



Last updated: Mar 7, 2021

The Streets Tell No Lies

I'm hear to speak for people living on the streets, like many others speaking on The Right to Rest Act.

Since the pandemic, and with Portland's shaky promise of no more sweeps, I have seen the drastic improvement on the lives of those living out on the street. Many have built structures with very little materials to work with, and they take a lot of pride in those structures.

I'm a carpenter by trade and have saved materials over the years to make a structure. The first time I tried the entire block, a business, a landlord of commercial property I was renovating, a condo owner above, and the child care service, that shared the sidewalk with the location of the build, were all in favor of this. But it only took one other condo property owner to throw a fit and have us removed.

The couple I was building the structure for expressed how painful it was being swept before the pandemic, sometimes weekly. He showed me his art work, what few pictures he had on his phone. He had a lot of talent. And then he told me, with a heart full of sorrow, that most of his art has been trashed in sweeps. That it is nearly impossible to save everything. That he even lost phones in these sweeps.

Another man expressed how you are given a couple days notice, then the sweep can show up randomly between the span of several days. "As if I don't have things I need to do," was a point of passion on his many words on the matter. And please consider those words. Being houseless doesn't mean you are sitting around waiting for hand outs. I have seen an amazing work ethic for the vast majority of houseless folx. Even those with disability. When I distribute goods, some have jokingly asked if I was giving out gainful employment.

And not only work ethic, I have witnessed the highest amounts of respect and consideration. A man who was an electrical engineer, becoming houseless in 2017 after heart surgery, told me how if even one person complains about him digging in recycling for cans of an entire apartment building, he won't do it again, because even that one person deserves respect.

I was in shock, because I say fuck that one person having a negative impact when the vast majority is supporting you in your action and in your care. This loud minority shouldn't be heard, though it's typically who the city hears from and responds to the fastest with police or sweep crews.

But that's my view. And here this man on the street was teaching me humility. And honestly, if you talk to people on the streets, you too will learn a lot. As one man said "keep an open mind." He said this with shine of hopefulness that his words would be heard, after I asked what message do you have for the general public that you want them to know about you and others living out here on the streets. "Keep an open mind," he said, "Most of us can speak for ourselves if you come up and engage with us. And we all have different backgrounds, problems, and needs. Just keep an open mind," he stressed.

The second time I tried to build a structure, we ran into the same problem. The cops were called. It was one business complaining among a few businesses and residents. The business did not own the land, but was adjacent. But the only thing that made this case different was this houseless man has stage four cancer. And the Big C gets even the cops and property owners to chill on the harassment of pushing along houseless people. But it shouldn't take cancer to have empathy. It shouldn't have to take advocates, houseless folx, and currently enrolled students. Time, labor, and money, to ensure a man with cancer didn't freeze to death in the recent blizzard.

Another houseless man, a former construction worker before the pandemic, is currently building a large space for several people. He was one of several who expressed how much he wishes to have work again. He also told me of how common it was for people to yell and throw trash at them. To scream for them to get a job or to kill themselves. And he said "I don't think some people realize how three or four missteps, and they can end up in a similar position. Or even one disaster." As one of his houseless neighbors had her house recently burn down.

So all I can say is this bill is positive step forward in a long march that will happen on state, city, and federal level. I'll end with one last quote. More wisdom from the electrical engineer who had heart surgery and has been houseless since 2017. "The streets don't lie. Everyone else can hide behind four walls. All their problems. Their messes. There hoarding. Mental illness. Drugs. But now it's all exposed for everyone to see. The streets don't lie."