



SPECIAL REPORT

# STREET LIFE

Tim Renshaw BEM has listened to the experiences of hundreds of rough sleepers in his role as CEO at the Cathedral Archer Project. To gain an even greater understanding of their struggles, he spent 14 nights rough sleeping in churchyards across Sheffield. *Christopher Kerr* met him to find out how it went.



**T**im had heard it all when it came to the challenges of rough sleeping, but nothing could prepare him for the real thing. “One night, I slept in a church doorway near a cemetery. People were constantly walking past me as I lay down. I felt really vulnerable to be honest. I was so tired though that I fell asleep. I woke up some time later and thought, ‘Wow, I was really lucky nothing happened to me there.’”

Most rough sleepers experience violence at some point, a fact Tim would have been all too aware of as he lay there with just a sleeping bag between him and the strangers walking by. “After six nights though,” Tim says, “I was so exhausted that I remember thinking, ‘Sod it, if it happens, it happens.’”

Fortunately, Tim didn’t get attacked on his 14-night sleepout, and he was keen to stress this wasn’t the only thing that made this a very different experience to the real thing. “This sleepout was to genuine rough sleeping what glamping is to wild camping in the Himalayas. There is no comparison! That said, when I was talking to a few people who are former rough sleepers they told me not to worry – I would learn enough!”

And, so it proved. I sat down with Tim to discuss his experiences, and the lessons he learned along the way.

## LESSON 1: ROUGH SLEEPERS ARE GOOD PEOPLE WITH SAD STORIES

“One night, a real rough sleeper found me. It had been raining, and the ground was wet so I offered to share my tent with him. He said no and slept outside. Not even constant rain during the night could convince him to take up my offer,” Tim says.

The reason for this is as sad as it is true. “I clocked something he said to me earlier in the evening. He was telling me how sometimes he drinks and that makes him react to things that make him angry. He told me that he regrets it when that happens, but if he can cope with what his dad did to him when he was younger, he could cope with anything.”

Like so many people who end up homeless, this gentleman had suffered childhood trauma. “Trauma creates distance between a person and the society around them because life becomes an exercise in survival, and trusting others



isn't a great survival technique. It drives one to homelessness, even neglecting shelter in the pouring rain."

Having worked with homeless people for many years, Tim knew about the link between trauma and homelessness, but this interaction really rammed it home. "I want to shout this story from the roof tops. Ending homelessness has to start with understanding the trauma link just as much, if not more, as building good quality affordable homes."

Tim is correct. In one large study of homeless people, reported in the *Journal of Psychiatry* (2000), 100% of women and over 90% of men had reported experiencing at least one traumatic event prior to being homeless. Many other studies confirm the causal link.

Tim is also concerned by the vicious trauma cycle homeless people face. "Trauma pushes people onto the streets and, unfortunately, they often experience more during their homelessness. Women who sleep rough are particularly vulnerable to this. One woman told me, 'If you are a homeless woman, you expect to be offered something in return for sex.'"

It is important to remember this as we walk through our towns and cities, inevitably seeing homeless people lying in doorways. Their journey to this point most likely started with something terrible happening in their lives.

## LESSON 2: HOMELESSNESS REALLY IS A TALE OF TWO CITIES

In his book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens famously opens with: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.' Tim felt the weight of this contrast during his two-week sleepout.

"Choices dry up when you are homeless.

## "Bad backs, aching necks, painful feet are just the tip of the iceberg"

I walked past Bramall Lane (Sheffield United's stadium) and it suddenly struck me that even if I wanted to attend, I couldn't. That was a theme of my time rough sleeping. I could walk down the same streets as everybody else, but I couldn't go to many of the places that they can go into."

On the odd occasion that Tim did dare to enter a fast-food restaurant or café, it was far from a pleasant experience. Same prices, different service: "Even in a well-known fast food joint, I was being monitored and stared at. I had paid for my order but I was still viewed with suspicion."

This is a common experience for those who are homeless: "A friend called James phoned me. He was a rough sleeper for two decades. He said, 'I watched couples holding hands and just walking down the street, going in shops or wherever. I'd have loved that. Watching people go in restaurants and you know they're not places for you.' I think for many rough sleepers, they feel like they occupy a different universe."

## LESSON 3: A SMILE IS MORE VALUABLE THAN YOU WILL EVER KNOW

Unfortunately, that feeling of being in a different universe is compounded by how people interact with rough sleepers. "I lost count of the times people would see me, but then immediately divert their eyes

away from me. It did have an impact on me. What was I? Something to be afraid of? Something unwanted?" Tim laments.

I thought his choice of language was interesting here – 'something' rather than 'someone'. That tells us a lot about the distance people experiencing homelessness feel from those who are not.

Fortunately, there is a very simple solution to this, as Tim experienced: "On my first night sleeping rough, a lot of people were walking near me and looking away. Then a man and a woman passed me and to my surprise the woman looked back, smiled at me and said 'hello'. This was a really small act, but in that moment of loneliness, it was really valuable."

Tim would encourage us all to take this approach. "Sometimes people worry they are going to say hello to a person who is rough sleeping and they are not going to be very nice back. These moments are incredibly rare. I think we need to be braver. For someone in a bad place, a smile or hello can change their day. I experienced this and I hear it time and time again from people who have been on the street. Not being ignored or stared at is wonderful."

One story of Tim's demonstrates the power of this. "I was lying in a doorway and a man came and stood to one side. He then walked to the other side of the doorway, at all times diverting his gaze away from me. I was on edge – what was he doing? He then turned to me and asked me if I wanted a cigarette? He explained to me that he was here as it was a good spot to hide away from his wife who didn't want him smoking! He then asked if I needed anything to eat. All my tension fell away, and it was so nice to have a chat with someone."

## LESSON 4: HOMELESSNESS HURTS

It sounds obvious to say that homelessness is tough, but we perhaps don't understand all the ways it impacts a person. "I knew that at the end of the 14 days I would be going home, and that I could call my wife at any time to talk. Even so, there were moments that I felt really low."

It was the 5pm slot that would often give Tim that sinking feeling: "This was particularly hard during the second week. It felt like the end of the day, and it would be, normally. People are leaving work and heading home to see their families and to settle down for the night. I knew my day and all it brings was only going to get tougher from here on out. That was hard."

The physical effects of rough sleeping only made things worse for Tim: "I felt extremely tired, and I was aching in all my muscles and bones. We know from the NHS health assessment reports that tired muscles and bones are very common for people who are homeless. So, the idea that I had to keep →



“For someone in a bad place, a smile or hello can change their day”

trudging around to keep warm and get to my place to sleep drags you into lowness.”

If you add to this the loneliness, isolation, fears, vulnerability and the hopelessness that comes with homelessness, it is no wonder that 8 in 10 people who sleep rough struggle with mental health issues. “When I spoke to people who are really sleeping rough, they kept talking about feeling disconnected from everything. It goes deeper than loneliness, its isolation where you feel like everything is in touching distance, but you cannot be a part of any of it. I think we would all struggle with that.”

There are other struggles too, as Tim found out: “Bad backs, aching necks, painful feet are just the tip of the iceberg. Wet and cold weather have far more serious implications for those sleeping rough. When it rained, my instincts would take over and make me obsessed with keeping dry. Imagine getting soaked on a cold winter’s night? It would be dangerous that’s for sure.”

## LESSON 5: THERE ARE REASONS TO BE HOPEFUL

Hope is often elusive on the street, but you will find it if you look hard enough. “One thing that always amazes me is that I meet people every day who are homeless and rough sleeping, and yet these people summon the spirit to be cheerful,” says Tim. “I know they are tired, aching and

struggling with low moods. I know they have stories of serial abuse and neglect. I know they have fewer choices than us, yet somehow they remain hopeful. Not all the time of course, but we often see it in their humour, and their appreciation for what people do for them.”

So what made Tim hopeful as he lay there in a damp churchyard on those cold, wet, lonely nights? “I was doing a lot of evening talks for youth and church groups and a lot of the conversations I had brought me hope for the future. I remember talking to one youth group in a low-income area in Sheffield about what I was doing. I was struck by how interested they were, and how much it resonated with them. When we talked about trauma and how it is a big cause of long-term homelessness, a boy said, ‘You have just described me, but I will not end up homeless.’ I wanted to pick him up and hug him and say, yes, keep that determination!”

Hope also came from the comments people made on his daily blog for this sleepout. “I didn’t think this sleepout would be a big deal. But there were loads of people out there that followed my journey with interest from all over the world. When I read their comments, I realised how widespread is the desire to see a change. That gives me incredible hope really.”

There is no doubt that homelessness is a problem so large in scale it touches every

nation, and with the cost-of-living crisis and a long recession looming, it is only likely to get worse. People like Tim give me the hope that we really can do something about that. [S](#)

## HOMELESSNESS: CURRENT STATISTICS

- 227,000 households were experiencing the worst forms of homelessness by the end of 2021 (Crisis)
- The end of Assured Shorthold Tenancies and the use of eviction notices is the leading cause of homelessness (Crisis)
- The number of people sleeping rough in London has jumped 24% in the past year, meaning more than 3,600 people slept on the capital’s streets between June and ■ September (Official count)
- The majority of rough sleepers are male, by a 6:1 ratio (Office for National Statistics)
- The average age of death for people experiencing homelessness is 46 for men and 42 for women (Crisis)
- The number of people dying while experiencing homelessness increased by 80% between 2019 and 2021 (Museum of Homelessness)