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English 1B

19 May 2019

*Essay 4: A Society in Dire Need of Help*

Homelessness is more than statistics, these are real life people who struggle with addiction, mental health, physical disabilities, and financial problems. Just the other day I overheard a faint weeping sound of a man. When I turned around I seen a man in sweatpants that were covered in filth and a t-shirt with a huge hole in the bottom, leaving his belly exposed. He was bent over a burner phone and the contact read, “mom.” Every time he called you could hear, “I’m sorry, the person you are trying to reach is not available. Please try again or call back later. Goodbye. If you’d like to leave a message, please leave your message after the tone.” The poor man just sat at the feet of a mannequin and wept, getting sadder and sadder each time he tried to call his mother. His final attempt, he left a message. He started crying his eyes out while he started to speak into the small flip burner phone. He apologized for leaving his mother behind when she was sick to wander the streets and get high. He blamed everything on him, her illness, losing their home, pawning her jewelry for drug money. Lastly, he said, “Mom, I’m so sorry for leaving you to die. I should have been there when you took your last breath. I wanted to say goodbye. I’ll never get to say I love you!” At this point customers were staring at me as if his call to his mother affected them or as if he were a nuisance. As the gap between the top one percent and the poor keeps growing, homelessness has become more and more of an issue. These individuals are mistreated, often left to face the harsh elements of extreme heat or freezing temperatures. Many people turn a blind eye and pretend that these poor individuals don’t even exist. Most individuals would rather turn focus on snapping a picture of their food for Instagram or flaunting their new designer bags or foreign cars, than helping another human being out. It is time that the spotlight is shined towards those who are less fortunate than we are.

There are more and more homeless on the streets every day. According to Gale Holland of the Los Angeles Times, the number of those living on the streets of Los Angeles and LA County has increased seventy-five percent in the last six years. Last year, the number of individuals that lived on the street was a baffling fifty-eight thousand compared to the thirty-two thousand, six years prior. In 2017, there were approximately five-hundred and fifty-four thousand people who were experiencing homelessness in the United States. This number continues to grow daily. For this project, I decided to heighten my awareness of my surroundings at work. I work at the Target located on Foothill and Haven in Rancho Cucamonga. This store is a beacon for homeless activity in the area. Most nights, I see a homeless woman that resembles Goldie Hawn. She is always kind, but each day she looks more and more tired as if she had been baking in the heat all day long. I also encounter a Caucasian man who always wears a navy-blue sweatshirt and plaid pajama pants with beaten up tennis shoes. I even encounter a man who always has a polar pop cup in one hand and a flip phone in the other. He always sports a blue hoodie, dirty light-blue jeans, and sandals that look two sizes two big than his feet. He usually comes inside when it is too hot outside, or if it is too cold. When he wonders around the store, he always pretends to talk to someone on the phone. How did these individuals get to this point? What causes homelessness? If this lifestyle was a choice, what would bring them to choose to live on the streets?

One does not understand why an individual becomes homeless until it happens to them or a loved one. The person I decided to interview was my sister Sienna Smith. Her and I had recalled all of the events from her past starting with her first pregnancy. At the age of sixteen, my sister became pregnant with her oldest child named Madison. She loved her daughter so much, all though she had to drop out of high school to raise her. Sienna was a nurturing, selfless, caring young mother. When she was eighteen, she had her second child named Jamison. Financially, she could barely afford her one child. Having a second one soon became a burden. After she gave birth to Jamison, she suffered from Post-Partum depression. She went from a loving mother to someone that slept all day and acted like her children didn’t exist. At the age of nineteen, she gave up her rights and gave her children to my mother. Rather than caring for her children, she would go get high and roam the streets. After about a year and a half, I hear the sound of banging coming from the front door. When I opened the door, I seen my sister brutally beaten, with bruises, open wounds, broken bones, and blood everywhere. She was found by a woman, after being left for dead in the mountains. I called 9-1-1. My sister was on the verge of death and I didn’t know how to react. When she was taken to the hospital, they ran her name and found that she had a warrant out for her arrest. Right after the wounds were healed, my sister went to jail. When we visited her, she told us stories that sounded absolutely crazy. She was beaten over a missing bag of cocaine from her boyfriend she met on the streets. When she was released, she came home to live with us. She was just skin and bone, except she had a big belly. She was pregnant with her third child. My parents gave my sister an ultimatum to either go to rehab and therapy or go back to living on the streets. She refused to go to rehab but wanted to stay and put not only her own live in jeopardy, but all ours as well. She was kicked out of the house to live on the streets once again. After a few months went by, she called us begging my parents to pick her up from her boyfriend’s house. She was ready to go to rehab. When she sobered up, she became closer with God. She gave up her life on the streets and decided that she wanted to have her family back. She is now four years sober and has gained joint custody of her other two children. She is a proud mother of three, living her best-life in Palm Springs. Today, she gives back to the community by handing out cold waters, clothing, food, and blankets to those who live on the streets.

Those who reside on the streets, mostly suffer from mental illness. In the article titled, “Mental Illness Contributes to Homelessness,” Timothy Wild observes the surprising percentage of homeless population suffering from mental I illness. According to Timothy Wild, “Seventy-Five percent of the homeless population has a mental illness…” (Wild 2017). A plethora of homeless individuals have experienced emotional distress, physical health issues, and have dealt with substance abuse. Many of the homeless that you see by grocery stores, gas stations and highways are all products of either market failure or deinstitutionalization. Deinstitutionalization is the phenomenon when an individual with a mental illness is removed from a restrictive institution (mental hospital, rehabilitation center, jails, prisons, etc.), and is released into society. The lack of help outside of these facilities creates a limbo effect. Those who are institutionalized have a hard time coping in society. For example, if someone serves a ten-year sentence and is released a decade later, times would have changed. Life evolves outside, but the concrete walls inside do not. There needs to be more programs available that help individuals’ transition into society. With a criminal record, and or a mental/physical disorder, finding a job is near impossible. If it isn’t deinstitutionalization, it is market failure. When someone who suffers from a mental illness is laid off or faces a hike in rent, they tend to end up homeless. No one ever thinks of those who are disabled after their family dies. Once there is no one to care for them, where do they go? These individuals end up on the streets. When you have the brain functionality of a child and you are all alone with the elements, your disabilities tend to amplify. When those who are disabled are jobless, unable to properly care for themselves, or even cope with the loss of loved ones, what could they do? Seventy-Five percent of these individuals roam the streets. In the article titled, “Maternal Depression Is Homelessness Risk,” Lindsey Wahowiak touches on the topic of post-partum depression. According to Wahowiak, “A mother’s post-partum depression can put her family at risk for homeless…” (Wahowiak 2014). When a mother suffers from postpartum depression, her children are most likely to suffer from emotional and physical abuse. According to a study conducted by The Nation’s Health, “Women who suffer from postpartum depression have more than twice the odds of homelessness after three years of their child’s birth.” How is this fair? Mental health should never be ignored.

On Sunday, March 24, 2019, I interviewed a heavy-set middle-aged Caucasian woman dressed in a pair of over-worn light blue denim capris, a faded pink and white tie dye t-shirt, and a pair of blown out classic vans. Her eyes were a peculiar faint blue and her face was covered with sun spots and wrinkles. She had severely chapped lips and had teeth with tartar build up and decay. Her name was Sandra (Sandy for short). I was on my break at work. I am a Guest Service Team Member at Target. I had just closed self-checkout when she had asked me if I could take her because she liked to ring the items herself. I have always seen her, but never interacted with her besides the usual, “Hello,” or “Hi, how’s it going?” I had mentioned that I was observing homeless activity to better understand how one became homeless or how they lived day to day. At first, she refused, but she gave in after I mentioned that I’d only take five minutes of her time. I asked if she had struggled with any mental or physical disabilities. I’ll never forget what she said, “Never take your life for granted. If your heart is ever full of sorrow or you believe you hit rock bottom, know that things are far worse. Everyone deals with hardships. I used to envy those who were more fortunate than I was. To answer your question, after the death of my only son, I couldn’t face what the world had for me anymore. I fell in a deep depression and I just stopped working.” After she had lost her son, she couldn’t face the reality outside of her bed. As her bills piled up and her water and electricity were shut off, she felt like society was against her. I had one more question to ask her before she left, “Have you ever attempted suicide?” She explained that life became unbearable. She felt like it was her against the world. After her son died from a hit and run, she believed that life had nothing left for her. She attempted suicide by overdosing on a pharmaceutical cocktail inside of a Walgreens. She had taken a combination of sleeping pills, cough syrups, and muscle relaxers. She had stolen all of them, including the whiskey she used to down them with. The police were called, and she had been rushed to the hospital. She begged and pleaded to the officers to let her die. After the over-the-counter cocktail she downed, she soon found out that she had severely damaged her kidneys and liver. On top of all of that, she was committed into a mental institution and was charged for theft and assaulting a police officer. She served six-months in jail and was forced to see a psychiatrist. After she was released, she had a criminal record, major-health problems, and an eviction with severe debt. She had nowhere to go and she became homeless.

When hope feels lost and your heart fills with sorrow, know that there are others that experience far worse hardships than you do. Everyone has a story to tell. Instead of looking at the stories of celebrities, peers and close friends on Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat, turn your attention to those who wander the streets and sidewalks. Instead of hiding behind our screens, we should take actions to create a better community. I believe we all should play a role in helping those who are mentally ill transition into society. Between mental/physical disabilities and the strict rules of society, the quality of life tends to shift. We need to come together as a community and create change for those who call the streets their home.

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