



Knowing One Another

Hill Brown

Southern Ambassador for Harm Reduction Overdose Prevention Ministries

“Even the most ardent revolutionist, seeking to change the world, to overturn the tables of the money changers, is trying to make a world where it is easier for people to love, to stand in relationship to each other. We want with all our hearts to love, to be loved.” Dorothy Day, [The Reckless Way of Love: Notes on Following Jesus](#).

Every week for five years, I distributed sterile injecting equipment and naloxone in Asheville, NC. When I began this work in 2016, it was as a volunteer for a newly formed, community-based harm reduction organization. I knew the supplies were valuable to stop the spread of infectious disease and reverse increasingly common opioid overdoses. However, as the years passed—and I transitioned from volunteer to outreach worker to executive director—the thing that kept me engaged in outreach was the reality that many program participants were most interested not in supplies but a consistent, caring relationship.

People who use drugs experience a devastating amount of stigma in the United States. Many people I worked with encountered so much unfair treatment when seeking emergency medical care, housing, and even treatment for substance use disorder that they had stopped visiting other service providers. Having someone show up week after week who called them by name and responded to their needs without judgment or coercion was a much bigger deal than I had anticipated.

I left my role in direct service harm reduction in 2021. Unsure how best to grapple with heartbreak, burnout, and a world remade by the confluence of at least four public health emergencies (Covid-19, opioid overdose, homelessness, and police violence), I moved to a tiny rural town an hour away from Asheville. For a

couple of years, the distance felt restorative, nice. But this year I have started to feel very lonely.

Last week I decided to volunteer at a cafe that serves free meals near one of the locations where I had previously distributed supplies in Asheville. I thought maybe if I had a constructive thing to do with others I would feel less alone. I sat through the volunteer orientation and then I started the work of handing out plates of food.

Throughout my two hour volunteer shift, I was stopped multiple times by people who asked “don’t I know you?” I would explain where I used to work and then their faces would light up. “Oh yeah! Hill, right?”

When the cafe served its last meal, I helped fold chairs and sweep and then I said my goodbyes. As I walked down the street back to my car, I heard someone yell my name. When I turned, I saw a woman I had met only once before waving at me from the bus stop. I walked over and chatted with her while she waited for a ride. As we parted ways, she smiled and said, “It was good to see you, Hill! See you soon.”

When I finally sat down in the driver’s seat of my car, I closed my eyes and thanked God.

For years I had shown up every week to call people by name, because I could tell folks were isolated and this turning-towards was not happening in other areas of their lives. Now I need someone to call me by name. Acutely, I feel the need to be seen and known. I do not think it is some dramatic role reversal that many of the folks who provided me with this kind of support last week are the same people I served at the syringe exchange. These are the folks who know me. And this is a kind of mutual aid. We are not made to tough out this hard moment alone. Each of us wants a world where it is easier to love. We will only arrive in that world by seeking to know the other and allowing ourselves to be seen, known, and called by name.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hill Brown is the Southern Ambassador for Harm Reduction Overdose Prevention Ministries for the United Church of Christ.

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