

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 34



Photo: Courtesy Google Free Images

HOW HOMELESS BLACK WOMEN'S LIVES HAVE CHANGED

By Wanda Sue Parrott

REACTING to the death of George Floyd last week, mobs of mostly peaceful protestors around the world marched in Black Lives Matter demonstrations despite the Covid-19 pandemic during the Trump White House term.

If this were 60 years ago, when I was young, few white faces would have been among the protestors, but now people of every beautiful skin color filled my TV screen. Most, but not all, were young people bearing banners reading everything from “Get Off Our Necks” to “End White Supremacy.”

Rather than march on foot at age 85, I drove among them along Canyon Del Rey, honking my horn in support as I remembered the first poor black woman I ever met.

It was 1962 and I was training to become a juvenile officer in a white Southern California Police Department during the Kennedy White House.

My job was preparing officers' in-station reports or accompanying detectives into the field to take statements, confessions, or deathbed declarations. As an actual officer, I would have to wear a uniform and carry a loaded firearm I might have to use against people whose statements I took in shorthand.

I particularly liked a fortyish woman I'll call Loviejoy Jones who was officially identified as “NFA” (standard abbreviation for Negro Female Adult). In those days, no such term as racial profiling was used and the term Black has now replaced Negro in common usage. Loviejoy reputedly lived in a dirt-floored shack in the district I'll call “Ragtree Road.” According to her 2003 obituary, she died at 80 after spending 60 years in the segregated community, leaving 79 descendants.

Homeless Women Then vs. Now

Back in the early 1960s, there were no visible homeless women like those classified in the 2019 Monterey County Homeless Census & Survey, which lists 2,422 homeless persons, 35 percent of whom are women (848).

Half Monterey County's estimated homeless women are white, (424); 20%, (170) are mixed-race; 25% (212) are black; only 2% (42) are American Indian and Alaska Native.

In 1962, needy minority women survived within the segregated framework of white-dominated society by using whatever systems were available, creating their own rules and codes of conduct.

Loviejoy Jones, NFA

Loviejoy periodically committed a petty, non-lethal offense, for which a team of officers transported her in a squad car for booking in the police station downtown.

Always smiling, she arrived with a platter of fresh-baked homemade cookies for the cops. My lifelong love of ginger cookies is directly attributable to her sugar-coated chews and attitude that made her seem grateful to visit the station.

Loviejoy's independent "voice" inspired me to move north to Monterey and find mine by becoming a writer rather law enforcer who might have to shoot her if she pushed white man's constraints too far.

I arrived in Monterey during the Jazz Festival in September 1962. Three years, later I won the title of Poet Laureate Runner Up of the Monterey Peninsula in the Monterey Peninsula *Herald's* annual contest during the Johnson White House.

This Etheree-form poem is dedicated to Loviejoy Jones and all poor and homeless women trying to survive, When I first came here in 1962, such shelters as this one, along with tents and corrugated metal shacks, existed in Sand City and Seaside on beach strands where businesses now stand.

Homeless Woman's View

*They
paid twelve
bucks for the
Charity Tour.
American Dream:
Fine homes for everyone.
Persian Rugs, Hand-cut Crystal,
Porcelain Under Glass, Silver Spoons.
Genteel twitter spilled aahing, oohing.
No one lined up to view my cardboard shack.*

The Lanterman Act

Following California's passage of the controversial, historic Lanterman Act, the blame for homelessness is often placed erroneously on Ronald Reagan. It was introduced in 1973, during the Reagan governorship, but passed in 1977, during Jerry Brown's first term as California's governor, during the Carter White House. Among other provisions, mental patients of all ethnic and racial backgrounds gained the right to choose where to live and with whom.

After patients opted to leave mental institutions, the first wave of homeless women started appearing on California streets and nationwide, as reflected in this 1992 book which gives them voice practically in the shadow of the Clinton White House.

(continued)

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 30 more years later, the first Monterey Peninsula shelter for homeless women and children of all racial and ethnic backgrounds finally 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.

We vote in November. Which White House will you choose?

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About this Column: “Homeless in Paradise” is a free public service self-funded and produced by the author. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this column appears regularly on the last week of each month in the Cedar Street Times at www.cedarstreettimes.com (and as periodic FLASH columns like this one).

It also appears on Facebook, in Next Door and on private email lists. If interested in being added to the list, submit your request to the contact info below.)

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