

Praise for Angles of Reality

“‘We as a society must start with love.’ says a participant in the book *Angles of Reality*. This book is an act of love. Rory Ramos shows great respect and care in her handling of these stories of the poor and socially outcast, compassionately accepting the participants as they are. This teen author demonstrates maturity beyond her years.

These personal stories give candid insights into what can lead to poverty or homelessness: mental health issues, trauma, incarceration, addiction, or foster care. They illustrate the challenge and pain of living on the edge and offer us a gateway to more empathetic understanding. There is also a strength in these stories, a “life force that refuses to stay down” as one participant puts it.

When we stand in awe at what the poor face, we can better stand in solidarity with them. This book recognizes the marginalized in our city and what they can teach us if we are willing to listen.

These stories are essential reading for everyone.
Bravo on this empathetic book!”

—*Anne Mahon*

“In *Angles of Reality*, Rory Ramos told me she tried to ‘create a platform for the stories of marginalized voices that need to be heard.’ Yet in reality she went further than that. By sharing her own stories, along with those of the 8 others you are about to read, she has linked her own pain and heartbreak to those people we often don’t see as being truly alive.

Maya Angelou said, ‘I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.’

In the collection of stories you are about to read, I know that Rory Ramos and her storytellers possess an abundance of that very courage, on display for us to learn from.”

—*Syd Korsunsky*

Angles of Reality

Winnipeg Voices of Resilience &
Stories of Courage

“You are not just existing. You are not just breathing. ‘Just’ means only, and there is so much more to you...It takes a lot—a lot—to be human, and to make the most of this existence when the burden of your struggle strains your mind, body, and heart. So, the fact that you have made it this far means something. You are strong in a billion subtle ways, and I just hope you can remember that in seasons like this, on days like today. You have been through so much, and you have been strong, anyway.”

— *Morgan Harper Nichols*

“There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

— *Arundhati Roy*

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To the resilient and the brave,
may you allow strength to guide you to
warmer
days and brighter horizons.

May your determination and voices bring us
to a world where we
believe in the goodness of people.

The author is donating all proceeds from the sale of this book to the organization of Oak Table Inc. that provides direct support to the community of Winnipeg including individuals living in poverty.

Visit www.anglesofreality.ca for more information.

This book is a documentation of the diverse stories of participants. The stories and opinions contained in this work belong solely to the individuals that shared them.

WARNING: This book includes language that may be offensive to the reader. It has been kept for authenticity of the individual's voice and story.

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Introduction

Strangers

Justine Rory Ramos

I am six years old.

My family and I are on our way to Polo Park. I sit in the car, rocking in the opposite direction of the wheels as we turn corners. I watch the clouds as I always do; it's bright today and it brings me comfort.

As we slow to the red light of an intersection, I notice a person standing in the island between roads. They are much older than I am, and I know they have been through far more than I could imagine.

They wear a green jacket with stains and tears, their beard grows to a length that I feel would be uncomfortable if it were on my

face. Their clothes hang loose and their bag is swung lightly across their shoulders. They have a cardboard sign, written in nonuniform letters and black sharpie are the words, “ANYTHING HELPS.”

I search for change, any coin that I could give them, but I am just six years old. For some reason I don't use my voice to ask the other passengers of the car if they have change to spare. In the corner of my eye, I notice the stop light of the perpendicular street turn yellow and I'm frantic now. I search once again in places I have already looked, thinking maybe something will appear this second time.

My light turns green and we travel by. I try not to look at the person as we pass.

Don't stare, I tell myself. Don't stare, don't stare.

A heavy feeling blooms in my chest and I am too young to understand the word for it. There was nothing I could have given them.

For the rest of the ride, I stare at my feet instead of the clouds.

I am nine years old.

I step off the curb of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila, Philippines and make my way towards a van. It's crowded here, bodies pressed together shoulder to shoulder—trying to get to the van is like walking through water.

This is the first time I have set foot on the land of my birth since I left when I was one year old. At this moment I am a bundle of curiosity and nervousness. I soak up every sight I can because I know I will not be able to stay as long as I want to. I step inside the van. There are other people who came to greet us that are doing the same, but I don't recognize their faces, too young when I left to know that these people's blood runs in my own veins.

It's hot here. The humidity from the outside clings onto me even as the air-conditioned car rolls away from the airport. I had never known heat like this before, having grown up in the frigid cold of "Winterpeg." It's hard for me to breathe, but I suspect my

excitement plays a bigger role in that than I'd like to admit.

I am told we are on our way to my Tita's house, but the destination isn't what concerns me right now. The sun shines brightly on palm trees and when I look around in every direction, I am filled with the sight of people who look like I do, our skin colour varying in shades of beige and brown. There are street vendors packed just as close together as the people stand and the chaotic sounds of the roads wash over my ears.

The density of people fades out as we pull into a residential area, the vendor shops blending into small houses that are still just as closely packed.

As we make our way along this street, I notice a section at the corner of an intersection ahead that seems devoid of colour, like the life was sucked right out of this particular square lot.

The van brings me closer and closer and I notice two kids. One can't be more than a year older than I and the other seems much, much younger. The older one wears nothing

but torn up shorts and sandals. Their once blue shirt looks brown and is swung over their shoulder. The younger individual is barefoot, a loose tank top hangs over their frame as their long hair brushes against their face and their bare skin makes contact with the sharp stones of the ground with each step they take.

They are both looking through piles of trash. Black bags that are ripped open litter around them as they search for whatever's left of what has been thrown away.

Where are their parents? I think, why isn't anyone helping them?

Can I help them? I want to help them.

There is a makeshift shelter behind them built of large metal sheets, broken poles and worn-out blankets. Closer to the makeshift shelter is another child that I didn't notice before. They look the youngest. They are crouched down and hug their knees as they stare into a puddle. Their clothes are torn, brown and just as dusty as their hair and skin.

I know they feel my eyes on them because they look up at me. Through the

windows of the van, we make eye contact for a moment where I feel time stop before I am driven out of view.

I am still too young to know the word for the emotion that filled their gaze when we locked eyes.

The humidity of the air wasn't the only thing that hung onto me that day.

I am fourteen years old.

I take my seat at a table in Oak Table Inc. at 109 Pulford Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba. I gesture for an individual I do not know to sit in a chair I had placed across from me and she does so with grace. I smile at her, mustering as much warmth as I can because I know that just outside these walls is a sharp frost. She smiles back.

I ask her how she is and she tells me that she's alright. She places her hands in front of her on the table and cups them together.

I begin to tell her about my purpose here, my purpose for asking her to speak with me. I ask if she'd like to help me with this purpose

and she agrees to do so. I pull out my pen, my phone and two sheets of paper—one for my reference and one for her. I explain to her what's written on the paper I place in front of her and we go through questions of anonymity and what exactly I will be using her story for. She writes her name at the line indicated at the top and signs on the line indicated below.

I press record on the voice memo of my phone and ask my first question, “Who are you?”

From there she tells me about her story, her life and experiences, loves and losses, hardships and triumphs. An hour into our conversation she begins to cry. We take a moment here as we are flooded by tears that cannot seem to be held back. She apologizes but I assure her that there is nothing she has done that would require an apology.

I pause the recording and I excuse myself to go in search of tissues for her. I come back with a small packet of Kleenex and she does her best to wipe away the tears. I'm not sure why what happens next is what

happens, but it seems that a wall has been broken down because she covers her face in her palms and she continues to cry.

I do not stop her. I find myself crying too now. I was always bad at keeping it together in times of great emotion, always easily affected by the feelings of the people around me. I find that I have nothing to offer her anymore. I want to help, want to give her something but I don't know what and I don't know how.

Don't just look at her, don't just stare, I yell at myself, do something, help her.

My arm moves on its own as I place a gentle hand near the bottom of her elbow and a sob breaks out of her. She lifts her head out of her palms and with quivering lips she looks at me.

I don't exactly know what she was looking for when she gazed into my eyes, but I gave her the warmest smile I could muster. She smiles back.

The emotion that gets caught in my throat is something too mixed up to have an

exact name for it, but I know it was real. It was human.

We weren't as much strangers as I thought we were.

Chapter One

Acts of Kindness Go So Far

A word from the Volunteer Coordinator at
Oak Table Inc.

My name is Harvey Heather and I am the Volunteer Coordinator here at Oak Table Inc. When I first started at Oak Table in 2014, I volunteered a couple of days a week for about three years. An opening then came up and I became the Volunteer Coordinator.

I grew up in a family with eight brothers and sisters. From the experience of my grandparents, to my parents, to my siblings, we were always told to be kind and do what we can to help others. Ever since I was very young, I was taught that that is what we're

here for and whenever you have the chance to do that, you should.

My faith is something that is also very important to me. I grew up to realize that when you're helping others, you'll feel good about it and want to do it more. While that's maybe not the greatest reason to volunteer, it feels gratifying to get back often more than you put in. You realize that even as a single person, you can really make a difference in this world—even if it's only in a small way.

I think that it's important to remember that even if we cannot give *things* to people, we can always give kindness. Kindness is the main element in life. I see that being reflected by the volunteers and others that work here every day.

We're thankful for the support that many of the other churches and organizations give us, as well as all the individuals that do what they can. People are constantly inspiring me with all the kindness that they show, it makes me continue to love where I am and motivates me to continue working towards helping those who need it.

I've had a lot of experiences here that warm my heart, especially with the guests.

There is a gentleman who has been coming here for many years and when he first started coming, he would barely look at anybody. He would keep his head down, get his food, and never say much. He's also had some health concerns—whether it's mental or physical I'm not sure, but every once in a while, he would have an outburst of being very loud. When he would talk, it would be very jumbled up. He would say words, but they didn't really make sense together.

Over time, it's been amazing to see how much he has grown. He's now able to come up to us to strike up a conversation and while his words may still be a bit jumbled up, he's been doing so much better. If you saw him today you wouldn't be able to recognize just how much he's grown, but we know.

Today he came up to me and asked me how my weekend was. That's often something we say to each other, but many here at Oak Table are dealing with a lot of different hardships in their life. When you're

in those kinds of situations, you often put all your focus inward and are only concerned about yourself, and yet he asked me how I was doing. He's even grown to speak with other volunteers as well, not just me.

It just shows that hopefully some of the kindness we are showing them has opened them up a little bit. We hope to remind them that people do care about them and that they have something to offer as well, even if it's only a few kind words.

There was another time when this same gentleman asked me for change for five dollars. When we got him some change, he ended up putting three of those dollars back into my hand and said, "This is for Oak Table." He doesn't have very much and yet he did this. I told him that he didn't have to and that he probably needed it more than we did, but he was very adamant about giving us the money.

This was his way of feeling that he contributed to something. It was important for him to give back a little and it was an inspiring act of kindness. When you think

about it, all we've really done for him isn't too much other than listen to what he has to say. Even if it didn't make sense to most people, he valued the fact that we listened. One day, he said thank you for exactly that. He said, "Thank you for your patience and listening to me."

It just really let me know that he appreciated people giving him the time and ear he needed. It makes me feel inspired, yet again, to know that showing him kindness has done so much for him on the inside.

A few weeks ago, a lady came up to me. She was quite in distress as she deals with addiction, but we try to help her with whatever she needs. Sometimes we give her some toiletries like soap and shampoo, nothing really big, and yet again, she really seemed to appreciate it.

Later on, she gave us a handwritten letter that read, "Thank the Oak Table for all your help for the homeless, abused and confused."

A couple of weeks after she wrote and handed us this note, she gave us a fifty-dollar bill. This lady has so little, so of course we really thought she should keep the money, but she was again so adamant just like the other fellow. I took it to our Director here because I really didn't feel good about taking this money from a person who needed it so much more, so I waited until we officially put it into our system, just in case she changed her mind.

She comes in the next day and I let her know that we appreciated it so much, but that I really think she should keep the money. She refused again and told us about how grateful she was for the help and support that we've given her. We reluctantly kept the fifty dollars, but it just goes to show again how sometimes people are just looking to be valued.

It can be as small as saying hello to someone or asking how they're doing, but I think our guests here just really appreciate the kindness shown by our volunteers.

It frustrates me the most when we're not able to get a lot of the services that people need. People seem to run into a lot of roadblocks, especially when they're just trying to get back on their feet. It's hard to get going again. We've been able to bring in medical help and other support for our guests here, but there's still people who need support with getting a place to stay. They run into a lot of obstacles and the biggest frustration is not being able to help as much as I would like to.

There are people here that need medical help, help with addictions, help with mental health, getting housing and social services, finding homes for them, and for many reasons it's not a simple thing. For many reasons, these people aren't able to get the help that they need, and it becomes hard for me to watch, but we still strive to do what we can. Small things can lead to big things, so we just always try to do our best.

We're currently renovating Oak Table in hopes of being able to give more to the people who need it. We're moving into the

downstairs area of our current location and we're all very excited here. It's chaotic at times, but once we get through that, we are going to be able to provide some wonderful things for our guests.

We'll be including some basic things that most of us take for granted like a laundry facility and showers. We're also going to have what we call "dignity washrooms." If people are homeless, they don't often get access to these essential resources like bathrooms. People are often not allowed to go into a store or business without buying something. When you see someone going to the bathroom in a back lane or beside the street, most people's first instinct is to question why they would do that, but they really don't have any other options. Because of this, we're really looking forward to having our dignity washrooms where people are able to use it without having to interact with the rest of the space if they don't want to—same thing with the showers.

When you think about not being able to take a shower, it can first of all, not feel all

that great, but there are also medical concerns that come along. If people have any conditions or injuries like sores it certainly is an opening for infection or worsening conditions they might already have.

Our footcare program here has been something that we really value and it highlights the dangers of not being able to wash your feet properly or have clean clothes. These are all things that can really affect your health. You can't walk well if you're in pain, and a lot of the guests that come here already have underlying conditions of their own.

We've also been told that there are people in the community who have waited *eight weeks* to wash their clothes, so we're really looking forward to having a laundry facility for our guests as well.

We're also planning on having an urban cultivator which will enable us to grow microgreens like sprouts and vegetables that we can use in our soups and salads all year round. Although we get a lot of support from surrounding businesses, churches and individuals, we don't really have a consistent

supply of nutritious and healthy food for our guests. We want to make sure that we're really giving them our best.

We all just want to see continued support for the people that come here. Many individuals need homes and access to resources needed for help with addictions and mental and physical health issues. Even though our goal is to provide as much as possible for our guests there are certain needs in those areas that we just aren't able to give them here.

Even if we can't support them with those issues directly, we still want to be able to help them find those resources so that they can lead the best lives that they can.

I think that people really need to be more aware of the challenges that most of the folks that come here face every day.

I went to the store a while back and I was standing in line at a Costco. I got frustrated with how long it was and how long I had to wait until I realized that there are people who come to Oak Table and other places every day that have to stand in lines all the time.

When I considered this, I really had nothing to complain about. We have so many blessings in our lives and we often fail to recognize that. Sometimes people complain about various small things until you get to know the hardships of our guests and realize just how fortunate we are.

I wish people knew that our guests are wonderful human beings, but more than that I wish they knew that they are also survivors. I don't think a lot of us could have survived what many of the people here have gone through. Many individuals are living outside in thirty below weather, living under a bridge, just trying to get enough food for the day, trying to stay warm and make sure they have clothes. These things that people need can really be chalked up to a lack of basic access that so many of us take for granted.

In the end, I really ask that people look around—see how you can help other people in whatever way you can.

Go in search of the needs in your house, in your community, in your school or at your

workplace. Search for ways you can be kind to someone, because truly kindness makes a difference. If you could help a person, give them a smile or share something that you have you will be so very gratified in knowing that you've made a difference with the people around you.

Small things can lead to big things. These small acts of kindness go so much farther than you think it does.

To continue reading *Angles of Reality:*
Winnipeg Voices of Resilience buy a copy at
www.anglesofreality.ca