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Up Close: The "Palm Out" State

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A collective anxiety for today's graduates—who for the past six years have been leaving the Ivory Tower only to enter the Great Recession—usually distills to a single image: sleeping on their parents' couch mired in existential crisis. But what if the new graduate chooses something even more unsettling then a return to his childhood home? What if he chooses no home at all?

Shortly after graduation in 2008, Derek Snook spent a year living at the Star Gospel Mission—transitional housing for the homeless population in Charleston, South Carolina. “I had just spent a few months in Kenya teaching orphans and made a promise to God that if He gave me something purposeful to do, I wouldn't quit,” he says.

“I began to realize there is this disconnect between people who want to help and the people they are actually helping. You can't understand what they are going through until you walk in their shoes.

“All I can say is that living at the mission, brushing my teeth at night, climbing in my top bunk and listening to the other men snore—I realized I would never feel more successful in my entire life than I did in that moment.”

Snook worked day labor with the men from the Mission, and the experience inspired him to create a social enterprise called In Every Story (IES) Labor Services. The name derives from one of Snook's favorite sayings: “In every story there is conflict, but also God's hope, love, and redemption.”

IES adapts the temp agency model for those who are homeless. It focuses on providing labor opportunities, but it also guides the homeless toward self-sufficiency “by providing laborers with competitive wages, as well as opportunities to save money and develop life disciplines.”

The “competitive wages” aspect of IES's mission is key. Minimum wage in Charleston County is $7.25 per hour, but thanks to IES’s Rewards Program, Snook can supplement incomes beyond minimum wage to $8.75 per hour. The long-term goal is $9.74 an hour, which according to an MIT study is the living wage for the county.

During the year Snook spent living in the Star Gospel Mission, fellow alumnus, Stanford Law graduate, and best friend Pete DeMarco '08 joined him.

“Derek had been talking to me for a few weeks about his decision to move into the Mission, and eventually he convinced me. My time at Furman had helped develop my commitment to social justice, and Derek cast a compelling vision of serving the poor. I remember thinking that I would move down to Charleston for a few weeks. You see how that worked out, DeMarco laughs.

The two formed a brain trust and took a cross-country road trip to understand similar operations. The trip was over almost before it began, however, thanks to a blown transmission on the second day.

“We weighed out the options of buying bus tickets and going home or buying a car and continuing on. We realized that while going home would be the reasonable and even responsible thing to do, we just couldn't. If we did, we'd be setting a pattern for our lives where every time the car broke down we'd go home. Neither of us wanted our future children to have fathers who told stories like that.”

Instead, Snook and DeMarco bought a new car and allowed their travels to show them what was possible and what was not working among nonprofits for the homeless.

Snook started IES in 2011 with $3,000 and a single job assignment: hiring three workers for trash pick-up at the local fair. Today, IES places up to 110 workers each day and has added more than $100,000 to workers' wages through the Rewards Program.

“We plan to start our second branch in 2015 and then all across the country. We also intend to start other services and products that benefit those who are marginalized, to use this as a platform to talk about living your best story.”

In spite of his success, Snook remains humble and focused on improvements. “We are not going to pretend we're turning homeless people into attorneys, but we are making a marginal difference that is noticeable. And it takes time. We'll see what God does.”

—Kate Dabbs '09