Cultural Daily

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The Less Fortunate in Los Angeles

Santy Pelayo · Tuesday, November 7th, 2023

The Less Fortunate in Los Angeles
by Santy Pelayo

Working in Downtown Los Angeles, I was surrounded by passing cars and influencers walking up and down the streets. I worked in a Starbucks right next to Little Tokyo, so it was very active throughout the day. There was always a new event going on as well, from construction happening when I arrived at work to festivities and blaring music and lights once I clocked out. The celebrations and crowds of people enjoying their evening really brought life to our city. These are the images that come to mind when you think of Los Angeles. After a month of working in Downtown LA, it was apparent this was not the case for a large population of citizens.

When I clocked out of my shift and headed home, and I noticed the sidewalks of the city were covered with tents and people sleeping on mattresses. They used trash cans as fire pits to keep themselves warm and dug through restaurant garbage bins for food. Once 5pm rolled around at work, the manager ordered us to lock the store doors “to keep the merchandise safe.” If a customer came to the door, we’d have to let them in manually. Sometimes people just wanted to use the Wi-Fi, and I didn’t know how they differentiated them from the homeless population. How? “Our best guess.” They suggested that we look out for any torn or dirty clothes. We were also “encouraged” to avoid any and all people who hung out outside of buildings and dumpsters. We weren’t allowed to communicate or give out cups of water to those who pleaded.

Every night we had to throw away the excess food items we didn’t sell from the day; the walk of shame to the dumpster left a huge weight in my stomach. Each time I would glance at the absurd amount of discarded pastries, scones, and muffins that would leave me nodding my head at myself. They might consider it company policy to discard the food but donating some of it wouldn’t be unforgivable. The secure click of the padlock on our dumpster rang in my head every time, sometimes it followed me on my way home. Are we the ones that should be afraid of those in need? It felt like we were punishing people who were already suffering.

It felt like an immense privilege, having a job and being able to comfortably travel from work to home was increasingly obvious after every shift. This was a routine I have done countless times, but didn’t stop to realize how sought after my lifestyle truly is. There were countless tents and tarps laid out on the sidewalks in these neighborhoods. It wasn’t uncommon to see police and other patrols approach these tents in squads and be ready to incapacitate the elderly citizen.

The soothing jazz music inside our store was often interrupted by police car microphones or

shouting. After making them move, taking down their tents and confiscating their stuff, the police left. They were quick to use force to make them move, even sometimes using nightsticks or pepper spray, but arrests were considered a last resort. These aren't people who can afford resisting the police. Did they only want them to move? Were they ruining the image of our city? Or, was that "teaching them a lesson" for being in their position?

It was a Thursday afternoon, and a few people were in line to order a drink. I was in the process of completing orders when I heard a coworker say, "Shit, here they come." The loud whirr of the police siren made all conversations in the store stop, and we watched across the street as two male police officers confronted a sleeping man on the sidewalk. He was somewhat close to the curb of a busy intersection, so I understood their urgency. It suddenly turned to commotion when the man sleeping wouldn't get up. Shouting ensued, "You gotta move!" "Don't resist or we'll mace you!" The man only had a shopping cart with empty soda cans and blankets on it, but the police ended up "confiscating" them. It was harsh, from what I saw the man woke up surrounded by police officers, so he must've panicked. Once the commotion had passed, my coworkers continued their tasks as if nothing had occurred. They shrugged it off and assumed they were on something. From an outside perspective, it was apparent we don't truly know their story.

I'll never forget about Ron. My coworkers and I had just started cleaning up the store and getting ready to lock everything up, when we heard knocking on our window. An older man, with an army-green jacket and navy blue beanie on, was trying to say something to us. He was waving his arms, pointing at something, mouthing his sentences. My coworkers insisted he was "off the needle." God, I hated that saying. They insisted we let things be and focused on cleaning, when our manager went running past us out the front door with a fire extinguisher. Two of my coworkers chased after, and after about twenty minutes of commotion, they returned and said, "Someone set one of our bushes on fire." Ron wasn't, as they'd thought another "beggar" or "crazy homeless person." He was looking out for our safety. I rarely saw more of Ron over the next couple of months, but he was constantly moving around the city for shelter.

It was a Saturday afternoon in November, I was heading to work when Ron approached me. I don't know if he ever recognized me. "I don't mean to take up too much of your time, but there's a place nearby that can give you a warm bath and a bed to sleep in for the night for only ten bucks, do you think you can help me? I only need 6 more." I agreed and gave him five dollars, and to my surprise he said, "The lord sent you to me, I been' using soda cups and bottles to take my baths. I'm finally gonna' feel warm water and sheets, man. God bless you." I didn't think much of it, I didn't consider just how much it must've meant to Ron at that time.

It's people like Ron that really make me think about the homeless population, their situation, and how they got there. Sometimes I wonder if they're safe. The things we have and use daily, like our beds and bathrooms, are considered huge luxuries for people in these positions. They still have genuine compassion and gratitude for others. Do they have any sort of security? Why do the police treat them like such monumental threats?

The inaccurate stereotype of the population being centered on drugs and bad decisions further discourages people from assisting the homeless, and continues to paint them in a terrible image. According to LAist, when the Covid-19 pandemic occurred, the homeless population by 13% spiked from the 2019 population. This loss of income and property puts into perspective how easy it could be to become part of the homeless population.

My neighbor of nearly 13 years was heavily impacted by the pandemic. His wife sadly passed away from the virus, and his family had no way of traveling to Los Angeles to help him with the house. He was shortly evicted from the home for a few weeks, but always told us there was “an issue with his contract.” It was surreal seeing his once blooming garden and fresh-cut lawn become overgrown with weeds and vines, with his lawn frantically growing out onto the sidewalk. He luckily was able to temporarily live in his car, and didn’t have to remove all of his possessions from his house. It’s hard to be fully prepared for circumstances like these, with the consequences occurring even quicker.

Throughout the years 2018 and 2021, calmatters.org reports California spent $9.6 billion, with half going to housing costs and the rest being used to refurbish and improve homeless centers. This is a positive improvement, providing somewhat of a better lifestyle for those who need it. As the article continues, however, only 40% of the homeless population end up receiving support. The other 60% of the population are unable to be provided for because the city is unable to locate them. After seeing all the police activity, it’s apparent why the city struggles to keep track of the homeless.

There is progress being made, there are a wide variety of non-profit programs that aim to assist and provide housing for the homeless population. It would be irrational to demand housing for every homeless person in the city, then resources would diminish even sooner. Providing standard necessities such as food, clothing, and toiletries could work wonders for the health of someone in this position. The people in these communities aren’t the ones we should blame for taking up the sidewalks or receiving benefits, those in power who take away their opportunities and livelihoods are the ones keeping them there. Whether it’s mental illness or drug addiction, providing help and services could go a long way. With empathy and the organizations that provide these services, these people are allowed to have another chance to improve themselves for the better.

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