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THE UNEQUAL STREETS

**A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE
CAUSES & COMPLICATIONS OF
HOMELESSNESS**



OUR AMERICAN GENERATION
THINK. SPEAK. CREATE. SOCIAL JUSTICE

ABOUT THE PROJECT:

The Unequal Streets was written by Nam Nguyen in April 2010.

WHO WE ARE:

Our American Generation is a youth powered think tank for social justice.

OAG helps you(th) get serious and get organized about social justice issues you care about. We strive to engage youth in critical research and discussion about all social justice issues, in hopes to create a strong and diverse community of young Americans – a community that will not be reluctant to take on our nation’s most challenging problems.

Today OAG facilitates research by youth in the Seattle metropolitan area, and accepts blog articles from youth anywhere! OAG incorporated as a non profit in the state of Washington in October of 2009. In March of 2011 OAG was recognized as a 501c(3) Non Profit organization. OAG was first founded in March of 2009 as a registered student organization at the University of Washington.

The Takeover is a quarterly ‘zine produced by members of Our American Generation. Hard copies are available on University of Washington’s campus and at Seattle University, as well as various locations throughout Seattle. It is also published online at OAG.org. The Takeover is created in Adobe InDesign by Sarah Hiraki. She can be reached at sarah.hiraki@gmail.com

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Every so often, but perhaps more minutely than we perceive, we are reminded of the state of homelessness in our communities. We may walk down the street and encounter a few people asking for money, we may watch the news and hear the latest string of violence erupt against the homeless, we may have driven by homeless shelters, soup kitchens, or free clinics, and see the lines stretch around blocks with countless individuals patiently waiting for someone to care, and yet, even though we are apparently surrounded by it, many perceive homelessness as a choice; to live on the street, to live against the status quo. For some individuals, this is most certainly the case. I have talked to, interviewed, and questioned homeless individuals who, ‘wanted to take control of their own life for once,’ or ‘live free of commitment and expectations,’ or even those who thought living on the street would be ‘fun.’ However, these individuals are few and only represent a minority of the homeless. For most, homelessness was not a choice, and their story is what I have to share.

We can talk about the marginalization of individuals through the lack of reflexivity between structure and agent, but I’m sure there are more in-depth analyses from people who hold more degrees

than I do and who can do a much better job than I ever could. We can try to trace the history of homelessness and quote de Tocqueville, Marx, Foucault, Kant, etc. and turn this issue into one of an academic exercise, or we can stop and listen to the individuals who live this life, hear their stories, and share their triumphs and even their downfalls of their journey, to really understand what it is to be in their shoes. I am by no means an expert on homelessness, for I have only spent a limited time with these individuals, but without a doubt the stories I have heard are valuable. I hope that my interpretation can at least inspire a greater understanding of the homeless community.

A Choice to Activism

I sat down with a lady who had been on the street for well over twenty years, who was easily in her mid-forties. Her face seemed worn-down from the scourge of time, her hands were calloused, her teeth damaged, and her eyes were beady and dark yet they seemed to drift on forever. As with most of the people I talked to, I asked her, “I want to know how you got to be here.”

She smiled slyly, as if she knew the question was to come, and responded, “I ended up on the street, mostly by choice.”

I was shocked, as my face expressed. She continued, “I used to live in camps with friends, but I was never homeless. I always had a place to live. I had a place to live when I lived with my parents, but I just liked being around these camps. I had fun.” It turned out that she was a teenager at the time she left home, and she joined her friends who had run away from their families.

“What are these camps? How was life in these camps?”

She looked away for a second, as if to reminisce, and responded, “Camps are everywhere. I used to live in a camp under the bridge. It was dangerous. Some people are nice and others just trash your stuff. I used to come back to the camp and find my stuff stolen or broken. Sometimes, it was other people in the camp, but a lot of the time, it was either cops or the DOT (Department of Transportation). They used to come in illegally and trash our stuff or get us to leave.” She continued to say that life in these camps was tough – tougher than she had imagined.

“Why would you continue to live like this?”

She thought for a moment and replied, “I couldn’t bring myself back to my parents to ask for help. It’s not easy to be away from home for so long and to go

back and expect people to just take you in again." During this time on the street she had mostly begged for money or food to get by.

"Did you have any form of employment while you were on the street?"

She shook her head and said, "It's not that easy. People think it's easy to get a job. Well it's not. You'll try entering a place, looking all dirty, with torn clothes, and not looking good, and try to ask for a job, and you'll hear 'There are no jobs available,' or 'We're not hiring now.' Sometimes you'll be lucky enough for a person to give you an application, but they'll never call you back."

"How about asking for help from organizations or family?" I asked.

"Sure, it's nice for church groups and other organizations to help you, but you can't be reliant on them all the time. You lose your own pride if you keep going to them. It's even worse if you ask your own family for help." Eventually, she said that she was able to get a job selling Real Change, a street newspaper, which led her toward the avenue of being an activist for the homeless - though it hasn't come without difficulties. "Sometimes, when you're on the street, you have men approach you who say, 'You know you can get more money doing other street work.' I tell them that I could, but I don't because I earn an honest living selling Real Change." When asked more about her involvement with Real Change she responded, "I've been with them for over ten years now. They've got me involved with all sorts of things. I now go down to Olympia every year to rally for social change. I try to get involved with getting people to know about the illegal 'sweeps,' that the police and DOT do. I try to be a voice for the homeless." Indeed she certainly has.

In the short period that I conducted

these interviews, similar stories were repeated amongst varied individuals. Obviously the people involved between each story were different, as with the context, and setting. Nonetheless the same themes of disapproval, institutionalized bigotry, misunderstanding and false pity from the mainstream seemed to reappear in one form or another in the stories of these individuals. This makes us question whether this never-ending cycle of homelessness is truly caused by this singular group of displaced individuals. Perhaps we should look to ourselves - those who are seemingly unaffiliated with their strife.

It may seem backward and even radical to think that the majority of people who are not homeless and who have never been homeless play a significant role in perpetuating this cycle. However, it may be this unfamiliarity toward the subject that has stigmatized and polarized these individuals and may prevent them from reintegrating into society.

The common trend in these stories is the rejection that individuals face as they attempt to reintegrate. This can come in the form of attempting employment, acceptance by family, or any effort to return to mainstream society. The barriers that exist are not necessarily created by, but often by those of the mainstream. It is only natural that as a society, we work to create stability, but at a price of introducing change, for we fear the risks that may come from it. Therefore, the work of the mainstream has been to protect the status quo, at the cost of certain individuals, and driven by fear of change from stability.

As our country approaches an era of more government mandated social services to our population, I fear that as a society, we will reject those who are appearing to benefit more from these pro-

grams than ourselves. A fear of deviation from the "Protestant Work Ethic" has most certainly fueled this form of bigotry. Without a doubt, our nation was built on the ideals of equality (even though history has shown that these ideals were not practiced) and we as people take pride and proclaim to the world that we are equal. However, as we embrace this so-called form of equality, we have also scorned inequality; and like medicine to disease, our mainstream has worked to build barriers against those who personify inequality. Therefore, are we not guilty ourselves of perpetuating inequality as we fight for equality?

I suppose it is easy and natural to point the finger toward the homeless and blame them for their own strife. I suppose it is easy to justify the mainstream's un-accepting behavior of these individuals for they are apparently conscious of their rejection of the status quo. And I suppose it is possible to justify the marginalization of these individuals, for it is their behavior and their own doing that has led them to their state. If we accept these as the answers to this problem then it is only fair that we accept the consequences of our actions that perpetuate this cycle. On the other hand, we can reject these thoughts and instead work on creating a truly equal nation. Whether it be providing more services in reintegrating individuals to the mainstream, or work toward more comprehensive social programs to prevent anyone from entering this cycle. Right now, these thoughts may be idealistic, even laughable in the eyes of some, but if we have been so successful at building barriers, how can one doubt that we are not fully capable of tearing these barriers down and bridging the growing gap of disparity?

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NOW DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.**

**PASS IT ON.
SPREAD THE WORD.**

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WE KNOW YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY.



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