



“Volunteers are architects every time they choose to spend an evening making someone else’s burden a little lighter.”

– Katie Shaw Thompson for “The Warm Hearth”



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Thank you to our friends
from Willow Creek
Church for helping carry
someone else’s burden
and for continuing to
build a more welcoming
Northern Kane County,
one meal at a time.

Foreword

Communities don't simply happen. The best ones are built, patiently and intentionally, by people who often never receive much recognition. Sometimes they are elected leaders or nonprofit founders. Sometimes they are the neighbor who organizes the block party, the volunteer who keeps showing up, or the family that always seems to have room for one more chair at the table. Some lived generations before us. Others live just down the street.

Katie is one of those builders.

As she writes, every one of us is shaping the places we inhabit. With our choices, our generosity, our attention, and our willingness to welcome someone new, we're deciding what kind of communities we'll leave behind. Every invitation we extend, every institution we strengthen, every neighbor we choose to notice helps determine whether someone finds a place at the table or remains outside looking in.

It's worth asking ourselves what kind of place we're building. Is it a community where people instinctively make room for one another? Or one where too many are left wondering whether there is room for them at all?

-Brian J. Piñon

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What I Want to Be When I Grow Up

Katie Shaw Thompson

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My boys are eleven and thirteen, and lately our dinner table conversations have been filled with the future.

They wonder what kind of work they'll do someday. One day it's engineering, another day it's law, and every so often one of them announces that becoming a YouTube star still sounds like a perfectly reasonable plan. They talk about whether they'll get married, whether they'll have children, or whether they'll have dogs. Their futures are still wonderfully open, and they wear that uncertainty with a kind of excitement that only children seem able to manage.

What I Want to Be When I Grow Up (Continued)

I remember being their age.

The world felt impossibly large then. Every direction seemed available, and choosing one felt both exhilarating and overwhelming. Adults would ask what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I always tried to answer as though they were asking about a profession.

I wanted to be a writer, a teacher, or, for a while, a lawyer.

Looking back, I don't think any of those answers were quite right.

What I wanted, though I didn't yet have the words for it, was to make the world a little kinder than I had found it.

In some ways, I've become all of those things. I have written for most of my life. I've taught in classrooms, conference rooms, and community meetings. I've led organizations, advocated for neighborhoods, worked alongside elected officials, and spent countless hours around tables where people wrestled with problems that seemed far too large for any one person to solve.

For a long time I thought those were separate chapters of my life.

Now I think they've all been leading toward the same vocation.

It has taken me 40-some years to get a little more clarity on what I want to be when I grow up.

I want to be an architect.

Not the kind who designs beautiful homes or soaring civic buildings, although I have enormous admiration for people who do. I mean something a little less visible.

I want to help design the systems that shape the lives we live together.

Every community has an architecture, whether anyone intended it or not. It is found in the way schools connect with families, in the way neighbors know one another, in the ease or difficulty of finding affordable housing, in the strength of local institutions, and in what happens when someone's life begins to unravel.

What I Want to Be When I Grow Up (Continued)

Those systems determine whether a difficult season remains a difficult season or becomes a catastrophe.

They determine whether someone finds help before despair, whether a veteran waiting for housing has a safe place to sleep, whether a mother escaping violence has somewhere to take her children, whether a person recovering from addiction has enough stability to begin again. They determine whether first responders have somewhere to bring someone in crisis besides a waiting room or a jail cell.

We often imagine compassion as an individual act: a meal, a blanket, or a generous check. Those things matter deeply.

But compassion can also be designed.

A well-built community quietly carries people through the hardest seasons of their lives. It creates pathways instead of dead ends. It catches people before they fall so far that hope begins to feel naïve. That is the architecture I want to help build here in Northern Kane County.

Not because homelessness is someone else's problem, but because it's everyone's. Economic hardship, illness, divorce, disability, addiction, mental illness, a lost job, an unexpected diagnosis—most of us are far closer to one of those realities than we'd like to admit. The distance between stability and crisis is often measured in months, not decades.

The communities that flourish are not the ones that pretend those things never happen.

They are the ones that decide, together, what will happen when they do.

The older I get, the more convinced I become that architecture belongs to all of us.

Teachers are architects, even if they never draw a blueprint. They help build lives one classroom at a time.

Neighbors are architects when they decide a street should become a community instead of a collection of houses.

What I Want to Be When I Grow Up (Continued)

Business owners are architects when they create opportunities that allow families to remain rooted where they live.

Volunteers are architects every time they choose to spend an evening making someone else's burden a little lighter.

Even writers are architects when we imagine new worlds.

Thirty-six years ago, a handful of people answered a knock on a church door because they believed no one should have to sleep outside for one more night. I doubt they imagined that simple act would become the foundation of an organization that has served thousands of people over the decades that followed.

They probably didn't think of themselves as architects.

They were.

Lately I've been thinking about architecture in another way, too.

We haven't yet written about it much. But Brian and I recently became the stewards of a mid-century home together with both history and design lines we adore. We've spent considerable time deciding where a dining table should go, how people will move through the rooms, where conversations naturally gather, and how guests might feel the moment they step through the front door.

From the beginning, we brought our shared value of creating community. We aren't just designing a home. We're trying to create a place where people linger, where neighbors feel welcome, and where children would remember laughter around a table. We are well aware that we are creating our real-life warm hearth.

Maybe this is the through line for me. Whether it's a home, a neighborhood, a shelter, a school, or an entire community, I'm drawn to building places where people belong.

I still want to be a writer.

What I Want to Be When I Grow Up (Continued)

Stories help us imagine worlds before we know how to build them.

I still hope to become a little more at ease than I am today.

There is something holy about becoming the kind of person who no longer mistakes urgency for purpose.

But at heart, I think I've finally found the answer to that childhood question.

Wherever it takes me, I'm a hearth builder.

Sometimes that has meant nurturing a whole congregation of people.

Sometimes it has meant leading a classroom of eighth graders learning grammar.

Today it means helping design a better response to homelessness.

I think it will always mean writing a story that helps someone imagine a more compassionate future.

They're all the same work, really.

They're all acts of architecture.

Because everyone deserves a warm hearth.



This post was originally featured at:
<https://thewarmhearth.substack.com/p/what-i-want-to-be-when-i-grow-up>

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