

Friday, September 26, 2008

OU alumnus helps homeless find life beyond the street

By **Rebecca Wyatt Thomas**, OU Web Writer

When Nick Monterosso sees homeless people on the street in Detroit, he stops the car, gets out and engages them in a conversation. He listens to their stories, learns about their dreams for the future and helps them get off the street and toward a better future. Monterosso works with the United Way's 2-1-1 initiative in Detroit, a service that provides help in the health and human service areas to people in Washtenaw, Monroe, Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

"In 2006, after I graduated, I just started doing homeless outreach. I would go downtown Detroit and meet with the homeless," said Monterosso, who was accompanied by his friend John Azoni. "We made friends with some of the homeless and we listened to their stories. We were really surprised by the reaction we got from them. The homeless really desire relationships and people to listen to them."

Monterosso continued to make trips in to the city every other day after he got a job at Audi. When Azoni graduated in 2007, he was connected to the United Way for possible employment. He told someone at the United Way about his trips to Detroit with Monterosso and the two were eventually hired to work with the 2-1-1 program.

"I was looking for a job in the city. I had just moved downtown and I wanted to further plant my feet in the city with employment. There was a pay cut involved, but the job lined up so perfectly with my passion. I was sure it was an answer to prayer. I was going to work with my best friend doing something I cared about," said Monterosso.

The United Way's 2-1-1 program provides referrals to local services such as food, shelter, child care and legal aid to people in need who call 2-1-1. Monterosso and Azoni were hired as the homeless outreach wing of 2-1-1 and serve as a mobile unit for the service. They provide referrals from the 2-1-1 database while interacting with the homeless.

Monterosso and Azoni find homeless who want and are capable of getting back to work and help get them on the path to housing, work and a different future. They provide bus passes and Post Office boxes, donated by the United State Postal Service and located at the Detroit Rescue Mission, along with a voicemail box and calling card so they are able to start looking for a job.

The program is funded by the Downtown Detroit Partnership, business leaders from the city led by Roger Penske.

"During my experiences at OU, I really gravitated to two people: Alan Epstein and Vincent Khapoya, professors in political science. I learned a lot from them about justice and truth," said Monterosso. "I was not satisfied by what I learned in the classroom and I was inspired to do more."

Five years ago, Monterosso expected he would graduate, go to law school and practice international law. Instead he's working in what he calls "a very satisfying career."

Currently the Detroit-area 2-1-1 is coming through the first year and making enhancements for the future. Monterosso said the one-stop centers in areas like Orlando, Houston and Atlanta provide homeless the ability to get in touch with the necessary resources all in one place, and they provide a model for the 2-1-1 of Detroit.

"One eventual goal is that we would establish a level of success in Detroit that mandates growing the program in other cities," said Monterosso. "We want to see the people who succeed with the help of 2-1-1 pour back into those that are still on the street and speak to the authenticity of the program."

Monterosso said the economic situation in Michigan poses a challenge, but there are many people in the city who want to respond to helping the program and who have provided opportunities for the homeless population that needs assistance.

"We are the first United Way branch to have a program like this in any city in the United States. We are making it completely accessible to those who want to learn from it and writing a manual as we go. It has only been in the last few months that we have been publicly discussing what we have been doing," Monterosso said. "The first year, we just wanted to prove the program would be a success."

For more information on the United Way or the 2-1-1 program, visit the **United Way** Web site.

SUMMARY

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Created by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Friday, September 26, 2008
Modified by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Sunday, September 28, 2008
Article Start Date: Friday, September 26, 2008