

The Best-Dressed Man at FOCUS

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“This is Chester, the best-dressed man at FOCUS.” I was introduced to Chester on my first day volunteering at FOCUS Pittsburgh by Miss Cheryl, who is second-in-command at FOCUS. FOCUS is located in a two-story duplex in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. The Hill is mainly populated by low-income black families, and the crime rate is high. The median income is less than \$15,000 (Damewood 2011). In 1950, the city of Pittsburgh displaced 1,239 black families and 312 white families to build the Mellon Arena in the heart of the Hill (Bauder 2014). The neighborhood still has not recovered from this economic loss and is only now beginning to see the rewards promised in exchange, like the Shop 'N Save that just opened on Centre Avenue. Before the Shop 'N Save, the Hill District was a food desert, a poor, urban area lacking quality fresh, whole food.

Residents of the Hill come to FOCUS for job training and placement, document recovery, free food, used clothing, and general camaraderie. There is a free clinic, where I help sometimes, and walls and walls of donated non-perishables, which I sort through and distribute when I am not folding or hanging up donated clothing. I have seen many people come in to drop off bags of old clothes for the people of FOCUS to distribute to the needy of the Hill, and Chester is always the first to pounce on these bags. Chester is a volunteer, like me, but he needs things, too.

I am a Community Engagement Scholar for Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. When I walked out on my manager at the upscale downtown restaurant where I was a hostess, I walked out on my source of income. I had felt very ill and it was a slow night, but my manager made it very clear that I was not to go home or to the campus health center until eleven o'clock, which was four hours away. After the excitement of quitting my awful job wore off, I went to the director of the Honors College of Duquesne and begged her to help me find a small part-time job somewhere on campus. She recommended me for the position of Community Engagement Scholar to the Honors College. This job was technically an internship with a “scholarship” rewarded at the end of the school year, which came out to about three dollars an hour if I counted all the required seminars, hours at FOCUS, and independent work for the Honors College, which involved work with the Hill District childhood home of the playwright August Wilson. I accepted the position for the sake of my resume.

As a Community Engagement Scholar, one of my duties was to report to FOCUS for a few hours each week and help with whatever was needed. I was to engage the community, literally, and sometimes I would go to FOCUS and do nothing but talk to Miss Cheryl or watch television with whomever was sitting on the mismatched couches.

On Friday, I went to visit FOCUS, and Chester was there. He was wearing a paisley tie, cowboy boots, and as many pens as he could possibly cram into his shirt pocket. Miss Cheryl called him over and asked for her pen back, and Chester reluctantly took it from his collection and returned it. She rolled her eyes at me and I laughed, “Got enough pens there, Chester?”

“I got enough,” he said, grinning. “You seen my book?”

I shook my head and sat on a couch by the entrance, helping people find Miss Cheryl when they came in to leave clothes or take food, and giving a woman advice on the clothing she was selecting from the donation rack. She said she had a job interview and wanted to look

professional. She was very tall, like me, and we laughed every time she tried on a coat that left her wrists exposed. “Story of our lives, right?” she said.

Chester had been wandering, looking for what he was calling his “book” this whole time, and her joke reminded me. “Chester,” I said, “let me help you. What does your book look like?”
 “It’s my book.”

I left him to his search until, a few minutes later, he dropped a packet in my lap and walked away. Chester cannot read or write, and I opened the packet unsure of its contents. Inside was a resume outlining all the odd jobs Chester had done over the last five years. It listed things like “janitorial services” at a local school, and sometimes simply “odd jobs” for Hill District businesses and charity organizations. The most recent job was listed as “FOCUS+Pittsburgh: volunteer.”

There was his mother’s 2011 obituary, and I counted the number of her surviving children: nine.

Finally, there was a black-and-white picture of Chester standing in front of a poster of Nelson Mandela. Stapled to the cover picture were three pages of small paragraphs written in terrible English. I looked at it for a bit before realizing what I was reading.

“Chester, is this your book?”

He nodded.

“It’s about your life?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like me to type it up for you?”

“Yeah. And make me five copies,” he gestured to the copier, and I did as he asked.

As I ran the copies, I read Chester’s story as well as I could understand it, and the weight of the task for which I had volunteered settled on my shoulders. Chester’s whole life story, as he could relay it to whomever had written this for him, took up three pages. The best-dressed man at FOCUS was sixty-two, had a three-page life story involving violence, homelessness, and racism, and had casually handed it to me to tell. My grand exit from the restaurant—of which I was so proud—seemed spoiled and petty now.

I put the copies in the specific order he requested, then I went home and read the pages again, trying to put Chester’s thoughts into order. Though they had been dictated and though Chester can be difficult to understand, there were definite bits of him shining through the words:

I attend a Baptist church. Cook meals for people afterwards. Potato salad, green beans, potatos.

I walk around, finding furniture for people, finding clothes, lams, tvs.

People are shot on a regular basis in mckeesport.

My favorite thing is singing, and playing music.

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