

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

December 11-17, 2020

IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 59



*the man's silhouette
appeared as the sun went down
on the vacant dune
I was parked below
watching from Robert's Lake lot
while he scoped the camp
in a slow-dance mime
he kicked sand and picked through trash
hurled an old bike frame
a flashing red light
blinked a message from his wrist
like a semaphore
he pulled on a shirt
walked in circles tore it off
then lowered his pants
a girl rode her bike
off the road into the brush
heading toward the dune
night shift had begun
rubbish raiders went to work
sorting through the spoils*

WHERE DO THE HOMELESS GO WHEN THEY NEED TO BE COUNTED?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

IGNORING homelessness isn't an option; counting the homeless in your community is crucial. If the number of homeless people in your own backyard is unknown, federal funding to cover their costs could—and might—fall on you!

Why?

Because federal dollars to cover homeless costs depends on how many there are, based on actual head counts, such as those submitted from the biennial event colloquially called "the Homeless Census."

I volunteered as a homeless census taker in 2015. We gathered before dawn at the Salvation Army campus in Seaside and were assigned to teams that learned how, for one day, to spot and count the unsheltered people. We were led by formerly homeless people with inside info.

To be or not to be a census taker this year? That was my question. Is it yours, too?

Why The Homeless Are Hard To Count

HUD says only those who are actually identified qualify as unsheltered homeless, in direct contrast to educational institutions' formulae that consider as homeless all students who stay with friends or relatives; also, those who double up, couch surf, live multi-familied or in vehicles (considered sheltered-yet-homeless).

Here's a sneak peek at what you might encounter if you hunt for the homeless.

Brief Overview Of My 1-Person Surveillance Squad

Conducting my solo 2-square-mile surveillance squad's pre-census homeless count in Seaside started at 6:37 a.m., Mon., Nov. 23.

The sun wasn't yet up as I headed to the post office on Broadway to see if a homeless woman was still there from over the weekend.

All clear.

At Seaside Dollar Tree, two vans were parked by identical signs that read: "NO OVERNIGHT PARKING — UNAUTHORIZED VEHICLES WILL BE TICKETED/TOWED AT OWNER'S EXPENSE."

One van was maroon; the other, painted like camo, had a sign on its driver's side: Don't count the days—make the days count.

There was no sign of humans, but a block north in the former Salvation Army Thrift Store lot I saw a broad array of cardboard boxes, shopping carts piled with items and three shadowlike people cleaning up to clear out for the day.

"Hi," I said through the open window. "I'm Wanda. I'm a reporter, and I don't want to intrude in your privacy, but wonder if I may ask a couple of questions."

"OK," one man said, resting on his broom.

"Are you homeless?"

'Yes.'

The tiny little wrinkled lady between them nodded her hoodie in silence.

"Yes," the tallest man said, placing his folded sleeping bag atop neat military-style squared blankets on his cart.

"If given the chance to have shelter, would you take it?" I asked.

There was a pause, silence, and then the eldest turned from the headlights and continued sweeping. "We, uh, we might consider it."

Trash At The End Of The Road

My rounds culminated at sundown on Sun., Dec.8 at Robert's Lake.

A sole male figure stood silhouetted in the now-empty homeless camp off the Highway 1 Exit 404 atop the dune whose Robert's Road-level sign stated: HABITAT PROTECTION AREA—DO NOT ENTER—VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED—CITY OF SEASIDE MUNICIPAL CODE 9.20.021.

While the violator rooted through trash, a red light flashed signals from his right wrist.

Below, at the end of the offramp Exit 406, a man in a knitted watch cap emerged and started rummaging through former campsite residents' stuff now strung out in piles stretching 1/3 of the way across the bridge over the culvert.

The same trash had sat there for more than 72 hours, so on Monday I e-mailed Seaside City Manager Craig Malin to ask what the city planned to do about it.

He responded, "The trash on the highway right-of-way is outside of Seaside's jurisdiction. It is Cal Trans property. We've asked them to clean it up."

I also questioned the right of homeless people to steal from other homeless people. According to Craig Malin, "Theft is theft. Whether a person is homeless or not is not a factor in whether a theft can be prosecuted."

Meanwhile, the genuine “homeless census” known as the 2020 Homeless Point in Time Count needs volunteers. If interested, mark your calendar for Wed., Jan. 27, 2021 and contact Coalition for Homeless Service Providers for details at <http://chsp.org/monterey-and-san-benito-county-homeless-census-reports/>

As to whether or not I will volunteer, I haven’t yet decided.

After two weeks of daily surveillance in my attempts to count actual homeless people, I think I might have seen between 20 and 24 actually identifiable physical homeless people, and I know that’s wrong!

###

CREDITS: Photo courtesy of Pixabay via Google Free Images. Art and senryu septet by Wanda Sue Parrott.

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).

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

Copyright 2020 by Wanda Sue Parrott

Contact Wanda Sue Parrott at 831-899-5887, amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com