

Power in the printed word

'House Keys Not Handcuffs' is an insightful testimony to the trials and triumphs of the homeless

BY PAUL VON BLUM
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Paul Boden's "House Keys Not Handcuffs," a dramatic and disconcerting book on homeless organizing, art and policy in San Francisco and elsewhere, begins with a personal quotation that puts homelessness in the compelling human perspective it demands: "Holy shit, it is time to go home, and I got nowhere to go."

Millions of women, men and children live precarious lives on American streets and shelters, tragically beyond the concern, empathy and often even awareness of the overwhelming majority of their more privileged fellow citizens. The plight of the homeless, for political "leaders," is mostly a mere annoyance. They are an irritant to public officials and a fruitful source of arrest statistics for police departments throughout the nation.

Far too many Americans avoid contact with homeless people, whom they regard as distasteful and inconvenient — unpleasant reminders of the huge gap in wealth and privilege in this country. Conservatives (and many others) like to tell themselves that homeless people are there by choice, simply because of their unwillingness to work hard, defer gratification and live according to society's rules and standards.

By emphasizing house keys instead of handcuffs in the title, Boden deliberately asks his readers to understand that the homeless need homes and serious social and public health services, not arrests, prosecution, police harassment and the continuing criminalization of the poor in America. This is a central theme of this powerful volume.

It calls justifiable and powerful attention to the long record of using laws against trespassing, panhandling, loitering, vagrancy, disorderly conduct and many other variants to punish poor people and exacerbate their misery and desperation. Drug and alcohol laws are also tools in the seemingly limitless arsenal of law enforcement authorities. Police officials likewise use injunctions and "orders to vacate" and regularly confiscate the meager possessions of the homeless, bringing additional despair to these marginalized human beings. With unaffordable fines and excessive bails, homeless people often spend time in local jails, adding criminal records to the already complex burdens of their lives. This makes it even more difficult for them to find employment and to obtain the medical and psychological services they require.

This criminalization reflects the national

mania for "broken windows" policing, which ostensibly focuses on small crimes like vandalism, public drinking and loitering in order to prevent more serious crimes. This is a transparent rationalization for social policies that reinforce racism, classism and economic injustice, including the appalling numbers of homeless people in America. Broken windows policing has led to such injustices as "stop and frisk" laws and other policies that disproportionately target people of color. At its worst, broken windows policing leads to the deaths of unarmed people. One of the most egregious examples occurred in 2014 when New York Police Department officers in Staten Island killed an African-American man with a chokehold after seeking to arrest him for allegedly selling loose cigarettes.

The book also provides a deeper understanding of the homelessness crisis in the Bay Area and, by extension, throughout the country. It provides a detailed narrative of the organizing and political activities of 30 years of homeless organizing in San Francisco. It offers an outstanding guide for contemporary activists about what has worked and what has not. It also discusses the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP), which was created to expose and eliminate the root causes of poverty and homelessness in that region.

In its decade of existence, WRAP has served as a model of community organizing that goes far beyond the single issue of not having houses for people experiencing massive poverty. Its broad-based focus on social justice addresses child abuse and domestic violence, downsizing and layoffs, racism, unlawful evictions and other illegal actions, government budget cuts, inadequate or nonexistent mental-health treatment and many related issues. WRAP has several constituent member groups, and its efforts go beyond the San Francisco Bay Area. This form of coalition building is a useful model for other activists seeking to change society at the grass-roots level, especially in a nation that has experienced its greatest degree of inequality of wealth and income in almost a century.

One striking feature of "House Keys Not Handcuffs" is the story of Street Sheet, told through a series of its articles from 1991 to 2014. Like Street Roots, Street Sheet is a street newspaper like that is published and sold in San Francisco that contains articles about the problems of the homeless population, along with dramatic graphics. Vendors sell the newspaper on the streets of San Francisco for \$1. The homeless and



PRINT BY ART HAZELWOOD

low-income vendors pay nothing for the papers and keep all the money they receive. These vendors are, in fact, men and women who are actually working.

Each month, Street Sheet reaches 32,000 readers and provides a voice for the voiceless. The paper encourages them to write about life, politics and anything else from their perspective. That vision is a conspicuous and dramatic contrast to the mainstream media in America.

The most engaging element of this book is its inclusion of 67 powerful pieces of art, making this volume a striking collection of contemporary, socially conscious art. These works are introduced in an essay by Art Hazelwood, "We Won't Be Made Invisible: Art of Homeless Activism." Hazelwood is a veteran artist/activist whose works have

See HOUSE KEYS, page 9