



MIAMI UNIVERSITY'S  
**CENTER FOR COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT**  
IN OVER-THE-RHINE

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Originally published as a Guest Column in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* (January 19, 2008).

**THE GIFT OF THE DROP INN CENTER**

A Working Paper

January 13, 2008

The front-page headline of Saturday's *Cincinnati Enquirer* (January 12, 2008) read "Will Drop Inn Center Be Pushed Out?" bolstered by the subhead "Some wonder if homeless shelter hurts Over-the-Rhine development." If those questions weren't bold enough, readers were encouraged to register their opinions to the question "Should the Drop Inn Center Move?"

The prejudicial character of these questions should be obvious. People say that to really solve a problem, the question that frames that problem is crucial. These questions are no example of a decent framing. They are sly and specious, harboring assumptions that in no way reveal what the Drop Inn Center is and does. Example? The questions presuppose incompatibility, and worse, that such incompatibility rests with the Drop Inn Center. The questions place you too far down the road to recognize a more fundamental question: What is our society's capacity for empathy?

I remember a year ago, during the 10<sup>th</sup> year commemoration of buddy grays' death, that Donald Whitehead spoke of the first time he met buddy. As a person down on his luck, wandering about on the streets, Donald found himself one day at the Drop Inn Center. Buddy was there and talked with Donald for about an hour. Donald does not remember most of that conversation, except for four words: "I'm glad you're here."

Donald's account reminds me of an episode I witnessed this past Friday night as part of the silent march commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the People's Move. When our group of 120 folks ended our march at the front doors of Drop Inn Center, a disheveled, older man, clearly homeless, was confused and disoriented by the drama of songs and celebration swirling about him. A staff member

came out and put his arm around the man, and comforted him. It was a very simple gesture, but so illustrative of what happens everyday at the DIC.

What Donald Whitehead was saying was that buddy “saw” him. The same message holds true from the other night.

In our world where homeless folks are typically not seen, indeed, they are scorned, reviled, denounced—rejected—it is powerful when one comes up to a homeless person, puts his arm around him, and says “I see you brother.”

I submit to you, the lesson of this act goes unnoticed if we label it merely as an act of kindness. It *is* a very kind act, but it goes much deeper. This is an act to restore a person’s humanity. “I see you brother, can you see yourself?” This is the most loving of acts a human being can make.

Buddy had this quality. Bonnie Neumeier has this quality, as does Donald, and as do so many others of the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement from whom I continue to learn.

This is what the Drop Inn Center enacts everyday—it is a place of compassion, a place of redemption in peoples’ struggle to overcome addiction to drugs and alcohol, a healing place. And it is out of this base of interpersonal dynamics that we can see the contribution of the wider political mission of the Drop Inn Center and the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement: to restore Cincinnati’s humanity.

In this regard the Drop Inn Center stands in a long line of stellar examples that understood the importance of empathy and love in political movements.

Consider the words of Robin D. G. Kelley, an outstanding historian who visited Over-the-Rhine and spoke at buddy’s Place in October 2003: “Freedom and love may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us...I have come to realize that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter.”

This is the power of the Drop Inn Center. This is the Center’s gift to the larger world. And this is why the Center, with its capacity to love, remains for me the lead institution in the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement, in its political mission to restore society’s humanity, a humanity that many of us recognize is not possible under current political-economic conditions.