

# Facing Homelessness

## A Community Mask-Making Project

*Pat B. Allen*

### **Introduction**

“Facing Homelessness” was a year-long collaborative effort between West Suburban Public Action to Deliver Shelter (PADS)<sup>1</sup> and Studio Pardes, a private artist-run community studio in Oak Park, Illinois. The goals of the project were to raise awareness about issues of homelessness, to break down stereotypes about who is homeless, and to experiment with art-based social action as a means of creating community and exploring a social problem.

Close to 300 people were involved in creating, exhibiting, and finally auctioning over 100 plaster gauze masks that were uniquely created and embellished. Each participant was interviewed and, in three exhibitions around town, vignettes from each interview were posted next to the mask along with myths and facts about homelessness, and inspirational quotations (see Figure 3.1). The silent auction of masks, along with a spin-off project creating note cards featuring a selection of mask images, contributed to raising over \$3000 for PADS programs. Part of the initial funding for the project came from the Oak Park Area Arts Council, which also helped secure two of the public spaces for exhibition of the masks: a community bank and the Village Hall gallery space.

The Executive Director of PADS, Linda Scheuler, and I wrote a grant application to the Oak Park Area Arts Council to fund the project. The grant was modest, covering mostly materials, printing, supplies, and food. There was an enormous amount of in-kind support through the many volunteers. No artists received stipends of any kind. We were committed to asking for public support because we felt this was a project that would directly benefit



*Figure 3.1 Masks on exhibit at Oak Park Village Hall*

the whole community by providing art-making activities to a wide range of people at no cost to them. We felt that, even if the grant did not come through, we could probably have run the project by asking for private contributions and donated art supplies. It was in keeping with the philosophy of the PADS program to rely on the goodwill of the community to freely donate their time and effort.

We proposed to invite PADS guests (i.e. those who were receiving services), prominent figures in our community, artists, and the general public of all ages to make masks together. We agreed to interview each person who donated his or her face for a mask, and to post excerpts from the interviews alongside each mask in an exhibit to be held somewhere in our community. Our initial goal was to create 50 masks. By the end of the project, we had created more than double that number.

Part of my motivation was curiosity about the whole model of delivering services to homeless individuals in my community. PADS was originally set up to be an emergency program and yet had recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. As a volunteer, I was aware of the enormous effort involved in the program, which houses and feeds around 40 people each night. The effort of providing sleeping accommodation in a different church or synagogue basement each night, along with nutritious meals and some rudimentary social services, requires the work of hundreds of volunteers. Although I valued the work being done, I also wondered whether by bringing people together in the studio we would gain any insights about other ways to approach the problem. Additionally, I was curious about

whether I could, as an artist, participate in the work and offer something unique.

## **Groundwork**

The amount of groundwork necessary to create a successful collaboration between an art therapist and a community agency varies depending on the existing relationships between the collaborators. Fortunately, Linda and I knew each other fairly well through my prior involvement with PADS. My family and I had all volunteered in many different capacities during the ten years of PADS' existence. To initiate the mask project, we met with shelter guests to discuss the idea. I brought along several finished masks, when we went to the shelter to talk about the project, so that people could visualize the process. Guests were very supportive of the idea of the Facing Homelessness project. They helped us formulate the questions for the interview, and gave advice such as not identifying which among the mask faces belonged to homeless people. They felt it would be more thought-provoking to let viewers wonder, and suggested that the questions in the interview should emphasize the universality of people in a good way.

Next, we ran a two-week pilot session with families from the PADS Transitional Housing Program. These individuals were in more stable situations, having moved out of the overnight shelter. However, because employment is a condition of transitional housing, clients' time was at a premium. Mask making was scheduled during a regular meeting time when people would normally attend a support session at the PADS depot. Out of necessity, due to materials and mess, our mask making took place at Studio Pardes.

During the pilot sessions we learned crucial lessons that shaped Facing Homelessness and clarified our goals. Originally, we wanted participants to cast the masks (donate their faces), exchange masks with a community partner and decorate their new masks. We envisioned an ongoing relationship of at least several sessions between the community volunteer and the PADS client. We hoped that person-to-person contact would break down stereotypes, initiate a dialogue, and possibly even yield ideas of better ways to serve the homeless members of our community. When only four of the original transitional housing participants showed up for the second session a week later, we revamped the idea to permit one-session participation. This allowed us to shift our focus to overnight shelter guests. Because plaster

masks need to dry and cure, a one-time session could only accomplish the first stage of the mask process.

A PADS board member, who is a lawyer, developed the consent and release forms, which went through many revisions to make them as simple as possible. We wanted guests to be able to receive the proceeds of the sale of their work if they chose to, but realized we would have to make that option available to every participant, which we did. A very small percentage of people asked to receive sale proceeds – an equal number of guests and others.

Recruitment was a constant aspect of the project. We created a “Donate Your Face” flyer and posted it around town, mailed it to the PADS volunteers and supporters, and sent it to local newspapers for coverage. We cast our first half dozen masks and conducted interviews. We set up a table with a sign-up list at the PADS end-of-the-season banquet. We brought a large poster with sample masks, flyers about the program, and a list with time slots for people to sign up to have their face cast.

## **The project**

### *Donate your face*

Casting the mask was the first stage of participation. We streamlined the process to take under one hour. The first masks were made at the First United Presbyterian Church, the Thursday night shelter site for PADS. We collected about 20 masks there over 4 weeks. At the same time, a letter went out to all PADS volunteers, staff, and supporters, describing the project and urging them to call the studio to make a time to come in and donate their faces. We usually had two artists casting masks and sometimes other volunteers conducting the interviews. A one-shot opportunity meant that all paperwork, release forms, and interviews had to be completed in one session. The interview was used as a get-acquainted time for artist and face donor, and the formality of the consent form was finished first so that the more intimate encounter of making the mask could take place in a relaxed way.

Once the PADS shelter season was over on May 1st, mask making was scheduled at Studio Pardes every Saturday and one afternoon and one evening per week. When summer arrived, we also attended the PADS summer picnic and cast a large number of masks in the park on a beautiful sunny day (Figure 3.2). Flyers were posted in the studio windows and around town to encourage participation. Visitors to the park were invited to join in.



*Figure 3.2 Mask making in the park*

### *Materials and process*

Plaster gauze face-cast mask making is a simple, low-cost art task that offers many exciting possibilities for aesthetic, decorative, and personally and emotionally meaningful creative work. Almost always, face donors ended up feeling relaxed and rejuvenated after the mask experience. We usually had quiet music playing in the studio and offered a cup of tea when we were done. We always had examples of masks on display to spark interest.

Consent and release forms are absolutely necessary for such a project if the object is to photograph, display, and auction or sell the masks. By definition, legal documents can be intimidating. The text of the forms was read aloud when necessary to participants with literacy issues so that terms and conditions were clear. Participants were offered the option of receiving any proceeds from the sale of their masks or of donating any profit to PADS. Consent forms were signed in duplicate or photocopied with a copy given to participants if they wished or, in the case of homeless persons, kept on file at the program site where they received service.

Many of those who donated their faces expressed how relaxing and nurturing it was to experience being touched in the process of mask making, and to receive such concentrated attention. Some of our homeless guests stayed in the drying phase for an hour or more, enjoying the meditative

quality of being cared for and watched over in this gentle way. Several clergy who participated as face donors actually fell asleep and later remarked it was a rare moment of relinquishing their professional “face” and truly coming to rest. For one volunteer, the act of applying the plaster to the face of a homeless man was an extraordinary act of service. She felt touched by his trust, and by an intimacy and love that deepened her overall experience as a PADS volunteer in the shelter program.

We invited and encouraged all face donors to come to scheduled open studio drop-in times to choose and decorate a mask donated by someone else. This contingency challenged our original vision of having ongoing interactions in the studio between homeless and housed individuals. We had scheduled one of the drop-in times to coincide with the ending of the PADS summer lunch program that met at a church not far from the studio. However, only a handful of guests were interested in a regular studio visit, even when transportation was provided. Many were happy to donate their faces when we brought our supplies to the lunch program, and so we collected more masks there throughout the summer.

Instead of the one-to-one exchange we had originally envisioned, participants who chose to decorate a mask would select one from an array displayed on a clothesline strung around the perimeter of the back wall near the ceiling of the studio. Each mask, along with a copy of the release forms and the interview, was contained in a plastic bag affixed to the line with a clothespin. The embellisher of the mask then read the interview for inspiration about how to proceed to turn it into a work of art that honored and respected the face donor and served the goal of the project. We found people very excited, moved, and inspired by the interviews. Reading the interview form – the final question of which was “How would you like to be seen by the person who decorates your mask?” – helped each embellisher have a clear intention to fulfill the wish of that person. In most cases, the embellisher and the person whose face had been cast in the mask did not meet.

Because our goal was wide participation, we recruited families, children, and teens as well as many adults who do not ordinarily consider themselves artists. The interview bridged that gap and transformed their efforts into an act of service. The embellishment became a meditation on a person and an entry point to thinking about being homeless or being housed. This helped clarify how to meet our goal of breaking down stereotypes and raising awareness about issues of homelessness. As the project developed, some of

the initial face donors encouraged other shelter guests and volunteers to participate as either face donors or mask makers. We did experience moments when all roles dropped away and we became artists together in the studio – for example, when a homeless man interviewed and applied the plaster for the mask of one of our village officials. This was the fulfillment of a goal of the project and one of the amazing possibilities inherent in making art in community: our common humanity revealed, amplified, and celebrated.

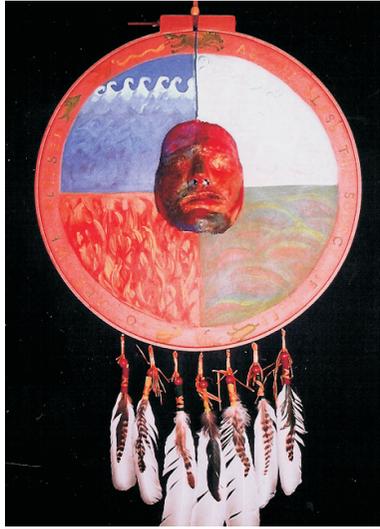
### *Embellishing the masks*

Painting and decorating masks is fun and exciting, but it is very important before beginning to set clear goals for the finished masks. There was no question that masks decorated by professional artists auctioned for the highest prices. In many cases, masks that were embellished by children or artistically unsophisticated adults had charm and energy. A parent was proud and happy to buy a child's mask for a few dollars as a memento of a fun and significant learning experience. Many people bought the masks of friends or family and gave them as gifts. But overall, masks created by locally known, professional artists had a visual power that surpassed the personal element (Figure 3.3). We chose to have a mix of people and to try to achieve several goals in a balanced way. We felt that, even if some masks did not sell, they could be either hung at the PADS depot or made into a teaching tool for speakers from the agency who go to schools and other sites to raise awareness about homelessness.

Most of the masks were embellished at Studio Pardes. All the necessary materials and tools were available, including access to sinks for cleaning up and opportunities to display finished masks to inspire creativity in newcomers. The professional artists who were invited to participate all took the masks they chose to their own studios to work on them. Had we used only professional artists, we would have greatly diminished the community participation aspect of Facing Homelessness.

### *Documentation*

All masks were photographed with both print and slide film in order to provide images for illustrated talks, publicity pictures, and, as it turned out, a set of note cards. The documentation was done by Studio Pardes staff and interns. One mask by a PADS guest was chosen as the image for a postcard invitation to the final show and silent auction.



*Figure 3.3 Mask titled “Local Warrior” by John, township youth*

PADS staff created a spreadsheet database that collected all the names and contact information for all participants in the show, face donors as well as mask embellishers. They kept track of who had chosen to withhold permission for use of their images in publicity in addition to who wanted to receive remuneration if their masks were sold. This was a crucial resource when the time came to send out invitations and to generate bid sheets for the silent auction.

### *Exhibition and publicity*

Once the masks were embellished, they were wired and ready to hang. We went through all the interviews to create vignettes by excerpting segments of the interviews. Our goal was to present the humanity common to all those who participated. PADS clerical staff typed a card for each mask with the names of both the face donor and the artist along with several excerpts from the interviews. We also prepared two other pieces of text to intersperse with the masks: “myth/fact” cards, which stated a common assumption about homelessness along with countervailing fact, and cards with an inspirational quote related to helping others from a source such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa, or the Bible.

We conceived of three exhibit sites to serve the goal of community education. Exhibits were scheduled both to coincide with Homelessness

Awareness Month as well as to build interest in our final showing, a silent auction fundraiser at Studio Pardes. We chose sites with a high volume of public traffic: Village Hall, a bank, and a public library. Bank staff reported that most customers spent considerable time looking at the masks and reading the supporting material. Posters about the final event were hung at each site. Because only a portion of the total masks were hung in each site, we hoped to build interest in the final event when all 105 masks would be available to be seen and purchased. We took advantage of any offer to review the mask show and auction – for example, we set up a display at the annual gala of the Oak Park Arts Council with a selection of completed masks, information about how people could get involved, and details about the upcoming events.

### *Final showing and silent auction*

All the masks were returned to Studio Pardes for the weekend in December that coincided with a celebration in the arts district where the studio was located. The masks and bid sheets were hung on the walls and displayed on tables around the room. Studio artists hung the show, which had culminated in 105 embellished masks. PADS staff, experienced with many other auctions and fundraisers, took care of the auction, bid sheets, money, and food. A PADS volunteer, who is a professional cellist, brought a friend and provided music during the opening Friday evening. The auction went all weekend long with a final celebration on Sunday afternoon where refreshments were served and money for the masks was collected. Everyone who had participated in the project was invited to the event and many came throughout the weekend. In addition, because of the overall art district publicity, many more visitors saw the work than might have during an ordinary weekend. The timing of the event at the beginning of the holiday season encouraged gift-buying and generosity of spirit.

On Sunday during the culminating event, the House of Daniel Men's Choir, a group of formerly homeless men, performed their original acapella spirituals. Hundreds of people had been touched by the project and close to \$3000 dollars was raised through the auction and the sale of the note cards. All but two of the 105 masks were sold.

### *An unmet expectation*

One of our original goals was to offer a weekly open studio afternoon where, in addition to the mask making, general studio materials would be available

to PADS guests following their lunch program at a nearby church. We planned to open the session to the community at large so that a mix of people could experience the creative process. Although a number of guests came once to decorate a mask and most donated their faces, only two guests became sufficiently engaged in the project to come more often. Frequently, other community members were present making art and, during much of the summer, people were still coming in to donate their faces, a task with which some guests helped out. Saturdays were our busiest times with many drop-ins including college-student friends of our interns and PADS staff, volunteers, and family members.

Most PADS guests had numerous survival issues to attend to such as healthcare appointments, meetings with caseworkers, jobs, or other obligations that prevented regular participation. Once in the studio, issues of competence, feelings of being uncreative, and therapeutic issues surfaced. Making art reminded one man of the child he had abandoned, and the lure of art was not enough to overcome his sorrow or discomfort. Guests routinely expressed gratitude at having a chance to help PADS and to give something back to the community. Some also expressed enjoyment at the chance to relax in a safe space and create, but that reaction often mingled with a sense of needing to keep moving, keep up one's guard. For some, simply navigating to a place off their usual track was a great challenge. Although just a few blocks from the familiar site that offered a daily lunch program, several guests were disoriented when leaving the studio and needed help to find their way to the bus stop.

### *Unexpected outcomes*

Although most of the embellishment by community members took place at Studio Pardes, we did travel a few times. We were invited to a class for teens on social justice at our local synagogue. The PADS Director spoke about the shelter program, and I provided masks for the students to embellish. Trusty cat litter buckets held paints, palettes, brushes, glue gun, rags, and decorative items. We covered the tables with newspaper and had the students work in groups of two or three, read the interviews, and decide how to work on the masks. In the course of less than two hours, the students decorated eight masks. Many of them had been PADS volunteers as the synagogue is a regular shelter site.

During the final months of the project, an unexpected opportunity presented itself. A PADS board member had initiated an unrelated project to

make Christmas cards using drawings from the children of the transitional housing clients. For some reason, this project fell through. Because we had slides of all the masks (many of which were striking works of art), because the board was already in favor of such a printed product, and most important, because we had good paperwork (i.e. release forms from every artist either granting or denying PADS' use of their art), we went ahead with a note card project. Five masks were selected and turned into blank notes and packaged in packs of ten cards for \$10. An explanation of Facing Homelessness was inserted in each pack on a small piece of paper. A service club at the local high school packed all the cards, which were then offered for sale at local churches, at holiday bazaars, and at Studio Pardes during the final celebration as well as at other shops and galleries in the Arts District. Although we had not planned to create note cards, it was a great way to extend the effect of the project both artistically and educationally – artist and face donor were identified on the back of each card, and PADS and Studio Pardes' collaboration were described on the insert.

### **Summary and critique**

As an educational and awareness-raising project, Facing Homelessness was a success. Hundreds of people saw the various shows and hundreds of people participated in mask making and perhaps thought differently about what it means to have a home, and who might be homeless, for at least a few moments. As an outreach endeavor to the homeless individuals in our community, it was less effective. In our plan, direct service was considered more of an auxiliary benefit of the project than a primary goal. Although about one-third of the participants were PADS guests, only one attended the final celebration – the event was announced at all the shelter sites and was planned for the afternoon so that it wouldn't conflict with getting to a site to secure shelter. Upon reflection, I realize that the project originated from my curiosity about how we choose to serve homeless individuals in my community and not from any stated need or desire on the part of the guests themselves. Facing Homelessness was designed primarily to meet the goals stated by the PADS administrator: to raise awareness and carry out community education.

Many unexpected moments of connection and insight occurred for everyone involved. I was walking down the street one day and a man I recognized from the shelter program smiled and pointed at me and said, "You're the Mask Lady," which reminded me that not all effects are known. The

PADS staff sees ongoing positive effects in a feeling of shared pride and an enhanced sense of community among staff and guests due to the presence of some of the finished masks in the offices of PADS. The masks serve as a reminder of something accomplished and as concrete proof of community participation.

The best result from the service point of view is that a PADS staff member initiated an ongoing arts program at the Thursday night site, the same church where we had done our original mask making. The existence of an ongoing program means that PADS guests can generate ideas for programs and projects that best serve their interests and needs.

The PADS staff member, Kate Woodbury, reports that what PADS guests want are concrete, goal-oriented projects. PADS had a very successful Christmas ornament-making project following the mask show. Guests were able to embellish ornaments and give them as gifts to friends and family. Kate observes that such a task allows guests to feel successful and to make something that can be given to another, restoring, if only briefly, a felt sense of dignity. She believes guests need a practical outcome that anchors them in what is going on around them. They are already too haunted by the circumstances of their existence and do not need to be reminded that they are without a home. Art programs that are too overtly “therapeutic” or issue oriented may harm guests by destabilizing them and activating fears and negative internal judgments that impair their functioning, even causing them to withdraw from services.

Facing Homelessness was successful by several measures – raising awareness, obtaining funds, creating opportunities for art making in the community. We, the housed members of the community, are the ones whose awareness needs to be raised, so this result deserves emphasis. Because we are the ones with the most power and resources to affect change in our community, putting the issue of homelessness in front of us has value. I don’t know how many others continue to think about the seeds that were planted by the project. It may have been simply an enjoyable distraction for many or most.

I know I came to see how naïve my own expectations were, and I continue to wrestle with questions about how best to use my energy as an artist in the service of the exploration of social issues and social change. As artists engaged in practice that brings social issues into public view, we have the power to determine what is represented and the power to re-present new views. This is a large responsibility and one that requires continual awareness

and critique of our work. Clarity of purpose and clear intention are the bedrock of a successful social action art program. Humble recognition that not every issue yields easily to change will help us sustain our efforts as we face and face again iniquity and injustice in the world around us.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The PADS model calls for different congregations to provide shelter one night per week so that responsibility is communally held by the various faith communities.
- 2 For further discussion of these important matters, see the following chapter.