

FLASH
HOMELESS IN PARADISE
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IN OUR OWN BACKYARD – Part 33



Photo: Courtesy Google Free Images

WHICH ARE YOU: A WARRIOR OR A GUARDIAN?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

REACTING to the death of George Floyd this week, protestors dominated the news with marches demanding everything from ending racism to defunding the police. If black people hadn't inspired me to write a poem almost sixty years ago, I might have retired as a Warrior rather than a Guardian.

In 1962, I was preparing to apply to become a juvenile officer with the Bakersfield Police Department. My current duties were preparing officers' reports or going with detectives into the field to take statements, confessions, or deathbed declarations.

As an actual officer, I would have to wear a uniform and firearm. I might have to use it against people I liked, such as a particularly pleasant black woman named Lovie Mae Bailey.

Before Homeless Women Were Visible

In 1962, there were no visible homeless women on the streets; however, poor women used whatever was at their disposal for survival, and Lovie Mae was a legend in the Bakersfield Police Department.

She periodically committed a non-lethal offense, such as shoplifting, for which a team of officers transported her in a squad car from suburban black Cottonwood Road to the police station downtown.

She arrived in good humor, bearing a platter of homemade cookies for the chief and desk sergeant who booked her down to the lowly steno, me.

Inside gossips confided Lovie Mae had at least six kids, fathered by different men, and she collected welfare rumored to be \$600 per month per child.

Further, the truth I never tried to verify was that a Cadillac allegedly sat outside her dirt-floored hovel and the largest-screen then available color TV was indoors.

Only one fact was clear: the police were from and for white Bakersfield.

Lovie Mae and many of the other offenders I met on my 7:00 PM to 4:00 AM shift, and liked more than they did, were from non-white areas.

To protect them, I chose a pen over a gun and became a writer. Ink, not blood, flowed for the next six decades.

Homage To An Unknown Legend

Tuesday, after George Floyd's funeral in Houston, I Googled Lovie Mae Bailey on a whim and found her obituary in the May 23-24, 2003 edition of the *Bakersfield Californian*.

It said she was born May 15, 1922, and died May 14, 2003, at age 80. She left 9 children, 28 grandchildren, 41 great-grandchildren, and 1 great-great-grandchild.

Lovie Mae, this poem from 1962 is dedicated to you. May George Floyd's tragic death finally help us all awaken in our transition from warriorhood to guardianship of humanity.

NIGGERS

*It is 4:00 in the morning, and here am I
writing "Cry, oh cry, you niggers."
You who do the drinking and the driving,
You who do the cheating and the beating,
You who do the mugging and the drugging,
You who do the shilling and the killing,
You who do the selfsame old repeating,
You lie and you lie and you cry
"You motherfuckers, you've got the wrong guy!"
A nigger is not a race or a face,
It is anyone who will not turn back
whose soul is black.*

~ Wanda Sue Childress (1962)

This book review about homeless black women in Washington, D.C., in 1992, reflects the difference three decades made as women on the street became common sights all across the country.

Book Review By Nellie Ryder

(From Women's International League for Peace & Freedom Newsletter)

TELL THEM WHO I AM - The Lives of Homeless Women,

by Elliott Liebow, Free Press, 1993, 350 pages, \$24.95.

The author of *Talley's Corner*, a 1960s social study of street corner black men, has written of homeless women in shelters near Washington D.C., how they interact with each other and their family and shelter staff; how they spend their days and struggle to maintain dignity.

These are not the usual homeless for they remain connected with society even though they have become homeless.

For most, life has always been a struggle with being poor and powerless, but they have kept contacts with family: parents, siblings, children, sometimes husbands, who, through their own poverty or dysfunctionality can no longer support them.

Some go home to visit, or have relatives call at The Refuge to give money or clothes—rarely to give affection or hope.

The jobs for which they qualify pay too little to exist off the streets; for many, government assistance is frustrating, misunderstood or demeaning.

With their own words, twenty women become the heart of Liebow's work evolving from his volunteering at The Refuge (a 7 a.m.–7 p.m. shelter) when he gave up his anthropologist career with the National Institute of Mental Health when he learned he had cancer.

Shelter quality varies greatly. Non-profit shelters staffed by volunteers are the best, say the women; municipal or private-for-profit were rated low.

Those who stay on the streets at night do so out of fear. “The shelter staff are afraid of the homeless and the homeless are afraid of the staff. Citizens, merchants, householders and whole communities fear the homeless and the homeless fear the non-homeless citizens. . . and the homeless are afraid of the homeless.”

And what is so terrible and intractable about this... “is that everyone is right to be afraid.”

In the words of Queen, “The street is safer because you can run away from crazy people.”

Appendices containing the women's life histories, social services described, and where the women are now (1992).

Shelter At Last

Almost three decades later, the first local shelter for homeless women and children broke ground on June 4, 2020, in Seaside. Co-partners Community Human Services and the Gathering for Women announced the Olympia Shelter facility at 1292 Olympia Avenue has been renamed Casa de Noche Buena.

As to Lovie Mae Bailey, back in 1962, I was told, “It's possible she makes more per month than the Chief of Police because she knows how to play the system.”

So do some homeless women today!

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