

There are no homeless, only us.

Preface

I walk my dog, Brownie, a lot at San Pedro park. We have been walking at San Pedro Park for years. Over the course of those years I have seen the Park grow and change. It started with a concrete path encircling the Park, the installation of concrete benches and grill pits and the removal of the softball diamonds. The park is larger now and more people

are using it. The Pandemic forced many people to go outdoors when indoor spaces were closed and binge watching Netflix became tedious. Also, San Antonio's lack of green space made San Pedro Park a natural location to go to for those who live near downtown. So now I see joggers, bikers and skateboarders all competing for the same space.

by Elizandro Carrington

Another group competing for San Pedro Park resources are "the homeless". I hate using that term but I'll talk more about that later. I see them there congregating on the gazebo, sleeping at the benches and when they can, washing themselves. Their presences has ebbs and flows. Sometimes I see a lot of them and sometimes hardly any. I hadn't any real opinion of their use of the Park. I did what all of society does. I glanced away and pretended they weren't there. But one day I had an experience that changed my perspective.

I was walking through the Park and I saw a couple sleeping in the middle of the sidewalk. There were empty liquor bottles scattered around them. Their clothing was ill fitting and exposing parts of themselves. They had no shoes on. What made me stop and think about them was their posture. They were facing each other with their arms covering each other. When I looked at them I realized that while I and everyone else ignored them, they themselves were looking out for each other and as I continued walking my dog through the Park I no longer saw homeless people, what I was seeing was just people. People who were sleeping because they were tired. People who were talking to each other because no one else would talk to them. People who were cleaning themselves at the Park because they had no home. These people were doing what all of us do. They were taking care of themselves.

If they are doing the same things we do as a society, doesn't it mean that they are part of our society too? I am sure that we can find many ways how they are different from us. And finding and defining those differences is how we justify treating them as something other than ourselves. We have institutionalized their care. We use the police to herd them out of our public spaces, we create depots like Haven for Hope to temporarily house them and we let private churches and organizations clothe them and feed them. What other groups do we do that to? If you substituted the word "homeless" with "black" or with "women" or "gay" or any other historical term of bigotry would we be treating that group the way we treat the homeless today? Please, I am not saying sexism, racism or other "isms" don't exist any more. There is plenty of institutionalized and subverted racism to go around, but what we don't do anymore is erase their



presence. We need to do the same to the homeless.

You see, there have always been poor people and people with mental illness. People who for what ever reason don't earn enough to pay for housing or can't learn basic skills or have had accidents that leave them incapable of sustaining themselves. Historically many of these people were just left to die. Societies with cast systems have left them in squalor. Developing nations created work houses or insane asylums to house them. Early in our history we use psychiatric wards to keep them off the street. Then we just released them onto the street, where they live on today.

In the news we talk about the "homeless problem". Cities get ranked by the Department of Housing on how they are handling the situation. We let part of our taxes subsidize their care. But what we don't do is accept them as one of us. We don't see them as ourselves. We see them as someone else's problem. We justify their treatment by saying things like "There are plenty of jobs available if they want to work" or "They are drunks and addicts, they need to get treatment" or "They are just nuts, there is nothing you can do for them". All of this is another form of blaming the victim. There are always going to be people who just can't work. Others will always abuse alcohol or drugs, or physiologically are prone to addiction or use substances to self medicate themselves from trauma. And always, always some people's brains just work differently. This part of the human condition will always exist.

There is no homeless problem. There is just us. Have we grown enough to make sure that our laws and our resources help everyone? Can we get rid of that "Not in my backyard" or "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality that was only meant to exclude others or to justify keeping property and income for ourselves? The discussion about allocation of resources and how we spend our taxes is too much to tackle here. All I am pointing out is that our attitude and our belief system needs adjustment. When I walk my dog at San Pedro park I try hard to see people. Please, try and see them, too.

BIO: *Elizandro Carrington is part of the Esperanza staff and does the layout and design for La Voz.*