

Pastor wanders streets in personal bid to understand homelessness

by [Greg Horton](#)

November 13, 2012

NORMAN, Okla. (RNS) Pastor Dustin Buff traded in his job, his house and his sense of security for a backpack, a Bible, a sleeping bag, one change of clothes, identification, and a cell phone.

For 10 days, Buff and youth minister Philip Nguyen were intentionally homeless, wandering the streets of Norman in a personal quest to understand the plight of the homeless.

Andrews Park, a mile and a half from the University of Oklahoma, is a temporary home to many of the city's homeless. Buff estimates 300 people live on the street in this city of 113,000. In the park, the homeless gather in gazebos, sleep in faux forts on the playground, and lounge on the steps of the amphitheater.

Buff pointed to the municipal buildings that ring Andrews Park.

"All the city offices are right there," he said. "Homeless people are sleeping here at night right across the street from the police station. I've read government estimates that Norman has 1,700 homeless residents, if you include transient housing, shelters, and the streets."

Buff is the lead pastor at Grace Church, an independent evangelical church where Nguyen serves as youth minister while he finishes a degree in music education at Oklahoma University.

The pair spent their days moving through Norman, looking for gaps in homeless services and engaging the homeless in conversations about their lives and their options.

"I was surprised to discover how easy it was to get food," Buff said. "You can get two hot meals a day thanks to Food and Shelter. Finding a place to sleep is harder."

Food and Shelter is a local nonprofit that serves about 250 meals per day, but the agency has limited sleeping space. Buff and Nguyen were going to spend one night on the floor at the shelter, but the limited space only holds four dozen people.

"We decided that we would rather people who actually need the shelter take our spots that night," Nguyen said, halfway through his homeless experiment. "We ended up sleeping between houses."

The two slept in a wooded area on the edge of town, between houses in a small neighborhood, and in a local shelter. Bed space for the homeless is tight in Norman, and the city is virtually devoid of bed space for families. One night, they tried to float between waiting rooms at Norman Regional Hospital, a common tactic according to Nguyen, but security asked them to leave the premises at about 1:00 a.m.

"It was a scary moment," Buff said. "It was the first night we didn't have a plan for where to sleep."

Another edgy moment came during a dinner at Food and Shelter. A newspaper article from The Oklahoma Daily, OU's student newspaper, that featured Buff's and Nguyen's story was making the rounds at the dinner tables.

"We saw people pointing at the article, pointing at us, and whispering excitedly," Nguyen said. "We didn't realize what they were reading at first."

Eventually, a homeless man approached them and asked about the article. Buff told the crowd why they were pretending to be homeless. "They were uncertain at first," Buff said, "but they eventually embraced the idea."

As Buff and Nguyen move through the park, they were greeted by two men riding bicycles that had been donated by First Baptist Church. They exchange a few words, and the men pedal to a nearby gazebo.

Buff and Nguyen had met the men the previous day. Both men are habitually homeless.

"There are roughly two types of people out here," Buff said. "Some are living a homeless lifestyle, and they are 100 percent OK with living like this. But there are others who are scratching and fighting to get out of homelessness. We want to help both groups."

The experiment ended on Nov. 7, and the two men planned to take a few days to reflect on what they had seen and learned. They plan to meet with Grace Church's leadership to determine where best to lend their limited financial resources.

"This is our city," Buff said. "This is the city God has called us to. I want to make an impact in the lives of these people, and this is the only way I know how to understand how we can best help."