at the Church of St. John the Evangelist on Bowdoin Street. Democracy would determine the books, with everyone pledging to read no matter what they thought of the choice. The first selection was obvious: Water for Elephants. And a one-of-a-kind book club was born.

“You know, the amazing thing about Water for Elephants was that after the third or fourth meeting, a fellow named Tim came in,” Tibbetts recalls. “Tim’s a carnival worker and he immediately brought in his life experience, telling personal stories, a place of connection. All that we heard in the aging gentle-
man in Water for Elephants, we were able to hear in Tim. So that really solidified our first book and people got enthusiastic.”

At first Tibbetts worried about reading too many books that dealt with life on the margin or urban poverty.

“You don’t want to rub salt in wounds,” he says. “But the books that have inspired the best conversations are those written by local authors, like Michael MacDonald’s All Souls and Nick Flynn’s Another Bullshit Night in Suck City. Flynn’s book talks about having to go into a shelter and get deloused, to stand there naked while someone sprays you down with bug spray, and you’re sitting next to someone at the table who says, ‘Yeah, I had to do that once.’ You’d be stunned at the honesty and integrity of folks who’ve lived that life. They knew those places. They remember the Pine Street vans, the expansion and reduction in services. It was a point of pride, that I’d survived this. It was really powerful.”

It wasn’t long before the next powerful revelation. A collection of O. Henry short stories was on tap. One club member said she hated the way the author didn’t seem to finish his tales. Resnik suggested she try her hand at a new ending. The whole group took up the challenge, and the next week everyone read their sugges-
tions aloud.

“What was amazing was I’d known these people six or seven years and the endings really unmasked how they saw the world,” Tibbetts recalls. “There were the fatalists: the Titanic love stories, where the couple sail off to be together forever and the boat sinks. There were romantic endings, poetic

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endings, hopeful endings. The endings stripped away a lot of the artifice people are forced to adorn themselves in and you got to see these people in a whole different way.”

For many in the club, time had reacquired meaning; it was being measured in stories, in back-and-forths across a table, in a new tribe bonding little by little.

**AT THE CHURCH ON THE HILL**


One morning this past November, copies of Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam war novel *The Things They Carried* were scattered like place mats around two tables pushed together in a chilly conference room. Eight men and one woman leaned over the paperbacks, cups of coffee within reach. Like Day, most had found some form of housing, but remained connected with the community and related services. The struggle doesn’t always end with a room of one’s own. Nor do the friendships. In fact, the sudden isolation from the community can often lead people back to the streets, the line between the two worlds a thin one.

A divider had been drawn across the room, and on the other side an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting would take place. Ned Carleton, a tall man with neatly combed silver hair, had arranged in front of him several notebooks and a newspaper clipping on O’Brien. One man, wearing his ski hat, ear flaps tucked up, fingered a small Snickers bar, another, huddled in a large tan winter coat, took a seat at the head of the table. A good turnout given that it was election day and a day’s work was to be had at the polling stations.

During the smoke break, Carleton passed around the newspaper clipping. The 71-year-old had been homeless for five years in the 1990s. Like Resnik, he too had graduated from Yale, a philosophy major.

“I enjoy the companionship of the guys who come here,” he says. “I’ve been led to read books I never would have otherwise. Frequently, I come to dislike them heartily. I don’t like this book, though I think Tim is a very able writer. He can make you feel what it was like to be there. He’s excellent at that.”

Damien Moye returned to his seat with a cup of coffee. Originally from the South, the 32-year-old first showed up last summer. He says he’s spent a night at Pine Street and crashed for a while on a friend’s couch, but is now housed and working when he can. “I get a sense of refuge here,” he says. “It’s a way out for a little.”

**THE STREETS OF MADISON**

The Boston homeless book club has garnered national attention, with visits from CBS News, *People* magazine, the *Boston Globe*, and Boston University’s NPR affiliate, WBUR. Over the past two years, the idea has been replicated across the country: Seattle, Wash., Fort Wayne, Ind., Smyrna, Fla., New York City, and even London and Barcelona.

Suzanne Alexander, a physician in Madison, Wisc., just celebrated the one-year anniversary of her church’s club, inspired by the Boston outfit. She started a blog, called *The Streets of Madison*, which details the books, meeting discussions, and author interviews—a blueprint for other communities, she says.

Whenever possible, Alexander invites the authors to be part of the discussion. Robert Kurson, author of *Shadow Divers*, drove up from Chicago to talk to the club. Members have Skyped with *Three Cups of Tea’s* Relin and with Garth Stein, who wrote the *New York Times* best seller *The Art of Racing in the Rain*. Connecting not only with one another, but with society at large has deepened everyone’s lives, Alexander says.

“The feeling of being invisible—that’s huge, having people not taking what they have to say seriously or not listening at all,” she adds. “This is such a great way to break the ice. One member would take his book to the coffee shop and people would come up to him and say, ‘Hey, I read that,’ where before they would just ignore him.”

**FRIENDS, PERIOD**

For Resnik, the key was taking a risk, to just say hello at first. Even after he offered to help Day with housing, there was trepidation.

“The biggest difficulty I had was a fear that I was going to offend people,” he says, “that I was stepping into something I really didn’t understand, certainly people I didn’t understand. You just don’t know what exactly is going to be involved in taking on somebody, trying to get them housing, and dealing with their problems.”

Now the grandfather of five has found not only a diverse company of fellow book-lovers, but a group of true friends. He recently sprung for dinner and tickets to a BU student production of *Rent*, which explores homelessness, among other themes. (Tibbetts had consulted with the actors as part of their preparation.) Some six club members made their way to campus for the show. And last year, Resnik was asked to give a talk about the club at the Boston Public Library. He felt nervous until he looked out at the audience.

“The whole book club came to Copley to support my talk,” Resnik says. “And they were at the reception. We all went out to dinner to Charlie’s on Newbury after. It was a very enjoyable evening. These are people I feel comfortable with. If I ever needed help, and I guess I did that night, I know they’d be there for me, too. It’s a mutual relationship. We’re friends. Friends, period.”

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**WEB EXTRA**

Watch a video with scenes from a session of the Boston homeless book club and commentary from its members at bu.edu/bostonia.