

Answering the big question: Why I'm here

BY ANDY KO
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

When the dust settles following any significant change in my life — a new job, a new home, a birth, a death — my mind starts asking me questions. I blame my father for this. They are mostly his questions. My mind sometimes even poses them with his slight

Korean accent. "How did you get here?" "Why are you here?" "What are you going to do?" "How are you going to do it?" "What then?" He was one of those people who believed that we are the sum of our experiences

and that those experiences are determined by the choices we make. He could be a real pain in the butt. More than 20 years after his death, I am still asking his questions.

I left Manhattan six weeks ago, with my wife and daughter, to live in Oregon and become executive director of Partnership for Safety and Justice. For me, returning to the Pacific Northwest and joining PSJ feels like a homecoming. After law school, I spent eight years representing homeless families in NYC. Some of these families were together — parents, children, sometimes grandparents — seeking shelter and spending days, or even weeks, sleeping on blankets and flattened cardboard boxes in a 24 hour city welfare office. Other families had already lost children to the foster care system. They were trapped between city bureaucracies: one agency demanding that they have housing to get their children back, the other requiring them to already have their children back to get into a shelter.

From these hundreds of families I learned that there is a "system." It affects

how each of us goes through life by defining our range of choices. Those choices — and what happens when we make the wrong choice — widen or narrow based on where we were born, who our parents were, the color of our skin, the language we speak, whether we were lucky or not at some key point in our lives and who is deciding whether to reward, punish or ignore us. Some families were fleeing violence. Others had suffered a catastrophic illness, mental health crisis or addiction of a family member that had thrown them deeper into poverty. Some had lost a breadwinner to prison — usually for committing an illegal act to put food on the table and pay rent. The system had squeezed them until homelessness was the only choice left — and then the system treated them as if they had chosen to be homeless. The system intentionally made what one homeless services official called a "bed of nails" for these families to force them off their blankets and cardboard mats, back into the street.

No one wanted this, not even the agency that created the bed of nails. But the system demanded it. I continued to see the system at work while representing low-income clients in Seattle and later doing drug policy work at the American Civil Liberties Union and the Open Society Foundation. It is sustained by fear and our collective unwillingness to confront suffering and work toward a solution in which we all share responsibility. I believe that NYC homeless services workers chose to implement policies that treated homeless clients horribly, in part, because they knew they were themselves just a paycheck away from homelessness. Homeowners and local businesses demanded the arrest of neighborhood drug users and sellers because they saw no other way to protect

their investments. Fear created the system; fear maintains it.

That is one reason — the main reason — why my decision to return to the Pacific Northwest was easy. Partnership for Safety and Justice is a remarkable organization. It is confronting the system by seeking solutions that ensure public safety through shared responsibility. PSJ recognizes that accountability necessitates addressing the needs of crime survivors, resolving the causes of crime and restoring people who commit crimes to full social, economic and political participation. Our crime survivor program raises the voices of crime victims to demand that public resources be used for more than filling prison cells. Our engagement with youth, people of color, and local communities organizes the people most heavily impacted both by crime and the criminal justice system. Our goal is to demand real solutions, not more of the same politically motivated get-tough responses that fail families and damage communities.

So, at this point, I can answer one of the questions: "Why are you here?" By coming here and joining with PSJ's staff and allies, I will contribute to change that transforms the bed of nails criminal justice system that we have created over the past four decades and help to establish a public safety system that makes us stronger and provides solutions that are both effective and fair. I am grateful for the opportunity and look forward to the experience.

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PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY and JUSTICE

Andy Ko is the Executive Director of Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide, non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.

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15

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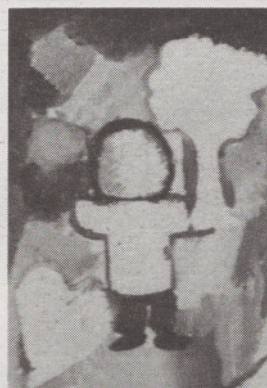


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