

Phil: Sleepout highlighted important issues

Phil Slatter of the Wycombe Wanderers Independent Supporters Club braved the cold on Saturday night.



Wycombe Wanderers Independent Supporters Club member Phil Slatter joined 150 other brave volunteers who slept out in the stands at Adams Park as part of the Dreams Big Sleepout for Wycombe Homeless Connection. Here, he tells his story from the night.

Last Saturday night after the crowds had dispersed, the post-match team talks had been completed and the majority of football fans across the country looked forward to a care-free evening, 150 people and a team of volunteers stayed on at Adams Park to bed in for the night.

This was part of the 2018 Big Sleepout, an annual event by Wycombe Homeless Connection to raise funds to support homeless and potentially homeless people in the town. Sleeping outdoors on a hard floor in the UK in November is hardly an appealing proposition, so what would prompt someone to voluntarily do such a thing? Raising money is the obvious answer, but there are other more comfortable, fun, and healthier ways to do that.

For many, myself included, the answer was twofold. Firstly, it was to get a glimpse of homelessness. It's an issue we don't really encounter in our day to day lives, something we know is there but only get the extent of it through facts and figures and unlike other worthy causes, not something that directly affects us on a regular basis. In the two weeks preceding the sleepout I encountered two individuals sleeping in the stairwell at Wycombe Train Station one Wednesday morning, read an article on the BBC website revealing that there were 'at least 320,000' homeless people in Britain and counted up many others in the town sleeping rough. It's remarkable what we see when we open our eyes.

Equally, Wycombe Wanderers supporting this event is a demonstration of the importance of the role that football clubs play in their respective communities. For all the joy and despair it might give us, football is just a game – sometimes

you win and sometimes you lose. Yet football clubs themselves, if utilised correctly, can transcend mere sport to actually make a difference. Wycombe Wanderers has always prided itself on its family and community appeal, and they continue to fulfil that role and demonstrate why football clubs around the country should be cherished.

Upon arrival through the Caledonian Suite, I was handed a thermal cup, provided by the event sponsor Dreams, for the hot drinks that were available on tap. I was then shown through to the Beachdean Stand at Adams Park. The pitch was partly lit by one of the floodlights, while all lighting in the stand was on to allow the team of volunteers to designate everyone a specific area in which to sleep. Every gangway was either for access or sleeping, and I was given a spot in the directors box overlooking the halfway line. The seats were cushioned, but the armrests meant there was no possibility of sleeping on them. The quiet was only interrupted by the occasional chatter creating an eerie atmosphere, a far cry from the game a few hours previous. I laid my sleeping bag on a blanket and shielded it with a cardboard box that I taped to the seats for additional shelter and warmth.

Back in the Caledonian Suite, a prize was handed out to the builder of most practical and most creative shelter alongside the announcement of the winners of the preceding quiz who won a tour of the ground. The biggest fundraiser was also the recipient of the tour and would have Wycombe defender Michael Harriman as a guide who, along with his wife Amy, is an ambassador for the charity. Yet in true Wycombe Wanderers style, General Manager Mike Davies then took to the stage to invite the recipient to be a guest of honour at an upcoming game and to deliver the matchball to help raise the charity's profile. He then extended the invite to the many volunteers who were running the event so well.

We were given a talk about Wycombe Homeless Connection, what the money we would be raising would fund and how it initially started when one individual sleeping rough was found dead on Christmas Day. The key word in the charity's name was 'connection' – connecting with the homeless through a simple act or helping them to connect with organisations that can provide support, accommodation and the facilities with which to re-build their lives. The most eye-opening story was of an individual who had worked as a camera operator on films such as Harry Potter and Nanny McPhee, but when the work dried up he ended up in desperate times and found himself on the street. The charity was there to support him and get his life back on track. Homeless people can often be stereotyped as addicts or down and outs, but this is not the case, and we headed into the night with the knowledge that homelessness affects those from all walks of life.

I settled down at around 11 and, using my coat to block out the light, tried to get some sleep. The gangways were long, but not particularly wide, meaning

movement was minimal. At one point I found both my arms were completely numb from lying on them. The cold came primarily from the concrete floor as my blanket moved during the night, bringing me into direct contact with the ground. I eventually had to get up to answer the call of nature and was shocked to notice the time was 02:30 a.m. I must have slept, but it didn't feel like it. Walking along the front of the stand, the temperature felt as if it had dropped significantly while the whole stand was completely silent. In many respects, this was a good metaphor for the homeless situation in the UK. I couldn't hear anyone, and could only see one or two sleeping near the front. Yet there were many people there, silent, hidden away, and no doubt struggling for comfort in the difficult conditions.

I returned to my cocoon and slowly warmed back up. The next thing I knew there were voices and people clearing up. It was 5:50 a.m. and still dark. The quantity of sleep had been low and the quality of sleep had been even lower. I packed up and made my way back to the Caledonian Suite for a coffee and pastry, contemplating what had been a tough, memorable evening that had given me a glimpse of life for the homeless. I use the word glimpse cautiously though, for those sleeping rough do not have access to hot drinks, toilets and first aid. Nor do they usually get to eat a full evening meal before settling down for the night or have a dry, sheltered, designated spot in which to sleep. Nor do they get to go to a heated house in the morning. In many ways this was like the 'Ice bucket challenges' that swept social media in 2014. They were to raise money for ALS and give people a split second feeling of having that disease. This had been a filtered, brief view of life on the street but as uncomfortable and as tiring as it was, the reality must be much, much harder.

Yet there is hope. With organisations such as Wycombe Homeless Connection and others across the country doing the work they do, supported by willing volunteers, participants and community institutions such as football clubs helping to raise funds, some of those of no fixed abode this winter will be able to re-build their lives and realise their value.