

Eight Minutes

with a

'Homeless' Millionaire

How a finance guy befriended the homeless and gave them a newspaper and hope

By MARGO PIERCE
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The guy holding the door wore a yellow baseball cap with a cowboy riding a horse stitched on it, a lime-green T-shirt, cargo shorts and flip-flops. People were trickling in and he just stood there, holding the door. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon and he was in no hurry. He seemed content to stand there all day if asked. There was no hint of arrogance or impatience, the tell-tale signs most people equate with a millionaire, and I had no idea I just walked past the man who rescued the *Denver VOICE* from oblivion.

Rick Barnes is the guy others will hold the door for in hopes of getting a few moments of his time. As the president and CEO of six financial companies hired by likes of Merrill Lynch and Citi Group to sell some of their "mortgage platforms," he's the kind of man who could easily ignore the homeless woman in the wheelchair on the corner in favor of the eager suits following in his wake. But he doesn't.

"I'm born and raised in Denver, so I have worked downtown since 1989," he said. "I'm

the type of guy who will throw 20s out to a panhandler. I don't care if they go shoot it. I don't care if they go drink it. I don't care if they go eat it or go buy a pair of socks, whatever. From a spiritual perspective, I felt like it was none of my business. If somebody was asking for help, I'd extend a helping hand.

"After a while I'd just stop and talk with them. Some of them became friends and I helped some of them to get into housing. Sometimes, if they were in a jam, I'd help them out of a jam. But all of a sudden all of my friends started disappearing because they were getting run off."

Those doing the chasing

were politicians, and Barnes was appalled.

"All of these city ordinance started getting passed about no feedings, can't sleep out, to urinate in public was a sex offense. At the same time Mayor (John W.) Hickenlooper won an award – all mayors nationwide were up for it – for his homeless campaign. The first thing that came to my mind was the hypocrisy: He wins this award and they're passing all these ordinances that make it illegal to be homeless. The amount of hypocrisy is just disgusting. People going to church every Sunday but not practicing what's being preached to them – I just wonder if people go to church and hear anything.

"About 80 percent of the panhandlers were wheelchair-bound. What I found out was that these were all people on disability, but that disability doesn't pay your bills. When you're on disability, you can make other income; but if your other income exceeds a certain level, then you lose your disability. It's a crock, a catch 22."

Barnes was fired up and happy to support the original *Denver VOICE* with a monthly donation when the paper fell on hard times. But after 10 years, the paper closed its doors in 2006. Described as "a grassroots newspaper created in large part by homeless people for homeless people" by the paper's Web site, the *Denver VOICE* got a second chance from Barnes, who took it over in 2007.

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"I get this paper ... then it dawned on me that I didn't know one person that had any journalism background," he said. "I had no idea how to secure funding for it, and the answer is there is no way. There's no one out there that wants to back a paper for the homeless. I wasn't in a position to afford it, so I borrowed \$50,000 from my 401K. That was the seed capital. And then all of a sudden my businesses started booming. I never once thought about giving homeless people a job through this project – my main intention was always to be an activist and to challenge head on the city government."

His intention to take on

City Hall hasn't panned out the way he anticipated. The new *Denver VOICE*, which put out its first edition in August 2007, focuses on arts and human-interest features that aren't printed anywhere else, but not activism. That's OK with Barnes because the economic impact for the vendors is where he sees the biggest bang for his philanthropic buck.

"In the month of August 2008, the Democratic National Convention was in Denver ... we sold 17,000 copies," he said. "And this is when I started looking for feedback. Most vendors average \$2 a paper. That's \$35,000 that we just put into the poor community's pockets.

"The last three consecutive months we've sold between 16,000 and 17,000 papers, so we've been putting between \$30,000 and \$35,000 into the pockets of the poor and homeless community. I'm a businessman; the mileage I

can get by having a homeless paper versus just handing out 20s all day long on the street corner, the impact on the consequences are so much better."

With the rise of laws targeting homeless people, it's difficult to understand how a person in a business that trades heavily on reputation would take the risk of getting involved with such an unpopular cause. Barnes offered a simple explanation.

"Because it's right," he said. "In my heart I feel like you're supposed to take care of the homeless, and you're supposed to take care of the poor and you're supposed to feed the hungry and you're supposed to clothe the naked. I just believe it."

Barnes is convinced others know what's right, too.

"Do you believe that people have to be taught that hunger is a crime? With that ques-

tion, I don't believe people have to be taught to take care of their neighbor, especially if somebody is really, really, really fortunate," he said. "So why does somebody who's really, really fortunate have to be taught that they should take care of the guy that's less fortunate? That part will always confuse me.

"Looking at it from a pure business perspective, I think I can completely remove myself from any contributions to the paper after the 36th month.

"To me that seems like a pretty simple model; if people can't find beauty in that model from a business perspective, then you can't find beauty in a field of flowers. You can't tell me that the city of Cincinnati doesn't have any one of 50,000 people who could cough up that money and never even miss it."



Rick Barnes is the publisher of the *Denver VOICE* and on the board of the North American Street Newspaper Association. Photo by Lynne Ausman.

Many people work hard to make a difference for the less privileged in the Queen City. "Eight Minutes" is an opportunity to learn who those people are and what motivates them to be a positive influence.