

INTO THE HEART OF HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS

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Philippine Post
NOV. 25-DEC. 25, 2003 M A G A Z I N E

College students want to do something to aid fellow Americans, thousands of them children, who are hungry and homeless. Recently at Boston University's Community Service Center, freshmen attended educational workshops and participated in a week-long outreach project. They came to deal with the effects of a failed economy—and this year, through an historic keynote address, they learned the cause, and the one convincing, practical solution.

The keynote speaker was Ken Kimmelman, Emmy award-winning filmmaker and consultant on the faculty of the not-for-profit Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York. He has addressed conferences of the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, the Campus Outreach Opportunity League at Harvard, Dickinson College, and more.

What he said to 700 students, administrators and others was groundbreaking. He spoke about what he's learned through his study of Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the American educator and poet Eli Siegel (1902-78). Students heard this question asked by Mr. Siegel, which is crucial for our nation: "What does a person deserve by being alive?"

"As I saw homelessness becoming a staple in America," said Mr. Kimmelman, "I knew this question had to be made conscious in people's minds...honestly asked and answered by Americans, including our government officials."

Four of Mr. Kimmelman's films were shown, including his award-winning public service film now on CNN, "What Does a Person Deserve?" A powerful montage of black and white photographs set to music by composer Edward Green, the film shows the ravages of homelessness, while also revealing the dignity of those who are forced to endure it, and ends with these words by Eli Siegel: "The world should be owned by the people living in it....All persons should be seen as living in a world truly theirs."

Along with CNN, this film, sponsored by organizations including the National Coalition for the Homeless, Food Chain, and the Harburg Foundation has been aired on major TV stations. "I'd always wanted to make films for social justice," said Mr. Kimmelman, "but it was when I began to study Aesthetic Realism that I learned principles that could really make for change."

The Fight between Respect and Contempt

He spoke about the need to understand that there is a fight in every person between respect and contempt. "The only reason there is homelessness in America is because our unjust economic system is based on contempt—the 'addition to self through the lessening of something else.'"

Mr. Kimmelman explained that economics arises from individual selves, and a system where one human being is encouraged to exploit the labor of others for his own profit

and aggrandizement, is contempt.

"Like families all over America today," he continued, "I saw my parents struggle to make ends meet. I wanted to do something to make the world better. But I was also terrifically competitive." He spoke courageously of the fight in himself and what he learned in Aesthetic Realism lessons given by Mr. Siegel, who asked him kind, critical questions like these: "Do you believe you wage a contest between yourself and everything else? Do you have contempt for people who are not financially all right? What's more important to you, being all you can be, or beating out other people?" Answering these questions, said Kimmelman: "was the beginning of a huge change in my life and my work as a filmmaker!"

He spoke about the Aesthetic Realism statement that the desire to like the world on an honest basis is "the largest purpose of every human being" and the one opponent to contempt.



Still from "What Does a Person Deserve?" by Ken Kimmelman
Photo by Robin Nelson

From the desire to like the world, Mr. Kimmelman said, have come "all the great contributions to humanity." And contempt, which can be so ordinary, is "at the heart of all the cruelties and injustices in the world—slavery, racism, poverty, war—and economic injustice."

Three Short Films against Racism

Mr. Kimmelman also showed three short films he made against prejudice and racism, saying: "In every instance of ethnic prejudice or racism, this is what occurs: you triumphantly belittle someone with a different skin color, language, or cultural background because you see them as standing for a world you dislike, and lessening them, you feel, makes you a big shot. Contempt gives one an immediate feeling of superiority—but contempt, I've seen, not only makes a person stupid, it is the most hurtful, dangerous thing in us and makes us despise ourselves."

The three films are: *The Heart Knows Better*, which won the 1995 Emmy for outstanding public service film, and two films produced for the UN: *Brushstrokes*, a humorous animated short for children, showing the absurdity of prejudice, and *Asimbonanga*, based on a song against apartheid by South

African musician Johnny Clegg, sung by Joan Baez. The students responded enthusiastically. "They loved those short films," said Ellen Reid, Coordinator for the event.

The Individual and the Community

He spoke about Community Service in relation to this principle of Aesthetic Realism: "Every person is always trying to put together opposites in himself." A large question Community Service brings up is the relation of community and one's individuality.

This subject, he said, was discussed in an Aesthetic Realism class in which Ellen Reiss, the Class Chairman, asked: "As we think of community, how do we see our individuality, how do we see our private self? People can be engaged in certain work, but when you are alone...you can feel you're a different person. Are they two different worlds—my individuality and my usefulness to the community?"

Said Mr. Kimmelman, "Where these opposites are not one there will be patronizing. We have to feel that being useful to others is the same as our individual expression, taking care of ourselves. In order to see with as much feeling and depth as possible the men, women, and children you will be working with, I suggest that you think of one of these persons, and write a 500-word soliloquy: what this person thinks to himself or herself, his or her hopes and fears, what opposites he or she is trying to put together—try to see from their depths, as a novelist or a playwright would. Keep a journal, and write a sentence about something you learned from each person you are useful to. This is the aesthetic way of seeing!"

"What Does a Person Deserve?" was shown as well during a workshop given by Kimmelman in which a paper by his colleague and NYC Planner Barbara Buehler, was read: "Housing: A Basic Right, an Urgent Need, a National Priority." Leslie Stierman, one of the Coordinators, said, "Students just couldn't stop talking about these presentations. They made them aware of things they'd never thought about before!"

"Economics," Kimmelman said, "begins with individuals. If people are really against contempt, and learn to see other human beings with respect—as having insides, hopes and feelings as real as their own—homelessness will be a thing of the past!" ♦

Ken Kimmelman is president of Imagery Film Ltd. (www.imageryfilm.com), and on the faculty of the not-for-profit Aesthetic Realism Foundation (www.aestheticrealism.org). He won the 1995 Emmy for Outstanding National Public Service Film for the anti-prejudice "The Heart Knows Better," shown worldwide, including at Yankee Stadium during the World Series. He also won an Emmy in 1997 for his contributions to Sesame Street.