

Homelessness

Essential question: "What does it mean to be homeless in Philadelphia?"

School: Thurgood Marshall Elementary School, Philadelphia, PA

Year of project: 2000-2001

Eighth grade students at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School found many of their assumptions challenged as they explored homelessness and several related concerns. The more they learned, the more they discovered there was to know.

Exploring root causes was an important part of their project. To learn about the problem, they interviewed representatives from the Philadelphia Committee to End Homelessness, Habitat for Humanity and the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development.

A pivotal point in the process was a visit to Stenton Family Manor to interview a small group of shelter residents. Through meeting these men and women, hearing their stories and listening to their hopes and dreams, the students gained a better understanding the residents' situations, how they reached this juncture in their lives and how they felt about their situation.

In a reflection afterwards, one student wrote: *"The [homeless] person we interviewed could be anybody, your mother, your sister, your aunt, your neighbor, your friend, you. She is a regular human being just trying to get by like you and me."*

Another powerful learning experience took place at a downtown intake center for homeless men. The students had created a survey to determine what causes contributed to the problem; they distributed their survey to a number of the men and were shocked at what they learned. Quite a few of the men were illiterate; others suffered from addiction and mental illness; a few used the open ended questions as an opportunity to vent their frustrations. The classroom discussion that followed the visit was lively.

The students decided they had much they wanted to share with the city's elected officials. To do so, they held an art auction to raise money to enable them to publish and distribute a booklet about homelessness that contained information they had gathered throughout the project. They invited the Mayor, City Council representatives, school district officials and media to their presentation. Their local

Councilperson attended and a local TV station covered the event for the 11 o'clock news.