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Catching Homelessness: A Nurse's Story of Falling Through the Safety Net

Josephine Ensign

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Josephine Ensign : Catching Homelessness: A Nurse's Story of Falling Through the Safety Net before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Catching Homelessness: A Nurse's Story of Falling Through the Safety Net:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Engaging and easy-to-read, but incredibly powerfulBy C.

Jefferson The homelessness epidemic in the United States evokes many different reactions from people. What did they do to end up homeless? Why don't they just get a job? How can I help? Should I help? Could this ever happen to me? The answers to those questions are as varied as there are people to ask them. But one thing is clear, the number of homeless in our country is increasing. And we need to think more critically about how we, as individuals and as a society, respond to it. In *Catching Homelessness*, Josephine Ensign, a nurse practitioner, chronicles her work with the homeless. She discusses why she initially got involved, the people and issues she saw, and what she's learned about trying to help. She also talks, rather frankly, about her own period of homelessness. When she started working with the homeless, she was one of those who thought it could never happen to her. Her story and experience not only provide readers with a firsthand look at helping the homeless, but also with the voice of someone who has been there. Both sides of the coin are reflected here. To say the subject is heavy would be an understatement. Not because this is a book that left me near tears on every page; it's not like that. But "heavy" just doesn't capture the rawness and reality of the stories contained in this book. Even if you're someone who works with the homeless or already has your eyes "open," I highly recommend picking up this book. It's honestly a quick read, but it's very powerful. I find myself still reflecting on it a few days after I finished it. And I expect I'll continue to think about it for some time to come... 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Absorbing and insightful story of the many faces of homelessness and one nurse practitioner who strives to make a difference. By Marianna Crane. Josephine Ensign has written a book, *Catching Homelessness: A Nurse's Story of Falling Through the Safety Net* that resonates on many levels. As a nurse practitioner she shows us the difficult and engrossing and frustrating work a NP does in treating a marginal group of folks who have slipped into homelessness. She educates her reader in the myriad ways that one can become a member of this group and surprises us with the fact that she, as an educated professional without mental illness or an addiction, finds herself without a bricks and mortar home. The history of the development of the NP role is discussed. My teeth were on edge when Ms. Ensign told us how the medical establishment tried to close her clinic in the Richmond area in order to limit competition with physician practice even though few, if any, physicians wanted to have a homeless patient sit in their office seeking care. The special bond that NPs develop with those they care for is front and center. NPs provide more than routine health care. They do what is necessary to meet each individual patient's needs. I am happy when nurses/nurse practitioners write about what they really do since I believe the public knows little about the invaluable contribution of nurses/nurse practitioners make to the sick and needy. For those who enjoy reading about nursing practice in alternative health care settings, i.e., clinics and the community, this is an informative, and at times disturbing, but always an engaging page-turner book. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. "Catching Homelessness" was an excellent, quick read. By Martina CLARK "Catching Homelessness" was an excellent, quick read. I learned a tremendous amount about the homelessness epidemic both in factual and anecdotal ways. Most importantly, though, through reading Ensign's own story woven throughout, I realized just how precarious our lives can be and how quickly any of us could become homeless, even when we do everything "right" as she has. This is a beautifully written heartfelt memoir that adds an element of learning. Highly recommend it.

At the beginning of the homelessness epidemic in the 1980s, Josephine Ensign was a young, white, Southern, Christian wife, mother, and nurse running a new medical clinic for the homeless in the heart of the South. Through her work and intense relationships with patients and co-workers, her worldview was shattered, and after losing her job, family, and house, she became homeless herself. She reconstructed her life with altered views on homelessness and on the health care system. In *Catching Homelessness*, Ensign reflects on how this work has changed her and how her work has changed through the experience of being homeless, providing a piercing look at the homelessness industry, nursing, and our country's health care safety net.

"Catching Homelessness" is a carefully researched documentary of poverty and health care woven together with an intensely personal and suspenseful memoir of a professional journey. Ensign is a compelling storyteller because she sees people so clearly; her characters include those who are homeless and sick, those who run health-care services, and not least herself. I wish every health-care professional would read this book at the start of their training, again at the start of clinical practice, and a third time after a decade of work. Few books do so much to humanize health care and to exemplify reflective clinical practice. — Arthur W. Frank, PhD, author of *At the Will of the Body* and *The Wounded Storyteller* "A provocative book. Viewed through the lens of her own experience of homelessness, Josephine Ensign challenges us to view the homeless as real, complex people rather than social issues, or, worse, problems. Her committed vision as a clinician and author makes this a powerful narrative of one of the pressing social issues of our time." — Theresa Brown, New York Times Bestselling author of *The Shift: One Nurse, Twelve Hours, Four Patients' Lives* "The ability to share and understand another's experience and feelings in a profound way is the basis of empathy. In reading *Catching Homelessness* the act of empathy was evident on every page. Dr. Ensign crafts a narrative that expresses her own empathy for those she cares for and invokes the same level of understanding and awareness for her own struggles with uncertainty. One cannot read this lovely book without feeling deeply the sorrow and desperation that accompanies life on the edge." — Bobbie Berkowitz, PhD,

RN, NEA-BC, FAAN, Dean and Professor, Columbia University School of Nursing

"Catching Homelessness is a powerful and personal story of providing nursing care for the homeless in Richmond, Virginia, and of the author's own experience of homelessness. When her life and values no longer fit the expectations for a good white, southern, Christian wife and mother, Ensign loses her home in every respect. In this era of foreclosures and income inequality, Catching Homelessness is a risk we share. Ensign never preaches but draws the reader into the world of people pushed to the margins, and to those few, like Ensign herself, who feel drawn to our common humanity."

—Marsha Hurst, PhD, Lecturer, MS in Narrative Medicine, Columbia University, New York

"Catching Homelessness is a book I feel comfortable recommending to anyone who likes a 'good read.' It moves quickly... paints vivid pictures of individuals...and describes a critical but often-ignored piece of our health care system. Perhaps most important, it takes us into a world most Americans don't inhabit: the world of people who are homeless."

—Nancy Amidei, MSW, Senior Lecturer, Emeritus, University of Washington School of Social Work and author of *So You Want to Make a Difference: Advocacy is the Key*

"When I reflect on the richness of Josephine Ensign's writing, several words come to mind: honest, elegant, harrowing, heartfelt, assertive, gentle, courageous, humble, unpretentious, compelling, compassionate, indicting. Every single essay in *Catching Homelessness*—a work that brilliantly weaves together the author's vivid recollections of her Southern upbringing, her life as a "good" Christian wife and mother, and her years of experience as a nurse practitioner in impoverished communities—is a profoundly affecting, stand-alone treasure. *Catching Homelessness* is a much-needed gift to the planet—and a book that I want to place in the hands of everyone I know."

—Stephanie Kallos, best-selling novelist of *Broken for You*, *Sing Them Home*, and *Language Arts*

"In *Catching Homelessness*, Dr. Josephine Ensign jolted me out of my comfort zone—again! 'Nurse Jo' interweaves narratives of human experiences, homeless patients from a street clinic in which she practices, and her own personal experience as a nurse practitioner. *Catching Homelessness* elicited both my visceral and my political responses. If you've become so accustomed to seeing homeless people in your community that you no longer respond to them, this book is a wonderful antidote for apathy!"

—Nancy Fugate Woods, PhD, RN, FAAN, Professor, Biobehavioral Nursing, and Dean Emeritus, University of Washington School of Nursing

"Catching Homelessness rings true: true about people who live the experience, true about the forces that drive homelessness, and true about those who care and respond. Josephine Ensign's remarkable memoir tracks the first three decades of the modern epidemic of homelessness, introducing memorable characters from real life and drawing out lessons that must be heeded lest the epidemic continue forever."

—John Lozier, Executive Director, National Health Care for the Homeless Council

"Josephine Ensign's account of helping people who are homeless will resonate with everyone who has done this work. She captures how complicated it is to be homeless and how resilient one must be to return to any semblance of stability. I am proud to be her friend and colleague."

—Sheila Crowley, President and CEO, National Low Income Housing Coalition

About the Author: Josephine Ensign is an associate professor at the University of Washington, Seattle, where she teaches community health, health policy, and narrative medicine. A graduate of Oberlin College, the Medical College of Virginia, and Johns Hopkins University, she has been a nurse for over thirty years, providing health care for homeless and marginalized populations. She is an alumna of Hedgebrook and the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Her essays have appeared in *The Sun*, *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, *Pulse*, *Silk Road*, *The Intima*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *Johns Hopkins Public Health Magazine*, and the nonfiction anthology *I Wasn't Strong Like This When I Started Out: True Stories of Becoming a Nurse*, edited by Lee Gutkind. *Catching Homelessness* is her first book. She lives in Seattle.