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There's No Place Like Home

“Just a reminder that you’re closer to being unhoused than being a billionaire, stop treating unhoused people like they’re undeserving of basic human decency.” That was said by Tik Tok user, @maiabemtbc, and it really stuck with me. Privileged people that I’ve encountered in my life are ignorant of this and reinforce the stigmas surrounding unhoused people. From the quiet suburbs of Los Angeles, to a siren-surrounded apartment in the Bronx, the epidemic of homelessness always follows. Growing up I noticed heavy wealth disparity, privilege, and ignorance. I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Woodland Hills, California, where I shared a room with my two sisters.

I went to high school with wealthier kids but I didn’t have a lot of luxuries that they had because money was tight, and I was taught that obtaining nice things required hard work. I didn’t get a car until after I graduated, and my grandma drove my sisters and I to and from school in her minivan everyday. Comparing myself to my peers became exhausting, and I tried to focus on what I did have, instead of what I didn’t. I noticed people living on the streets and begging for change on busy street corners. I learned that even if people “worked hard” other factors could cause them to lose their homes, like unaffordable housing, job loss, physical, or mental illnesses. According to the [National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty](#), common causes are: “Lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, low wages, mental illness and the lack of needed

services, and substance abuse and the lack of needed services.” In addition, “the leading cause of homelessness for women is domestic violence” All of which are usually outcomes out of their control. I wondered why I had the privilege to live with a roof over my head and privilege to get medical help, but some people didn’t.

Despite feeling bad for people living on the streets, I was also scared of them. Once my friend and I were eating dinner late at night when a disheveled and dirty man in a wheelchair, who was shouting gibberish, wheeled right up to our table. I froze with fear, but my friend just said to ignore him and he’ll go away. I held my breath and focused on his face as he spoke directly to me. He banged his hand on our table, said some expletives and rolled away. I asked my friend how she wasn’t anxious during that encounter. She said: “What’s he gonna do? He doesn’t have legs!” and began to laugh. I was so shaken up that I didn’t notice he was an amputee, and I immediately felt bad. Later, I had a job as a canvasser on the streets of LA for a non-profit. I became used to coming across people like the man in the wheelchair, and I grew out of my fear. I once saw a boy, about my age, sitting outside a grocery store with a cardboard sign and his dog. I was heartbroken. I immediately gave him my food and water, and he then split the food with his dog. Knowing that the animal was unsheltered with him isn’t what shattered me, it was the fact that that dog was probably his only sense of comfort and companionship while living on the streets. As I drove home from work that day, it hit me that unhoused people are actually *just* people. The guy in a wheelchair who shouted gibberish didn’t make him any less of a person, it meant that he needed help. Unhoused people are often portrayed as “crazy lunatics” or “lazy drug addicts”. That boy was neither of those things and neither was that man in a wheelchair. They are both just people who society has failed and

discarded like trash.

It wasn't financially possible for my sisters and I to go straight to university, so after high school we went to community college at Santa Monica College. We lived with our mother in Tarzana, and drove to Santa Monica for school. Santa Monica and Tarzana are two very different areas. Tarzana is a suburb of the San Fernando Valley, it is quiet, moderately diverse, and has a neighborhood feel. Santa Monica is a highly affluent city in Los Angeles, with a high rate of white people. Both areas are still plagued with homelessness. According to the [Los Angeles Almanac](#): in 2022, "Tarzana had a homeless population of 131, and Santa Monica had one of 827". When I chose to major in Journalism, and at the start of COVID, I became even more interested in researching the issue of homelessness. According to the [New York Times](#): "Three times as many homeless people died in Los Angeles County as in New York City during the first year of the pandemic." I worked for the U.S Census Bureau for a month during COVID and as I was knocking on the door of someone's house, I witnessed an unhoused individual run onto their front lawn, turn the hose on, shower himself, then walk away. I was shocked but it was a hot day so of course I sympathized with him. Unhoused people dying from poor weather extremes and extreme climate change is another reason why homelessness should be dealt with.

Even walking around the clean neighborhoods of Santa Monica, it wasn't unusual to see unhoused people. According to [Safe Place for Youth](#), "there are approximately 4,673 homeless youth on the streets of LA County on any given night". In quarantine, I thought back to being on campus and if I could remember noticing any unhoused students in my class. The person sitting behind me or in front of me could've been, but it was

something that rarely crossed my mind. According to a 2021 memo by the California state legislature: “Homelessness is prevalent across California...with 1 in 20 students at UC, 1 in 10 students at CSU, and 1 in 5 students at California Community Colleges (CCC) reporting experiencing homelessness at some point during the academic year. Even more students experience some form of housing insecurity”([Assembly Budget Committee](#)). [SMC](#) offered several resources for low-income students or those with housing insecurities. For example, the Safe Parking Program was a resource that allowed vehicle dwellers to find safe and local places to park to sleep at night. An additional resource connected students with a housing specialist to provide virtual housing support. During my time at SMC, I had the privilege of interviewing Sarah Fay, the Campus Peer Navigator from Safe Place for Youth.

As a former foster youth, Fay worked as a guidance counselor assistant when she noticed a lack of resources and services for homeless youth attending her school. “A few years ago I became homeless. I was living at my grandma's, and then I wasn't able to live there anymore” said Fay. She was “Going to class dirty, and going to class hungry, and going to class tired and [couldn't] focus on work.” She finally grew the confidence to approach her biology teacher and told her: “Look, I'm a former foster youth, I'm homeless, is there anything you could do to help me?” and her teacher replied: “What is that? What do you mean? You're a foster youth? like what is that?”” said Fay. It shocked me to learn that her teacher didn't know the term “foster youth” and didn't have the resources to help her. According to [Safe Place for Youth](#): “59% of homeless youth come from an unbearable family environment and 23% are former foster kids”. This is what ultimately inspired her to find solutions to these kinds of issues and become a Campus

Peer Navigator. In an article for the [University of Chicago Press](#), Cameron Parsell writes: “People continue to experience the social and material deprivation of homelessness, not because we lack the scientific knowledge but rather because of our values and the political decisions we make... The political decision to support home ownership at the expense of affordable housing both contributes to homelessness and reflects a set of values about reward and deservingness.” Connecting with Sarah was extremely inspiring and enlightening for me because it helped to dispel stereotypes and stigmas reinforced by these values of deservingness. Speaking to her solidified the fact that anyone can be or become unhoused, regardless of what you look like, and that everyone deserves housing and medical assistance.

When I visited New York to see potential college campuses, I fell in love with the Bronx, and felt at home. Unfortunately, I also witnessed large amounts of people living on the streets. At one point my mom and I were walking in the city, and there was a man who seemed to be distressed and yelling. My mom scrambled to move us out of his path in fear. I told her it was okay, and that he wasn’t going to do anything. She said: “Well he’s homeless, you don’t know what he’ll do.” Of course I love my mother, but this kind of thinking is what plagues the minds of American people and feeds stigmas surrounding homelessness. I told her that it’s more respectful to call people “unhoused” rather than “homeless” because it highlights the humanity of that person. Categorizing people as homeless, with the word “less” creates the idea that they are less than for not having housing. However, as long as someone is a person, they can also become homeless, no matter who they are.

It’s been a year since I’ve lived in the Bronx. Yes, it is quite gritty, can be

dangerous, and also has unhoused people, but it is also full of character, culture, and hardworking families. The Bronx is the most food insecure borough of New York and a lot of families are just living paycheck to paycheck. According to [Invisible People](#), “59% of Americans are just one paycheck away from homelessness”, and the likelihood of low-income families becoming homeless is increasing due to recent levels of inflation. New York’s “Right to Shelter” law requires temporary housing, but about 5% of unhoused people in NYC are without shelter. The [Coalition for the Homeless](#), a NYC housing organization, catapulted the law. The co-founder, Lawyer Robert Hayes, led the class-action lawsuit, Callahan v. Carey, against New York state “arguing that a constitutional right to shelter existed in NY”. He argued on behalf of an unhoused man named Robert Callahan and all others in NYC. The argument “pointed to Article XVII of the NY State Constitution, which declares that ‘the aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by such of its subdivisions....’”. They settled on a negotiation consent decree that required the city and state to provide shelters for all unhoused people in NY. Shelters, however, fail to meet living standards. [The New York Post](#) said the shelter system has “Cockroaches in the food and mice crawling on beds. Constant assaults and thefts. Sanctuaries that feel like jail cells.” Sean McAloney, an unhoused veteran said: “trains are the best place to get some sleep, the safest place.” About 1000 unhoused people in NYC sleep in subway stations. On Twitter, people [responded](#) to Mayor Eric Adams street sweeps: “Homelessness is not a crime and NYPD should not be involved in outreach.” Using police to remove people from the streets is traumatizing and breaks the trust that unhoused people have with shelter organizations. It’s clear that both Los Angeles and New York need to improve their solutions with the

possible help from the U.S Government.

Moving across the country for college is not easy, it took some adapting, and I still struggle with identifying what “home” is to me. California will always be where I grew up, and I still call it “home”, even though I don’t have a physical house there. New York is my new “home”, but I don’t yet feel like a New Yorker. Half a million people are homeless in this country and I willingly recognize the major privilege that I have to be able to call two different major metropolitan cities home. After living in these two large cities, I’ve been able to educate myself on the issue of homelessness, and that it looks different for everyone. Unhoused people should not be generalized or be reduced to stereotypes of criminals and drug addicts. Unhoused people can be young children, parents, grandparents, or even college students. If you can’t volunteer at your local shelter or soup kitchen, the least you can do is educate yourself on the issue, spread awareness, and most importantly, be kind and acknowledge anyone you see that’s begging on the street. Anyone can lose their home but unhoused people aren’t any less human for lacking home addresses.