

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

September 6-13, 2018

CEDAR STREET SUMMIT - Part 6



“...LIKE THE SNAP OF A RABID DOG’S JAWS ON UNSUSPECTING PREY!”

By Wanda Sue Parrott

LOSING a friend to death is hard to handle, but when my friend is alive, homeless and vanishes, as happened when Summiteer CeliaSue Hecht disappeared last week, I was stunned.

If two words describe reaction to such loss, mine were: “What happened?”

In all “missing homeless friend” cases I’ve had since starting this column in October 2014, a common thread connects them all.

It’s summarized in one of two 11-word Articles of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” proclaimed on December 10, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations:

Article 3

Universal Declaration Of Human Rights

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

All non-deceased homeless people have life.

Most of them also have enough liberty to be free to move about as CeliaSue did.

What they lacked was “security of person.”

For instance, my three friends, whose names are changed to protect their privacy, were insecure in different ways.

Turn Back The Hands Of Time

The year was 2013 and Monterey's now-Vice-Mayor Timothy Barrett had just produced a symposium called "Homeless and Hungry in Paradise" at Monterey Peninsula College that focused on the Monterey Peninsula's unacknowledged homeless population.

Mandy, 82, was one of them.

We met at a church potluck. She was as well-spoken as she was attractively dressed, and I'd not have guessed she was homeless if she hadn't told a tablemate, "I'm not safe at night in my van."

"Are you homeless?" I asked, astonished.

She said yes, and told me how numerous items were stolen from her van on different occasions, including jewelry, clothing and underwear.

I invited Mandy to my home to take a shower and sleep overnight on my couch.

She said a 10-year plan on ending homelessness was proposed at the symposium and invited me to be a guest at two organizations in which she was involved to help bring adequate shelter to homeless women on the peninsula.

End Homelessness By 2023!

First group we visited was Homeless Outreach, which still meets at the First Presbyterian Church in Monterey one Monday per month. Next two meetings are at 1 p.m., Sept. 17 and Oct. 15. Details from slarson2130@gmail.com.

Second meeting was Friends of Homeless Women, outreach arm for the Fund for Homeless Women, started by Kathy Whilden, Marian Penn and Father Michael Reid, an Episcopalian priest. They still meet the last Wednesday per month at St. Mary's by the Sea Episcopal Church in Pacific Grove. Next meeting is September 26, 10 a.m.-11:30 a.m. Topic will be Homelessness among College Students. Details from wildini@aol.com.

Mandy captivated audiences as she explained that not all homeless women are alcoholics or drug addicts, or mentally ill despite public opinion to the contrary.

Mandy was trusted by just about everyone she met, and was often invited to house-sit or pet-sit in exchange for sleeping indoors instead of in her vehicle.

The Invisible Killer

Mandy was house-sitting the summer afternoon our friendship died instantly. Like the snap of a rabid dog's jaws clamping onto unsuspecting prey, she killed it!

I had gone to pick her up to go out to lunch. Instead of answering the door, she was in the shower. I could hear her screaming and yelling, so hailed a passing neighbor and we were trying to get in when Mandy answered the door in a towel.

The neighbor left me alone as Mandy, livid with rage, accused me of being a government agent trying to rape her with an invisible weapon aimed at an implant in her brain.

"This is America," she shouted. "This should not be happening here!"

True, I thought. It shouldn't be happening.

Mandy's genuine terror at the sight of me morphed into blank stares from her once sparkly blue eyes. She ended up accusing me of stealing her things.

Mental disease is an invisible killer.

Schizophrenia destroyed our friendship but left us both alive.

Mandy staunchly refuses to admit she has a mental illness.

Conversely, Samantha, 57, is a brain-cancer survivor who got hooked on opioids during recovery from surgery. After completing rehab, she was denied admittance into the Interim, Inc. housing program because, as she told me, "I don't have bi-polar disease or schizophrenia."

The last I knew, she was temporarily staying in a motel, following which, if no housing is found, she will be on the streets without a car.

Something's Wrong With The System. What Happened?

A third homeless friend was a legal livewire I'll call Starla who lived in her vehicle. She carried copies of laws wherever she went, and bent the ears of whoever would listen.

Starla was a survivor whom I last greeted at the 2017 Saint Patrick's Day party for seniors at the Oldemeyer Center in Seaside, where I saw her sneak in the back door without paying.

While couples whirled around the dance floor, Starla picked pieces of corned beef and cabbage from the plates of paying guests, thus enjoying a free lunch.

When I inquired at a Friends of Homeless Women meeting about what happened to her, I was told, "She was caught selling clothes she got free at Gathering for Women and isn't welcome any longer."

Homelessness is an insecure life for any woman, even gals like Starla who are career con artists!

CeliaSue Reappears

Good news! CeliaSue called and said that after she got the diagnosis her breast cancer had recurred, she and Cici went to Bakersfield. While sweltering in her van, she watched a man reach through the window, snatch her computer bag and flee. She wiped her tears and her resilient spirit sprang forth renewed. "I need housing!"

Indeed. She needs it NOW. By 2023, it may be too late!

Contact CeliaSue and Cici at 702-225-8206.

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Caption: This photo is a visual metaphor for the power insecurity-of-person has to kill relationships among the peninsula's mentally ill homeless population.

Photo courtesy of Clip Art

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