

## JIM O'CONNELL

Jim O'Connell once found himself sitting on a panel with Paul Farmer. They were both Harvard-trained doctors committed to wringing privilege out of their lives for the benefit of those who had none. But the similarities seemed to end there. Farmer had traveled the globe working to improve public health, from Haiti to Peru to Rwanda. He told the crowd that O'Connell was “this poor doctor who never got more than a mile from his medical school.”

Farmer quickly made his admiration for O'Connell clear, saying, “He’s seeing in Boston what we’re seeing in Haiti.” Still, it’s never easy to hear that the reach of your life’s work can best be measured in feet — especially when the person holding the measuring tape is famous on multiple continents. O'Connell, who has spent four decades providing medical care to homeless people in Boston, never felt close to being in Farmer’s league.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder and his legions of readers would disagree. Farmer, who died suddenly in 2022, was the subject of Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. Kidder went on to give O'Connell the same treatment, making him the focus of his book *Rough Sleepers*, which was released in January.

The toughest part of the past year for O'Connell has been all the attention the best-selling book has thrust on him. Yet, the soft-spoken 75-year-old says any discomfort has been worth it. He senses that it has reduced some of the nation’s indifference around homelessness and increased its reservoir of empathy. “More people,” O'Connell says, “realize that many homeless people are just like us, with a little twist.”

In 1985, after finishing his residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, O'Connell agreed to a one-year stint at the new Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program. He soon realized he was in over his head. Barbara McInnis, the nurse who trained him on how to care for homeless people — starting by soaking their feet — told him he could do his best work in “blessed obscurity.”

O'Connell embraced that message, and never left. He and his team developed an approach that delivered both dignity and continuity of care. They put homeless people on their board of directors, started a mobile unit to meet people



where they were, and created the nation’s first computerized medical records for a homeless program as well as the first medical respite unit (as a step-down for patients moving from the hospital to a shelter).

O'Connell’s devotion was all-consuming. He put off marriage and fatherhood until late in life. “In 2013, I turned 65 and got my Medicare card,” he says. “And six months later, I had a kid.” It was only after he got sick in 2019 that he learned how to balance work and family. Recovering at home in Jamaica Plain allowed him to spend more time with his wife, Jill, and their daughter, Gabriella. His health has improved, but he now knows better than to surrender the gift of putting his

daughter to bed each night.

With characteristic humility, O'Connell admits that the homeless crisis seems only more daunting to him today than it did 40 years go. But he offers sensible advice for how each of us might engage with the homeless individuals we encounter: Pick one or two people a day. Make eye contact, treating them like the fellow human beings that they are. Consider handing them a Dunkin’ gift card for \$5, so they can get a hot coffee and have access to a restroom.

It’s classic O'Connell, a man who has spent his life walking the walk, listening to people who sleep on pavement, rather than looking down on them — or just looking away. — Neil Swidey

THEY MADE  
BOSTON AND  
BEYOND BETTER  
IN 2023.

THE  
GAME  
**CHANGERS**