

Cheryl's List Blog for 8/9/2016

Ceremonial Sweats

This summer, in the Florida-like weather pattern that has parked itself atop the territory we call Davidson County, just being outside means human beings perspire. The volunteers of Cheryl's List are no exception. Wet with sweat, we like to joke that at least we won't have to go to the gym. While that may not be exactly true, the work and the sweating are good for us, and not just in that body as a machine sort of way.

Once upon a time, one of our team—Eddie—travelled to Montana to participate in a Blackfoot Indian ritual of ceremonial sweating. For some reason, Eddie remembered it recently as we were driving back to the warehouse. In the ceremony, the body perspires, toxins are eliminated, visions happen, people sing, tribe people bond, and spiritual wellbeing is enhanced.

As many of you know, volunteer physical labor, once successfully completed, is followed by a "runner's high" of sorts. Feelings of satisfaction heightened by good brain chemicals and lowering body temperature. Cheryl's List work, even in the 100-degree heat index of a Nashville summer evening, can still be the best part of the day. In our own small way, the Cheryl's List team has continued to routinely collect gently used furniture, combine those items with new bedding purchased with donated money, all to help an average of three households a week. Hopping back into the truck, whether the windows are down or the A.C. is cranked up, is a chance to recount, reflect, and rejoice.

About two weeks ago, the Cheryl's List team encountered a father and son trying to get a new start. Referred by Room in the Inn, these men were moving into a second floor apartment without air conditioning. They greeted us joyfully. They helped us make many trips up some steep, but wide, metal steps. They helped us assemble beds and put furniture together. The jagged, no-slip, metal stairway and tight doorway made getting the beautiful, donated, leather couch inside, without ruining the upholstery, especially challenging. Our hands were slippery. The couch got stuck. A blanket was needed to protect the couch's corner, and the couch's feet needed to come off. By the time we were finished, we were all soaked with sweat. We had bottled water to share. I happily drank mine; they put theirs in the freezer for later. I watched the refrigerator's door open and close. This was move-in day; they had no groceries.

As we left, we felt pretty good—we had delivered everything on their list except the window air conditioner. [Cheryl's List currently doesn't deal with appliances.] Their new beginning would include beds and sheets and table and chairs and couch and upholstered chair and kitchen items. We had done the best we could at the time and honored our commitment. Still, we knew the stifling heat of their apartment would make it hard to sleep. Eddie and I conferred. We could at least make a run for fans. A few minutes later we returned with two box fans, one for each bedroom.

These two men had a tight bond. The father, who had been battling pneumonia, worked hard. When a neighbor in their building came out to speak with him, I thought maybe we had been too noisy, maybe some third shift worker downstairs was trying to sleep. As it turned out, she was warning her new neighbors about drug dealers on the other side of the building. She said they would soon be “checking us out.” Sure enough, a few minutes later, a tall young man came around the corner to watch four sweaty men fill a once empty apartment with furniture. For whatever reason, he stood there for a minute and left. Having been forewarned, the son became momentarily incensed by the perceived threat; the dad calmly diffused the situation. We just kept on working and prayed for the safety most of us take for granted.

Driving back to the warehouse we recounted the many blessings Cheryl’s List affords. We celebrated getting to meet these two men. We wrestled with the substitution of box fans for window air conditioning. We acknowledged the reality of an aging two-story apartment building bounded on all four sides by urban growth, gentrification, and traffic. We envisioned a city that could meet the challenges of poverty mixing with crime.

Driving home, I processed the night’s ceremonial sweat. Most memorable was not the perspiration, not the alleged threat of drug dealers, and not the stairs we climbed. It was the special bond between that father and son. We didn’t walk in their shoes, but, for an hour or so, we had the privilege of climbing some of their stairs.

A few days later, while driving through that part of town, I saw them walking. I waived. I think maybe they recognized me. They were going sort of fast. No shirts on, they glistened with sweat. The father was out in front; the son stepping off the curb; and, they were talking. Maybe there was a bus to catch. Maybe there was food in that fridge now. Maybe they could rest safely in the second floor heat.

I should note: my concern about the immediate danger they would face melted a little when, the morning after our delivery, the local news reported a drug bust on their street. It takes a village to do most things.