In Greenville County, 934 people were homeless as of January 2014. This is the second most in the state of South Carolina, according to the HUD Point in Time Count. We often look away or pass them by, not because we don’t care, but because we are unsure how to address the issue.

Over the past decade, a group of service providers and community leaders in Greenville, South Carolina have responded to this problem by developing a shared strategy for ending homelessness in the region. Through this plan, they intend to create a system of care that puts the homeless at the center of service provision. While members of this coalition speak on behalf of the homeless, none are homeless themselves. If we are to earnestly place people at the center of the system, shouldn’t the homeless be included in the process of problem-solving and decision-making?

While many homeless people have regular contact with service providers, they are often excluded from decision-making by these institutions. Even when invited to participate, the homeless often lack the time and means to engage in public debate. If we are to make headway on ending this problem, we must shift our thinking to view the homeless as active participants in the solution-building process.

No longer should we perceive the homeless as passive recipients of programs. The homeless are full of untapped knowledge, ideas and insight that can inspire transformative change. Through my research on poverty and urban inequality at Furman University, I have found that the best way to learn more about the marginalized is to spend time with them and experience life in their shoes. It is from this posture of humility that we learn to see the world through their eyes.

Homelessness cannot be addressed from behind a desk or in an ivory tower. It is time for us to engage those that we serve as co-creators of the solutions we deliver.

Benjamin Riddle
Furman University
Class of 2016
The Situation.

On the streets of Greenville, many organizations serve the needs of the homeless through relief and recovery efforts. Few focus on personal development. Even fewer are focused on empowerment through job-training and skills-development, which are building blocks for progress.

James Coltson is a homeless man with a mind full of ideas, but a criminal record that holds him back. With nothing to lose, James realized that starting a business might be the only way to hold a steady job. In his travels around the country, James learned about street magazines, which empower the homeless through storytelling and job creation.

After meeting James and learning about his desire to start a street magazine in Greenville, I decided to work one-on-one with him to build a team and create a platform for the homeless community to raise their voice, not by focusing on their plight, but by shedding light on their stories.

Intent.

After working with James, I realized that I didn’t want to start a campaign. I wanted to spark lasting change. Bellows is a street magazine that amplifies the voices of the city we live in through a street magazine and vendor program. Bellows bridges the divide between the classes through quality print and social media.

Why, now.

On the heels of the effort to close a homeless encampment known as “tent city”, people in Greenville are eager to collaborate to address problems in new ways. Bellows harnesses this desire by working with service providers and building on their efforts. Bellows sheds light on the issues that they address, and serves as a channel for the homeless to pursue progress through empowering work opportunities.

Teamwork.

Throughout the project, I assembled a team of creatives and writers, mentors and advisors, students, changemakers and entrepreneurs from across the Upstate to help James bring Bellows to life. Through this process, we have all learned that radical collaboration requires a common vision and shared values.

We’re not talking, we’re listening. And we’re writing it all down.

“Bellows amplifies the voices of the city we live in.”

The Story.

As a team, we envision a vibrant community where people from all backgrounds have the opportunity to experience the fullness of life, share their story and engage in meaningful work that produces shared value and drives positive change.

Mission.

Through Bellows street magazine, we create opportunities for homeless individuals to use the tools of storytelling and entrepreneurship to rise to their fullest potential in the context of a supportive community.

Values.

- Empathy: we listen and learn before making assumptions and plans.
- Respect: we put people before politics, products, programs, and process.
- Transparency: vulnerability and honesty are the foundations of trust.
- Resilience: learning how to fail forward, admit mistakes and receive grace is a key to success.
- Honor: positive affirmation and humble authenticity build confidence and are markers of professionalism.
GREENVILLE, SC IS THE FOURTH MOST GENEROUS CITY IN THE COUNTRY.  
Scarborough Research

MIDDLE CLASS, MIDDLE BROW.

Greenville is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the nation, and with a per capita personal income of $39,130, it is one of the wealthiest counties in South Carolina. From social media feeds to the streets, middle class individuals in Greenville, SC are powerful decision makers that affect the culture, marketplace and quality of life in our community. They set consumer trends, enforce social norms and inform policy decisions, all of which affect the homeless.

While demographically diverse, this audience is well educated, hard working and eager to participate in the growth and development of the region. By making conscious choices about what to buy, where to shop and where to invest their time and resources, middle class individuals make conscious choices that affect the culture and identity of the city. They are also inclined to serve, and do so often by giving to thousands of nonprofit organizations in the Upstate and beyond.

Greenville is regularly named one of the most generous metropolitan areas in the nation. However, many generous and well-intentioned people give to charities and organizations that create a culture of dependency. These “toxic charities” unintentionally reinforce the inequities that they set out to address. In recent years, civil servants in Greenville have joined together to shed light on the notion of toxic charity, and many now advocate for social services that promote progress and development.

In an age of instant connectivity, donors and citizens are eager to learn more about the causes they support, and the people that they serve.

By targeting the middle class, Bellows engages an audience that is eager to serve and participate in the life of the city. More importantly, this is an audience that shapes popular opinion and public perceptions.

By equipping the homeless with the tools and skills of storytelling and entrepreneurship, Bellows overturns negative stereotypes and creates an alternative paradigm that is both empowering and inspiring. Beyond the magazine, Bellows serves as a platform for social interaction that bridges the gap between the classes.

Sources: US Bureau of Economic Analysis, SCANPO, Scarborough Research, FCS Ministries
Through storytelling and microentrepreneurship, Bellows uses creative acts to activate the moral imagination of the audience in a way that overturns the traditional beneficary-benefactor relationship. This tactic provokes discussion and reflection in order to shift public perceptions and generate new approaches towards service provision.

As a viable social enterprise, Bellows serves as a platform for strategic advocacy that opens doors to discussion with local leaders in the public, private and civil sector about the needs of its vendors. By providing meaningful work opportunities for the homeless, Bellows positions street vendors as positive contributors to the life, culture and vibrancy of the city.

Through storytelling and social media, Bellows uses the tools of narrative criticism to depict the lived experience of the marginalized and shed light on issues that are hidden to the middle class. By pairing these narratives with stories of hope and ingenuity, Bellows fosters empathy in the minds of its audience to provoke reflection and civic engagement.

By working within and across local networks, Bellows connects and builds upon the efforts of service providers by identifying street vendors through their programs. Bellows uses the street magazine to connect service providers and the homeless with the community at large.

“NOBODY CAN TELL YA’ THERE’S ONLY ONE SONG WORTH SINGIN’.”

Mama Cass Elliot
As I crossed Main Street, we caught each other’s eyes. Alone on a bench sat a woman, slouched over with her head held heavy in her hands. She was visibly ill.

“How are you?” I said in passing. “Not well at all”, she said. “What’s up?” I remarked. “I’ve got the flu, and don’t have money for medicine.”

While strangers until now, I could tell that this woman wasn’t acting like herself. “Need Ibuprofen? I’ll be right back.” After a quick trip to CVS, I came back with a bottle in hand.

She thanked me, and looked at me with worn eyes. I sat down and introduced myself. From that point on, we spoke for an hour about her life, her work, her dreams, and her predicament.

She was homeless, but shouldn’t be. She had two degrees and a resume full of experience. After her position was eliminated at work and her car was totaled, she lost her house. The streets have been her home for the past four months, and it’s been hell. From service provider to temp agency she goes, day by day, pounding the pavement in pursuit of progress. Her work schedule is enough for a full time job without benefits or any days off.

That’s where I find her today, hunched on a bench with a jaded perspective and a mind full of ideas as to how “the system” could work. More than anything, she longs for our community to listen to the needs of people like her. People on the streets—who each have a story and situation that is unique.

In Greenville County, 934 people were homeless according to the HUD PIT Count in January 2014. This is the second most in the state of South Carolina, and a 5% increase from last year.

There is no shortage of service providers and generous organizations that focus on relieving immediate needs and nurturing people through recovery. Indeed, our community has been named one of the most generous in the United States. With this said, we struggle to connect our neighbors on the streets with the tools, skills and opportunities to chart their own way forward.

While many homeless people have regular contact with service providers, they are often excluded from decision-making and have no way to share their story in the public sphere. We often pass them by because we are unsure how to respond. This situation creates a separation, leading us to rely on someone else to bear the burden of care.

Street magazines bridge this divide. As a platform for social interaction, street magazines connect the homeless with opportunities to share their stories through empowering work opportunities. Rather than panhandling, a homeless individual partners with a street magazine to buy issues at a low price and resell them for a profit, which they save to support their needs.

In recent months, a homeless entrepreneur in Greenville has teamed up with local writers, Furman students, designers and advisors to develop Bellows Magazine, a street paper that amplifies the voices of the city we live in. This magazine will feature a variety of content, like photo essays, local art and a map of relevant services for the homeless. By working across classes, races and sectors, this team is developing a viable business and program model that plans to launch its first issue in the season ahead.

No longer should we perceive the homeless as passive recipients of programs. If we are to make headway on ending homelessness in Greenville County, we must shift our thinking to view them as active participants in the problem-solving process.

Bellows magazine represents a new approach that emerged from deep listening, creative action and radical collaboration. By working hand in hand with people on the streets, we learn to see the world through the eyes.

To learn more about Bellows magazine, advise the team or participate in the effort, email bellowsmag@gmail.com and follow on twitter @bellowsmag.

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OP-ED
The Power of Listening

Ben Riddle is a University Innovation Fellow and a student at Furman University studying Sustainable Development and Social Change. To contact Ben, email benjamesriddle@gmail.com.
Narrative Criticism Explored Through Op-Ed & Infographic

Narratives are symbolic actions or words that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. When deconstructed through critical reflection, narratives serve as tools that allow us to make meaning of the human experience. In the context of advocacy, narrative stories are powerful mediums that set the stage for direct action.

Whether told through image and text, spoken word or quoted excerpts, stories ground high level concepts and issues in the context of a specific social situation. They serve as a soundingboard for reflection and an impetus for decision making. Through Direct Action Projects 1 and 2, I used the tactics of narrative criticism to present an authentic story in a way that provokes a response from the audience.

Through an op-ed in the Greenville News, I presented the story of a homeless woman on the streets of Greenville, and paired it with statistical evidence related to homelessness in the region. When combined with statistics, the story positions homelessness as a relevant issue of local importance. I closed the piece by presenting street magazines as a potential solution for the problem, and invited the audience to participate by joining the effort.

To target the same audience on social media, I distilled the central points of the op-ed into a sharable infographic. With bolded text, quotations and a visual flow, the infographic presents the four topoi of argumentation in a way that captures the imagination of readers with a proclivity to scroll. By presenting the ill, blame, cure and cost of addressing the issue, these pieces invite the audience to critically reflect on the problem. By ending each piece with contact information for Bellows and a link to a website, both pieces create an opportunity for action.

View infographic online: http://bit.ly/1zNI1th
DIRECT ACTION PROJECT 3

Video Demonstrates the Importance of Listening

Stories are most compelling when told from first hand experience. For Direct Action Project 3, I recorded a series of interviews with homeless people around Greenville to weave their statements woven into a storyline with organic form.

The final video featured an interview with James Coltson and his wife Louise, who provided telling accounts of their life on the streets. I wove their stories together with video segments that visualize their statements and expressions. Their narration presents the importance of listening to the voices of the voiceless, describes public stereotypes and gives reason for these preconceptions from the standpoint of the marginalized.

“The first step to anything changing is communication.”

When transitioning between stories, I used motion captured from a moving car to indicate a transition in the storyline. I also used daylight as a motif that moves the audience through the narrative. I paired the vocal narrative with original music performed by Nathan Rosemond, a formerly homeless man who is widely known as a street singer on the streets of downtown Greenville.

In recent months, Nathan was arrested for singing without a license. The timeliness of this event and the series of news stories that followed his arrest make his vocal performance a subtle reminder that the voices of the homeless are often structurally repressed.

View on YouTube: http://youtu.be/5Vp3hd4Qz30
Building Community Creates a Story Worth Sharing

From the streets of Greenville to social media streams on Twitter and Facebook, I engaged my target audience by starting authentic conversations - both online and in person.

Social media serves as a powerful channel for story sharing and community building, since its reach is not constrained by time or geography. As a platform for sharing byte-sized stories, I used Twitter to share articles, links and feedback with people in Greenville and around the country. By my posts with popular hashtags on homelessness, social entrepreneurship and empathy, I built an audience of followers that are topically interested in the issues voice and social justice.

After sharing each of my Direct Action pieces on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, I worked with a team of designers and writers to develop a one-page that could be used to engage prospective partners. In recent months, I’ve met with service providers, business leaders and business owners, one of which sponsored the first 500 copies of the magazine. After one meeting, the owner of a local company called a friend that was hiring new employees. After months of unemployment, Bellows founder, James, was offered a job at a restaurant. In this case, Bellows functioned as a tool for demonstrating responsibility and credibility in the eyes of an employer.

Following this encounter, a local news station expressed an interest in covering Bellows on the evening news. On his first day of work, a reporter interviewed James to learn more about his experience with homelessness and his vision for Bellows magazine.

Following this story, we received numerous requests for interviews from other news outlets. By building a community of followers on social media and engaging this audience in person through strategic meetings and discussions, Bellows garnered interest from local reporters as a story worth sharing. More importantly, James got a job.

Watch the Interview: http://bit.ly/1Fluwh
To invest in people is an investment with high risk and high reward. *Bellows* is an artefact from a season of deep listening, coalition building and rapid prototyping. This project represents beginning an initiative with great potential, and for those it is designed to serve, even greater promise.

Over the past six months, I have worked on the fringes of society, risked failure and in the eyes of many, pushed the boundaries of acceptable advocacy. Through this process, I have assembled a diverse and dedicated team of volunteers, creatives and ordinary people that are eager to bring *Bellows* magazine from concept to fruition.

At this point in project, I am working with James and the *Bellows* team to form a legal organization and develop an operating structure. While outside the bounds of my work as an advocate, this effort will ensure the sustainability of the project and set the stage for its future development.

While James has a job, he is working diligently with the *Bellows* team to create content for the first issue of the magazine. At the same time, I am working with him to develop a street vendor program in partnership with local service providers. These agencies will work with us to develop a program that builds upon existing efforts to create meaningful work opportunities for their clients.

Moving forward, I aim to reflect on my involvement in the project to this point and make careful decisions as to my next steps. I must determine how to balance my role as a student, project facilitator, collaborator and friend. More importantly, I must work with the *Bellows* team to develop a process for critical reflection and a strategy for strategic advocacy. Radical collaboration comes with its blessings, and its challenges. The way that we communicate as a team internally and publically must be intentionally considered to ensure that all voices are heard.

When working with the homeless, I have found that many people have a tendency to perceive them as figures of interest rather than people of promise. As a team, we have experienced this firsthand in meetings and discussions, where someone refers to a person seated at the table like they are not in the room.

For us, this is unacceptable. Every person has the right to be recognized, whether homeless, housed, influential or marginalized. *Bellows* is designed with the understanding that everyone has something to contribute to our shared story as a community, and our collective vision for the place we call home.

-Benjamin Riddle
THE FOLLOWING PAGES INCLUDE CONTENT FROM THE FIRST ISSUE OF BELLOWS MAGAZINE. READ ON.
Meet Louise Coltson. Her 50th birthday was on October 23rd; Louise and her husband couldn’t afford to go out for dinner to celebrate. Louise does not have a criminal background. She is not physically or mentally disabled. What she does have, however, is an education. Louise got her bachelor’s degree in Biology from SC State University in ’88, her master’s degree from Strayer University in Health Services Administration in ’09, as well as certification in Medical Records and Patient Billing in ‘09. She has been CNA certified for 5 years, and currently works as a CNA for Advanced Nursing. However, Louise has struggled with homelessness throughout her adult life. For the past month, she and her husband, James, have lived in a hotel for almost a month and hope to move to a cheaper place off of Wade Hampton soon. Louise said, “When people see us, the first thing that comes out of their mouths is, ‘You’re lying, you are nowhere near [homeless].’ Because we don’t fit into the regular category. We’re not dirty. We’re not smelly, and so therefore that means you’re not homeless, haha, but that’s not true. And that’s my biggest thing I want to get across to people: I stay clean, but I’m still homeless. That’s because I do the legal things to keep myself from falling into that category.”

The way Louise kindly put it was, “to have a master’s degree and only make $10/hour is not degrading, but very disappointing.” Louise is an intelligent, compassionate, persistent, and caring mother of two men, who seem to be doing well, despite the hardship they’ve faced. Growing up, Louise’s mother couldn’t take care of her, so Louise moved from the Bronx in New York to South Carolina when she was just five years old to be taken care of by her aunts, Carolyn and Beverly, who were just teenagers themselves at the time. Despite the estrangement from her parents and grandparents (some of whom had passed away), Louise speaks very positively about the support of her family. Her Uncle Herbit in New York is just a phone call away, and is always willing to listen and support her in any way he
can. Her sons, Kayron (28) and Jaron (21), love her very much and have grown up to be good men. Kayron, who was accepted to the Citadel, decided to be a welder for the Navy and now works in insurance in New York to support his two daughters. Jaron does not have any children, but he has kindly accepted the honor of serving as godfather to the daughters of two of his friends. The good men that they have become, despite their bouts with homelessness, is a reflection of Louise’s belief that “even though I can’t financially give a child everything they need, I bet you I can give them all the love they want, and that’s way more powerful than any game system that you could give them, or any fancy designer wear that you could put on their butt or on their feet.”

The way that Louise’s sons and granddaughters love her is what keeps her going. She calls them her “fighters.” Family is clearly the number one priority in Louise’s life. When I asked her to tell me about herself, she responded by spending two hours telling me about how much she loves her family and gave me sweet stories about her sons and how they’ve grown to love each other.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Louise on her 50th birthday, and her positive attitude shone through her straightforward words of wisdom and kind smile. “As long as my sons call and wish me a Happy Birthday, … I’m good.” Louise had no complaints about being homeless on her birthday. Instead she had plenty of wisdom that no degree can give you. Her wisdom came from her hard-ship. After telling me her story about when she was about to lose her home again last year after a car accident that took away their only means of transportation to work, she responded positively, “These are the things I can change: the way I act and my attitude determine how my day goes and what good or bad will happen…. I chose to be happy.” She went on to say, “If I believe that my God is capable, why am I gonna worry about those other things? Those things don’t really mat-ter, because He’s gonna take care of them when He wants them taken care of.” Louise’s trust in God is astounding after all she has been through. She stays positive about her future saying, “For me, it hasn’t changed as fast as I wanted, but it is changing. So I’m happy about where we’re going and where we’re going to end up, and I’m not even sure where that’s going to be yet.”
Despite the wealth of services we have in Greenville, SC to help the homeless, Louise and James agree that Greenville is not the best place to live as a homeless person, because of the lack of flexibility in the public transportation system. They've been trying to get out of Greenville but haven't been able to for quite awhile. After learning about her husband's opportunity to lead BELLOWS magazine and her opportunity to have her story told, Louise gained clarity as to why they haven't been able to leave Greenville: "I never knew the reason we couldn't leave had to do with the situation that we were in, because our story has to be told, so that we can help other people along the way." Louise is very excited about the opportunities BELLOWS is giving her husband and her. She believes that "God puts things and people in your path for whatever purpose He has for you at that time, so you can get to your big purpose." What an honor to watch Louise begin to realize her big purpose: to help those get out of the struggles she's going through. As a CNA, Louise has had the opportunity to mentor and advise younger women and watch them blossom. For those in nursing school, she advises them to "be a nurse practitioner, be more than a nurse, get a background that helps you have the freedom to do what you want, [like a] nurse anesthesiologist; now they're allowing you to be more than just a nurse." She wishes she had known more about what job opportunities she would have in accordance with her degrees.

Louise noted that while she lived in Clemson, she was able to get wherever she needed to go for free, because the bus system ran on part of the tuition of the Clemson students, so that students without cars could get wherever they needed to go. If we want to empower the citizens of Greenville to work, then we need to provide an affordable way to get to work. Not everyone works first shift. If they need to travel to and from work before 8:30am on a Saturday, at all on a Sunday, or after 5:30pm any day of the week, then the bus is not an option, and high taxi fares should not be standing in the way of people being able to afford food. It's a downward spiral. If you don't have a car, then it is drastically hard to find a job you can actually get to.

While Louise noted James and she had certainly received help from The Salvation Army and Triune Mercy Center, the only lasting impact she spoke of did not come from organizations. It came from individuals, individuals who saw people who needed help and decided to do something about it. She found that the hands of people were often tied by the organization's rules with whom they were affiliated. However, the simple fact that people like Robin from Triune Mercy Center and Nick Bush from United Ministries cared enough to listen made a lasting impression on her. She also wants to thank a sweet couple that handed them a book bag with $200 inside simply because of a brief conversation they'd had earlier that day. Often those people don't get thanked because of timing. So Louise wants to thank the kind people who lend a helping hand. At the very least, the compassion that you show makes a difference in that person's life.

Louise noted that she would rather live on the streets than live in a shelter. She said, "Nobody gets on their feet in 3 weeks." For Louise, it's clear that the shelters' restrictions lead to resentment, instead of restoration. The restrictions on cellphone use, where she could go to church, and being forced to go to devotions left a bad taste in her mouth. This perspective coming from a Christian makes one wonder how someone of any other worldview would respond. Other shelters that Louise experienced didn't seem to be much better. When James and she went to shelters that
accommodate married couples, they were immediately dismissed, because they didn’t accept people of “your kind.” The only conclusion Louise could make was that they assumed that James and she were a pimp and a prostitute simply because Louise is black and James is white. Clearly, that is not the case, but because they are a couple of mixed race, they were refused shelter.

Louise’s biggest piece of advice to shelters is to allow families to stay together. When you split families, you split the only possibility of consistent support they have. Families include spouses. On that note, she said, “Forget about race. Just help people. God never saw groups. He never saw Jew or Gentile. … He just saw people that needed to be healed. And I thought that’s what we’re supposed to be, an extended family of Him, and it’s to help heal people. Period. The bottom line. Whatever that sickness might be. For me, it’s homelessness, so I want to heal those people who have to go through that…. and if there’s a way for me to change it, I would love to change it.”

The one good shelter experience she had was from an individual. Her pastor let her and James stay in her boarding house for $50/week, and this was before James and she were married. The kind pastor knew that people would judge her for allowing them to live there as an unwed couple, but she didn’t let that stop her from helping them. During this living situation, James and Louise were able to save up enough money to buy the only house of their own they have ever known. Had a car wreck not taken their means of transportation to work while they lived there, they may have gotten on their feet for the rest of their lives, because of one woman’s act of kindness.

Mother Teresa once said, “Today it is very fashionable to talk about the poor. Unfortunately, it is not fashionable to talk with them.” I ask that you would. I ask that you would listen to their stories and be compassionate towards their perspective. Louise said, “You’ll never understand where I’m at, because you’re not there.” She is absolutely right. However, in the midst of not understanding, we can seek to understand and learn how we can help by listening. Louise said, “People always say that people choose to [be homeless]. I didn’t choose to be here, but here I am. And so now I’m here, I’ve got to figure out: How do I survive in this situation…? I didn’t choose this situation. This situation chose me, and because I was chosen for it, I’ve got to make the best of it.… I’ve never done anything illegal to get myself out of this situation, but I will take care of me and my husband and my sons the best way I know how. … Don’t feel sad for me, but pray that God will keep sending people in my path, so I can get out of this situation.”

Louise gave some excellent advice about how you can help, no matter how thick your wallet is: “They need someone to tell them that they’re good at something; they could be great at something, and that you are only a nobody because that’s what people tell you, not because you actually is a nobody. Because I think that nobody is a nobody. People say that, but you’re really not.” According to homelessness.org, there are 6,035 people in SC living without a home. Do you want to change that? Take Louise’s advice: “If you change you first, it’ll trickle to other people, and they’ll change too, but it’s got to be up to you. It’s all up to you.”

Rachel Sanders
November 6, 2014
We’re not talking, we’re listening.
And we’re writing it all down.

BELLOWS®