

People experiencing homelessness are people too. Sometimes the hardest part of being homeless is coping with the world's misconceptions. HomeAid Atlanta Director of Community Outreach, Karen McLane, shares her eye-opening experience.

Karen's Story—Can You Spare an Umbrella?

As Director of Community Outreach for HomeAid Atlanta, I've had my fair share of encounters with people experiencing homelessness. Even with all of those interactions, it's easy to lose focus and forget that things - and people - aren't always what they seem.

On a rainy night last winter, I was driving into downtown Atlanta for a meeting at a homeless shelter. In an unfamiliar part of town, alone, at night during a torrential rainstorm, my first instinct was to cancel and blame the weather. After some deliberation in the parking lot, I decided to be brave and keep my commitment.



I jogged to the machine to pay for parking. Huddled under a tiny overhang to keep from getting soaked, I struggled to hold my purse and get my credit card into the machine. It wouldn't accept the card so I pulled out another one to finish the transaction. It suddenly dawned on me that this was not a safe situation. I felt like a sitting duck. Then I noticed two men slowly making their way to the overhang where I was trying to pay.

My first instinct was to run quickly to the car without looking back, but there was no time to get away. One of the men spoke. I was literally shaking, afraid of what might happen. He was a little hesitant and then respectfully asked if he and his friend could just come underneath the overhang with me to get out of the rain. I think he sensed my fear and tried to reassure me. With my purse hanging open, I was sure that his next question would be "Do you have any money?" To my surprise, he asked if I had an umbrella. Just an umbrella. What a perfectly reasonable request! Sadly, I didn't. I asked if he knew the way to my meeting location and he pointed me in the right direction. He asked me to suggest that this shelter add more beds because so many people get turned away every night.

As I was standing in the rain, I looked at him and thought of all the people living on the streets who just want to be warm and dry. We said goodbye and I walked the few blocks to my meeting. On the way, I passed more people experiencing homelessness, their belongings wet and dirty on the sidewalk. When I arrived at the shelter, I indeed saw a line of people huddled together, waiting to try to get a bed for the night.

This encounter has stayed with me. While my first instinct was fear, it quickly turned to compassion after taking the time to see and hear this man, who only asked for an umbrella.