

MY TAKE

Sherri W. Morr

On The Homeless

I USED to travel for work. Two weeks every month I was in a different city. I didn't love it, but learned that some cities are better than others. I was in San Francisco in February 2000, staying in Union Square at one of the boutique hotels.

One morning, I gave my change from the purchase of coffee to a homeless man. He took it, then he started yelling at me. I kept walking and realized he was following, actually chasing me, saying, "Put your underwear on, put your underwear on." At first I ignored him, but when I got half a block and saw he was running after me, I was scared.

I saw an available taxi, and got in. He banged on the window as we drove off. My first thought as we drove away: Do I have on my underwear?



I WAKE UP in a strange city, thinking about the meetings, the appointments, finding a taxi to get to the correct address on time. I don't even think about my underwear. I was sure I had them on because, after 12 years on the road, I rarely forget to pack things. Oh, I've donated plenty of items to the hotel upon departure: cell phone charger, belts, even a terrific pair of blue suede sandals. But never underwear. First of all, I always bring extra, and, secondly, it's reflex to put on my underwear.

Why would he yell that at me?

When I told people this story, some laughed, of course, about the underwear. But few thought it was rare that a homeless person chased me up Powell Street yelling at me. It didn't matter what he was saying, they said; most likely he was crazy and should have been in a mental institution, or that he was drunk, or spaced out on drugs. I thought then that it taught me a lesson: Don't give to homeless people.

THEN, A FEW YEARS LATER, I moved to San Francisco, got an apartment at Third and Folsom, where numbers of homeless congregated practically on my front steps — the same men, every morning when I went out to walk to work. I came to smile, say good morning, and gave them all my extra food or leftovers, including plastic utensils and paper napkins. I came to think of them as my homeless.

Now, I no longer live downtown, but I do work for a non-profit serving the homeless. Several of its programs offer living space to get people off the streets. Community Awareness & Treatment Services (CATS) has served the needs of men and women on the street for more than three decades. CATS provides substance abuse treatment and medical respite; their vans pick up people who not even the police can help. CATS manages two buildings in the Tenderloin where people can live, maybe get jobs, turn themselves around, and no longer be the blight on San Francisco that so concerns all of us.

I didn't take this job because of my own personal experience of a homeless man chasing me. I didn't take it because I had a compelling passion to obliterate this issue.

I TOOK THIS JOB because, with 70 million Baby Boomers, some are sure to be affected by shrinking services. The homeless population is going to grow. Grow at rapid rates, for sure. Most importantly, I took it because the staff appeared totally dedicated, caring and smart about their own challenges. The program directors and the management know the population; they understand the emotional and medical needs. They are quick to present options instead of stereotypical innuendos. They are realistic, knowing no one really likes the homeless.

So many homeless people are victims of situations that they may not have created. They lost jobs, families, their lifestyle and friends. Once you lose all of that, plus your living space, you hit bottom, and turn to drugs and alcohol. They lose their identity, they have no good thoughts, and some don't even have memories. Their only community is others like themselves, others who too live on the streets, or in shelters, and find themselves hoping for a handout, or a space at a food program.

IT'S GETTING COLDER, and the rains have begun. An estimated 6,000 people are homeless and on the streets in San Francisco. Let's pay attention to them this year. I mean really pay attention. ■

Sherri W. Morr is development director at CATS.

"My Take" is a feature of The Extra that offers neighborhood writers an opportunity to reflect on life in the Tenderloin in 600 words or less. Email manuscripts to mytake@studycenter.org.

Counting the homeless in TL

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and clarifies the instructions to record encampments by the number of tents or makeshift structures, to recognize that abandoned buildings may house squatters and that a group of adults and children could constitute a homeless family. Don't ignore automobiles or RVs with covered windows. People live in them. "They're not permanent housing and could signal homelessness," she notes.

Lt. Henry Parra, SFPD homeless liaison officer, reminds the volunteers to work safely. "Encampments are often an effort by the homeless to create an area of security. Don't violate that security by barging in," he cautions, and gives them a phone number to summon a cop in a hurry, if trouble arises.

New Mayor Edwin Lee ends the training hour. He thanks the volunteers for their civic devotion and shares a childhood memory of Room 300 — where he and other city children received free TB inoculations in the 1950s — and mentions with pride that San Francisco's homeless programs served as models in the Obama administration's strategic plan.

Bobbi and Rick receive a color-coded map of their assigned route in the northernmost part of the Tenderloin, and an official tally sheet. They head out from the dispatch center. Bobbi slows her silver Toyota near the corner of Post and Hyde streets. Rick has spotted two men sitting on a street-level window ledge drinking from brown-bagged cans.

"Could be two," Bobbi says. She parks. Rick walks back up the block for a closer look. "No," he says upon return, "they're not homeless." Up close the men looked like they had permanent residences — new, pricey shoes, clean clothing, pulled-together looks.

Later, Rick walks Shannon Street, now brightly lit. The windows of the adjacent Hotel Adagio sparkle and its public rooms are filled with people eating and drinking. A couple of valets mill about the side parking lot. Rick notes a discarded mattress propped against a building and an ample crawl space behind the lot's dumpster, possible homeless sleeping sites when the area grows quieter.

Turning the corner, Rick sees a man panhandling outside Swig across Geary

Street. The panhandler approaches Rick. "Can you give me something for a sandwich, a cup of coffee? I'm homeless," the man says. He gets counted.

As they cruise west on Geary, they see four men, one in a wheelchair, on the corner at Leavenworth Street. A block away an older woman, slightly disheveled, walks slowly, a shopping bag hanging at the end of each arm. Not homeless, they decide — the bags full of groceries signal a home, a place to store and cook food safely. When they double back to Leavenworth the corner quartet is gone. Five people on the block, none homeless.

On Post near Jones, Rick spots an elderly man seated cross-legged on the sidewalk, his back against the front entrance of Thai Stick Restaurant. He's begging spare change from pedestrians. Rick counts him. As he rounds the block a second time, Rick looks into the Stop-N-Wash Coin Op Laundry. Inside, washers are humming; people are folding clothes. No one appears to be camped inside, though Rick knows from prior counts that such warm, unmonitored premises sometimes provide a temporary haven for the homeless.

It's 11 p.m. After three hours and five passes of the three square blocks in the assigned route, driving and walking, Bobbi and Rick head back to the dispatch center. On the way, at the edge of their assigned route, they make an obvious call — a large man in tattered coat is pushing a shopping cart topped by busted luggage. His sneakers appear to flap.

"We counted three," Rick tells the HSA worker, who takes his tally sheet and his phone number in case any questions arise when the information is reviewed. Six volunteer hours to count three homeless people. It breaks down to nearly \$8,700 of expected HUD money for permanent housing, temporary housing and outreach services as a result of Rosenthal and Shelton's efforts.

Walking away from the dispatch center Rick sees four people asleep on the sidewalk a block away. They are not on his assigned route. "I know someone has counted them already," he says.

The results of the city's biennial homeless census will be known by April, says Schlageter. ■

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