

Sheds, Groundhogs, and the Opioid Epidemic

In 2017 a dear friend of mine donated an 8' x 10' x 12' (2.44m x 3.04m x 3.66m) shed that was on a property he was looking to sell. So I hired a group of workers that I saw hanging around in my neighborhood to help me disassemble and transport the shed to Mezzacello.

Full disclosure:

I tell this story as an educational parable about empathy and dignity. It is also a rather long post, but I do not want to break it up over multiple posts. I do not seek to denigrate anyone. But there were real problems with this project. I won't reveal the man's name. I just call this man the groundhog, but mostly because he built a foundation perfect for groundhogs and he became one himself.

The Foundation of the Problem

I had never built a building or a foundation before this. The groundhog was a plumber/craftsman and offered to take the measurements of the shed. Well the measures were very off. 10' x 12' x 12' (3.04 x 3.66 x 3.66 m) to be exact. We went to Menards and bought the materials and laid a square foundation. Then we started assembling the shed. It QUICKLY became apparent this was not going to work.



[/media-credit] Our donated shed built by a workman we came to call the groundhog.

But the groundhog insisted he could make this work. So we modified the foundation to fit the 8' section on the east/west axis and that left a 2' (61 cm) deck to the north of the shed. Well the other mistake is that we left gaps in the foundation and built the floor deck over that. That made the shed foundation a MAGNET to real groundhogs, rabbits and the occasional rat. The shed went up in one day. The roofing went up the next day. And voila! We had a shed at the southwest corner of Mezzacello.



[/media-credit] The foundation of the shed, poorly measured.

A week after the shed was completed is when the Groundhog told us he had been evicted from his apartment. Having no ID or bank account was an issue for him. Then there was the prison record and the fact that his license was suspended, so he could not drive. We offered to let him crash in the shed. That night we found all of his possessions in the shed. Over the summer we got the house painted, and we organized all the wood and tools. But once he was ensconced in that shed it was almost impossible to evict the groundhog. It's not like there was a lease. It was a man crashing in my shed.

Things Get Worse

That's when we uncovered the heroin addiction. That was a very hard and dark day. I knew that there was a very real issue of opioid addiction in Ohio. But I did not expect to see it so intimately. We were ignorant and naive. We also discovered the massive theft of equipment that was happening as the groundhog was selling equipment at pawn stores for liquid cash. My first instinct was empathy and concern. My second instinct was anger and concern. We offered to help him get treatment. He refused. He'd avoid us all day and then at night come around and steal equipment, bikes, rifle through cars on the street. This went on for three days until we finally had to get authorities involved. He was escorted off the property by police. But still he came back. We were unaware that he had the code to the digital lock on the house. We caught him on camera in the house and that was that. I got in touch with his brother and asked him to come and collect the groundhog.

It's one of the saddest stories I have at Mezzacello. It leaves me conflicted. I struggle between my desire to help and my naive ignorance that everyone's motivation is equal and positive. I have made poor choices. I created Mezzacello to be a learning lab for education but this was a wicked and heartbreaking lesson to learn. I am checking my privilege. I am owning my mistakes, assumptions, and ignorance. The shed still stands. But my heart breaks every time I think of its' pedigree. Eventually I will replace it completely. But waste not want not today is my motto. It is functional and a testament to the human condition. Useful, fragile, full of hope and potential and good intentions but subject to sadness, pain and hubris. Lesson learned. But my optimism to help others remains. I am just wiser and more sophisticated about it.

Stay there for each other. Be there for others. At some point you have to show up for yourself as well. My instinct remains, don't build a wall, build a bigger table. But demand honesty, dignity, and respect at that table.

Urban Farm, Urban Problems

Urban Farm, urban problems vandals, theft and working out the path of sustainability and ecosystems. We rebuild and keep working.