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# Men's expedition into homelessness in Madison sets off lively discussion on social media

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9 hours ago • PAT SCHNEIDER | The Capital Times | pschneider@madison.com

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Tim Metcalfe, left, owner of Metcalfe's Market, Will Green, center, director of the Mentoring Positives Program, and Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, shared their stories of going undercover as homeless with the media at Grace Episcopal Church Tuesday.

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## Pat Schneider



Pat Schneider joined The Capital Times in 1989 and has written on a wide variety of topics including neighborhoods, minority communities and the nonprofit sector.



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The **news** that Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, went undercover with two friends as homeless men to learn about the experiences of people living on the street set off a lively discussion on social media this week.

A photo of Johnson with Tim Metcalfe, owner of Metcalfe's Market, and Will Green, director of the Mentoring Positives program and the Salvation Army Community Center, as they looked while posing as homeless men posted Monday on the **Boys and Girls Club Facebook page** drew more than 1,500 "likes" and 100 comments in 24 hours.

Nearly all the comments on the Boys and Girls Club page praised the initiative. Posters called the trio's effort "inspiring" and "awesome" and "amazing." "Wow," they said. And "God bless you." And "Michael Johnson, you rock."

"About time someone took the time to do this," wrote one. "Let's get the conversation going," posted another. "You have completely restored my faith in humanity," and "The best way to find out what is really happening with the homeless," wrote others.

Comments on the men's experience posted elsewhere began to raise questions about its appropriateness.

Johnson posted Tuesday that he had communicated with Madison Mayor Paul Soglin and Dane County Executive Joe Parisi, as well as other community leaders and members of the media, but people were asking to hear more.



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So, the three men, joined by Martha Cranley of the United Way of Dane County, held what turned out to be a sparsely attended news conference Tuesday at the drop-in men's shelter at Grace Episcopal Church on the Capitol Square, where the men slept one night last week in their stint on the street, Nov. 13-15.

The men recounted some initial misgivings and many stories of generosity from members of the public, including homeless people. Johnson said a video on their experiences will be out soon, and promised more news next month about a homeless woman who, with her four children, is being placed in housing with the assistance of The Road Home, a local nonprofit homeless services agency. Cranley spoke of the need for more affordable housing.

Johnson told of panhandling in traffic near West Towne Mall, where he figured no one would stop for a big African-American guy like himself, until a senior-citizen couple stopped and offered him a place to sleep.

He also recounted going into a Perkin's restaurant off the Beltline, where the manager not only fed him, but when he said he wanted to take leftovers to a wife and children in a shelter, sent him off with a bag full of food and a phone number to call if his family needed more help.

"I was blown away," Johnson recalled. "I was in tears."

Graciousness sums up what they all experienced, Metcalfe said. And the emotion he felt in moving from the despair of standing with a sign asking for food to receiving people's kindnesses "was very difficult to handle," he said.

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“I was a little fearful” about what to expect in the men’s shelter, Metcalfe said. But he found the shelter, operated by Porchlight, Inc., to be well-run and clean. And the men he met there also were gracious in the advice they offered about navigating local homeless services.

He called on the public to support the local agencies that assist the homeless.

Green told of encountering men at the shelter who he had met before when they came to use showers at the Salvation Army. He was apprehensive about spending the night in a shelter and acknowledged it was difficult discerning the “protocol” to follow for lining up for and getting dinner, for example. A night owl, he felt trapped after the early “lights out,” he said.

“I was laying there thinking I can’t believe I’m in a homeless shelter,” he said. “But it was empowering. It was life-changing for me.”

There was so much snoring, and so much gas passed, Green added, that it was hard to sleep.

Johnson told about how he ran afoul of the rules of the shelter twice – once in reaching for a piece of cake with his hand instead of a utensil and again when he set off an alarm by opening a door to get the bed sheets he had called a staff member to bring down to him.

**Comments elsewhere on Facebook**, many by advocates for homeless services, expressed concerns about people pretending to be homeless in order to learn about homelessness.

“I think that is the risk here, some people will see three days on the street as an accurate and comparable experience to what people who are actually homeless experience,” wrote Linda Ketcham, executive director of Madison-area Urban Ministry.

“I don’t think anyone can truly experience the exhaustion, the hopelessness of having applied for hundreds of jobs, the not knowing what will happen next and not having that safety net,” posted Brenda Konkel. “Good to raise awareness, but I’m not sure people truly experiencing this really feel like people are kind all the time. There is an uglier side of things — mostly coming from our government, but also from others.”

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“.. Even though it is gimmicky, it may help open people's eyes. I'll wait to see the blog,” wrote another.

Ketcham also raised concerns that people who were filmed without their knowledge would end up in the video.

Asked about those concerns at the news conference, Johnson spoke of how he grew up poor in Chicago and is working with children from poor families today.

”This isn’t a joke for us,” he said. “Kids walk into the Boys and Girls Club every single day who need shoes, who need food, who need a place to stay. I know poverty, I’ve lived in poverty, but I wanted to see it up close in Madison.”

By evening, Johnson was posting his responses to critics on Facebook, promising no one would be in the video without their permission and setting up arrangements to talk with people who raised concerns about the homelessness expedition.

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**Tags** [Pat Schneider](#), [Michael Johnson](#), [Facebook](#), [Boys And Girls Club](#), [Tim Metcalfe](#), [Will Green](#), [Boys And Girls Club Of Dane County](#), [Salvation Army Community Center](#), [Director Of The Mentoring Positives Program](#), [Homeless Shelter](#), [Local Homeless Services](#)

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