

Helping the Bush Boys?

In the summer of 2003, a mom named Tami who lives in the small town of Vernon, Ontario, noticed two unusual-looking teenage boys camping in the woods behind a grocery store.¹ After a few days, Tami approached the boys to see if they were homeless and if they needed help. The boys told Tami that they had been raised by their parents deep in the Canadian forest, off the grid and totally isolated from outside society. They told her that their parents disowned them and kicked them out of the house, because the boys wanted to become vegetarian. With nowhere to go, and no experience of society, they wandered into Vernon, where they either begged for money or did small tasks to scrape together enough for food. Tami was worried about the boys, especially as the harsh winter approached. She and many other town residents generously helped the boys—getting them a room in a local hostel, and supplying them with food and other basic needs—while trying to secure long term help and find the boys’ parents. However, other town residents wanted more information about the boys before agreeing to help.

In fact, it was all a hoax. The “Bush Boys” as they came to be known, or Kyle and Roen Horn, were actually raised in California in a loving, middle-class family. They had run away mainly because they wanted to be on their own, away from their parents’ authority. Ironically, when Tami first approached them, they were about ready to give up and head home because they were facing cold weather and dwindling resources. But thanks to the community’s support, they stayed for several more months, building relationships with many who grew to care about them, nearly all of whom were devastated when they learned the truth. Tami said that she didn’t regret helping the boys, even though they had taken advantage of her and other community members. However, other people felt manipulated because the boys misrepresented themselves and perpetuated a lie.

Tami’s situation illustrates that with some types of charity, there can be a tension between caring for and enabling people. Tami’s care enabled Kyle and Roen’s lies. This tension drives arguments that many make with regards to giving money to those who are struggling. Some argue that such giving could prevent a person from seeking better and more permanent support for their problems. Others see the act of giving a small amount of money as not really being about the consequences of the action but about demonstrating care and communicating acknowledgement of the dignity of a person who is struggling.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Even though she couldn’t have known the truth at the time, looking back, was Tami wrong to help and support the boys? If she could go back in time and act differently, should she?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between the goodness of an act of charity and what a donation is used for?
3. How can we draw a principled line between caring for people and enabling them?

¹ <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Wild-boys-saga-turns-out-to-be-hoax-by-2-2799402.php>; <https://www.campsidemedia.com/shows/wild-boys>

