

EDITORIAL

This village mustn't turn a blind eye to its neighbors

Imagine a village that, due to circumstances beyond its borders, had several thousand people living without housing.

In response, the village established an array of services and shelter for its citizens. Over time it became clear that the services offered were simply not enough to maintain individuals and families needs. Those who could not take care of themselves began to fall through the cracks. Many of the disabled and elderly scrambled to obtain services. People dealing with mental health problems were left out in the cold. Families trying to stay together did everything in their power to maintain a dignified life despite their

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circumstances. In one year, 47 people without shelter died.

In response to the crisis a group of citizens created their own makeshift refuge. Installing tents and canopies on a plot of land to better serve those without shelter, the small group created a safe place for people to exist

until services became available.

Many people in the village who had no resources and cared for the poor believed the group's actions were justified and held them up as heroes. Others believed the group to be rogue and an eyesore for the community.

Villagers were conflicted. On one hand, the group was creating a safe place for people to be. The group was orderly and maintained basic principles and standards that held people accountable. On the other hand, the group was unconventional, and viewed as an obstruction to progress and new development that would help increase the livability for the rest of the village.

To make matters more complicated, the owner of the plot of land where the refuge was set up was seen as a villain by the village's leaders and many in the public eye.

In the end, the refuge was deemed illegal and fined for existing. The group responded by suing the village through a democratic process to be allowed to exist. Those who believed the group should be disbanded or moved out of the public's eye began to organize against the group, putting public pressure on the village leaders to take care of the situation.

Village leaders sent mixed messages. Some believed the group was doing good work. Some exalted its work during local elections as being a solution, while others either ignored or worked to disband the group by demanding the one thing it didn't have: money. There were no clear outcomes or leadership toward a compromise, splitting public opinion and giving people on all sides of the issue anxiety over what the solution might actually be.

Over time people grew tired and weary, especially during the cold, hard winter months — both at the refuge and in the village. Some took it as a sign of hope for the people without shelter, while others grew cynical and believed that nothing good would come of the situation.

The village is Portland, Oregon, and the refuge is Right 2 Dream Too, a tent city created to serve people experiencing homelessness. The City of Portland should work to find a solution.

Real relief is still worth pursuing

Homelessness in our community and cities throughout the country has become the new normal. That's a

problem.

Three decades ago, the federal government began slashing housing and mental health programs. The bleeding has never stopped. The rise of modern-day

homelessness in the 1980s came with a response of anger and concern by many people living in urban environments who believe that no human being should be without shelter and housing.

During that time we've seen many progressive local communities work to backfill the loss of federal and state dollars. We now stand on a dangerous and blurry line that has local communities fatigued and questioning how many resources it will actually take to tackle the problem.

Entire generations are now born into a time when homelessness is built into the fabric of urban living. It's no longer abnormal to see a homeless person in a doorway on your way to work or school. Individuals and families may have different responses to homelessness itself, but ultimately the idea of actually ending homelessness on a massive scale feels like a long shot to many.

When I started this work 15 years ago, I was astounded at the reality of poverty. I'm an optimist, but I couldn't understand why people didn't recognize the inhumane treatment of people experiencing

homelessness. People were sick, the elderly uncared for, the mentally ill ignored. People died, and society and people in power didn't seem to care. At least that's how I internalized it. I protested. I got arrested. I swam against the current and raged against the machine for not offering enough resources to combat poverty in our community.

Those turbulent emotions continue to this day. But so does the optimism. Working on the front lines of poverty you become a shell of your former self and realize that if you're working for long-term change that it's a marathon and not a sprint. You have to find a way to work with others and find ways to inspire change in the community. For every tragedy that occurs on the streets, there's someone who overcomes his or her circumstance, sometimes against all odds.

I believe that we as a community, and specifically our local and state government, are at a crossroads. The one thing we know is that real relief from the feds isn't coming to solve this problem. As we move forward with new leadership and a changing economy — it's imperative that we don't lose any more ground on the poverty front.

With new legislative leadership in Oregon and a new mayor and council in Portland, with the shifting of local resources to and from different government bodies — we ask all of our elected representatives to prioritize poverty in not only the upcoming budget, but in the next decade. We look to our leaders to go above and beyond the normal speak and to do great things on the poverty front. This is no time to give up.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org

In Remembrance Of

By John Pinney

Unknown
They died without names
And each year we take a day

Unknown
To remember and cherish
Those who were taken without

Unknown
Name, voice, or identity
Struck down for lack of conformity

Unknown
In a pew, at this mass of remembrance
Forgotten names that tear at my chest like lead

Unknown
A cold comfort to give you grace now
Someone who died to inspire my tomorrow.

Unknown dedication
To my transgender brothers and sisters lost
To a crucible of fire

Unknown
May we burn brighter still, those left behind
And to your true name, whatever that may be,
bring honor

Unknown

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Send letters to the editor to the Street Roots office, 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209, or e-mail to joanne@streetroots.org.

Our mission

Street Roots creates income opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and poverty by producing a newspaper and other media that are catalysts for individual and social change.

Street Roots publishes every two weeks, launching on Fridays, and is available exclusively through our street vendors or by subscription. We are proud members of the North American Street Newspaper Association and the International Network of Street Papers.

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Street Roots Rose City Resource

Street Roots publishes the Rose City Resource, a comprehensive booklet of services for people experiencing homelessness and poverty. To inquire about getting an order of the Rose City Resource for distribution, please write to pdxrosecityresource@gmail.com. Resources are also available online at www.rosecityresource.org.

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