

Christmas 2014

Dear Friend,

Every Christmas Eve at our Covenant House shelters for homeless kids is special — but there is one I can't ever forget ...

It was just after dark, and I had gathered with the kids and staff at one of the shelters. We formed a circle to mark the night together in prayer and thanksgiving for one another, and the gift of God's love in the world.

Two of our Faith Community volunteers were playing guitar and singing *Silent Night* as a prelude to our services ...

... when a shadow appeared outside the window, and lingered.

The lighting was poor and it was hard to see who was there. The figure was hooded and hunched over. He stood there, looking in, for more than ten minutes.

I left our circle, walked past the manger and the Christmas tree, and went out the front door to see who was standing there. As I approached, I could tell it was a boy, maybe 16 or 17 years old. He had dark circles under his eyes — he looked exhausted.

"Hi there," I said and offered a handshake. "I'm Kevin, what's your name?"

"Jeremiah." His smile was forced, but he was trying.

"Want to come inside, Jeremiah?" I asked.

He hesitated, not making eye contact, just gently shaking his head back and forth. "Nah, I'm alright. I'm fine here," he said tentatively.

"Well you don't look alright. You look tired. Come inside — we have some hot chocolate and Christmas cookies," I offered. But he didn't move. In my book, something has to be really wrong to turn down cookies and hot chocolate on Christmas Eve.

(over, please)

“Look, they’re right there,” and I pointed inside to the table with Christmas goodies. “Come in from the dark and take a load off.”

“How much you charge?” he asked, his face filled with skepticism. “I only have \$26 on me and I need it. I have to find a place to stay and something to eat, and I need my money.”

“We don’t charge anything, Jeremiah. Come inside Covenant House with me, okay?” I turned to walk inside, trusting he’d follow, and he did, but slowly.

I held the door for him as we entered, and we could hear the chorus singing the refrain of *Silent Night*. The music stopped Jeremiah in his tracks.

“My momma used to sing that song on Christmas.” He appeared lost in the memory.

“Where is your mom, Jeremiah?” I asked.

And he took out his wallet and unfolded a faded, creased Polaroid of a young woman with two small children and a mall Santa in front of a cardboard chimney.

“That’s me,” he said, pointing to the little boy on Santa’s right knee. “That’s my brother Ty,” he said, pointing to the other toddler, “and that’s Momma.” Perfect smiles, all of them, even the little ones.

“She died. She had breast cancer, 6 years ago.” He said it matter-of-factly, as if he’d said it 100 times before. But something in the way he squinted his eyes betrayed the pain that his words did not.

“How about Ty?” I asked.

“We went into foster care and got split up. He lives in a group house somewhere. I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Where have you been staying?” I asked.

But he had stopped listening to me. Jeremiah’s gaze was fixed on the circle of kids, donors and staff singing Christmas hymns. He bowed his head and started to shake a bit. His voice broke.

“I got nobody mister. It’s Christmas and I got nobody.” His eyes had filled, and the tears were starting to spill down his cheeks. (Tragically, there are thousands of kids like Jeremiah who “have nobody.” Every year, more than 56,000 homeless kids come to our shelters.)

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I asked Jeremiah if he wanted something to eat or whether he needed to rest, but he was intent on the circle and its music.

Then, Father Placid, our chaplain for more than 20 years, invited us into the circle by saying, “Let’s gather together and make room for everyone in our circle.”

We sang, we read prayers, and offered one another a “sign of peace,” a handshake to express our commitment to one another. Jeremiah took my hand and for the first time made eye contact. “I have nowhere to be right now,” he said. “Nowhere. I don’t belong in the world.”

“Yes, you do, Jeremiah. Right here,” I replied. “Peace son.”

“Peace,” he whispered.

After services we talked, and ate cookies and apples and turkey sandwiches (in that order, forgive me!) He started to relax a bit. We watched the kids open presents from our donors. And, Jeremiah received some unexpected gifts as well — a backpack, sneakers and a sweater.

We sang carols, slurped hot chocolate and stayed grateful to be sharing this night inside — in the light and out of the dark of winter.

As Jeremiah and I teased each other about who was going to win the Super Bowl, my cell phone rang. Since it was late and the number was from our shelter in New Jersey, I was worried something was amiss. It was.

“Someone stole the kids’ Christmas presents,” our New Jersey shelter director told me. “They broke in through the back windows and took it all.”

God forgive me, but my first reaction was rage. Who steals from homeless kids on Christmas Eve? Where could we find new presents for kids after midnight? How much was it going to cost to fix the broken windows?

It took me a moment to calm down, and Jeremiah noticed how upset I was. I explained the situation to him and made sure he was in the capable care of our shelter team before telling him that I needed to speak with our Covenant House New Jersey team and the police.

“Here,” Jeremiah said. “Take this.”

He had opened his wallet and taken out the \$26, handing it to me. “They need it more than I do.”

(over, please)

My friends sometimes call me Cryin' Ryan for a reason. At that moment I was undone by the giant generosity of this sweet, broke kid who emptied his pockets to bring Christmas to other homeless kids he'd never met.

And you know what really makes this story so special? There are hundreds of other boys and girls in our shelter tonight who are every bit as good ... every bit as innocent ... and every bit as deserving of our love and support as Jeremiah.

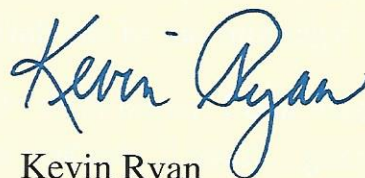
Please ... will you help us provide shelter and love to the droves of homeless kids who will come to our Covenant House crisis shelters this Christmas?

Your Christmas gift today — whatever you can afford — will give kids like Jeremiah food, a safe place to sleep away from the dangerous streets, medicine, and counseling.

But most of all, you will be giving them the love and dignity every child deserves.

Thank you for reading this letter, and for bringing kids like Jeremiah the miracle of God's love, if you can. The world is truly a better place because of wonderful people like you.

May God be with you,



Kevin Ryan
President

P.S. I've sent you this dime and penny to make an incredibly important point. During these next few weeks, we'll be jammed to the rafters with kids like Jeremiah who are cold, tired and hurting. But for just about \$19.11 you can feed, clothe and provide lifesaving support to a homeless kids for 120 hours during this Christmas season. Please will you return the dime and penny I sent you along with a life-saving donation today? Every penny matters!

We could really use your help right now. There is no other way to say it, the need is urgent. Please reach out to our kids this Christmas. And, please remember to send back the enclosed card as well, so the kids and I can keep you in our prayers this Christmas. Thank you so much.