

INDEPENDENTLY PUBLISHED BY THE COALITION ON HOMELESSNESS SINCE 1989



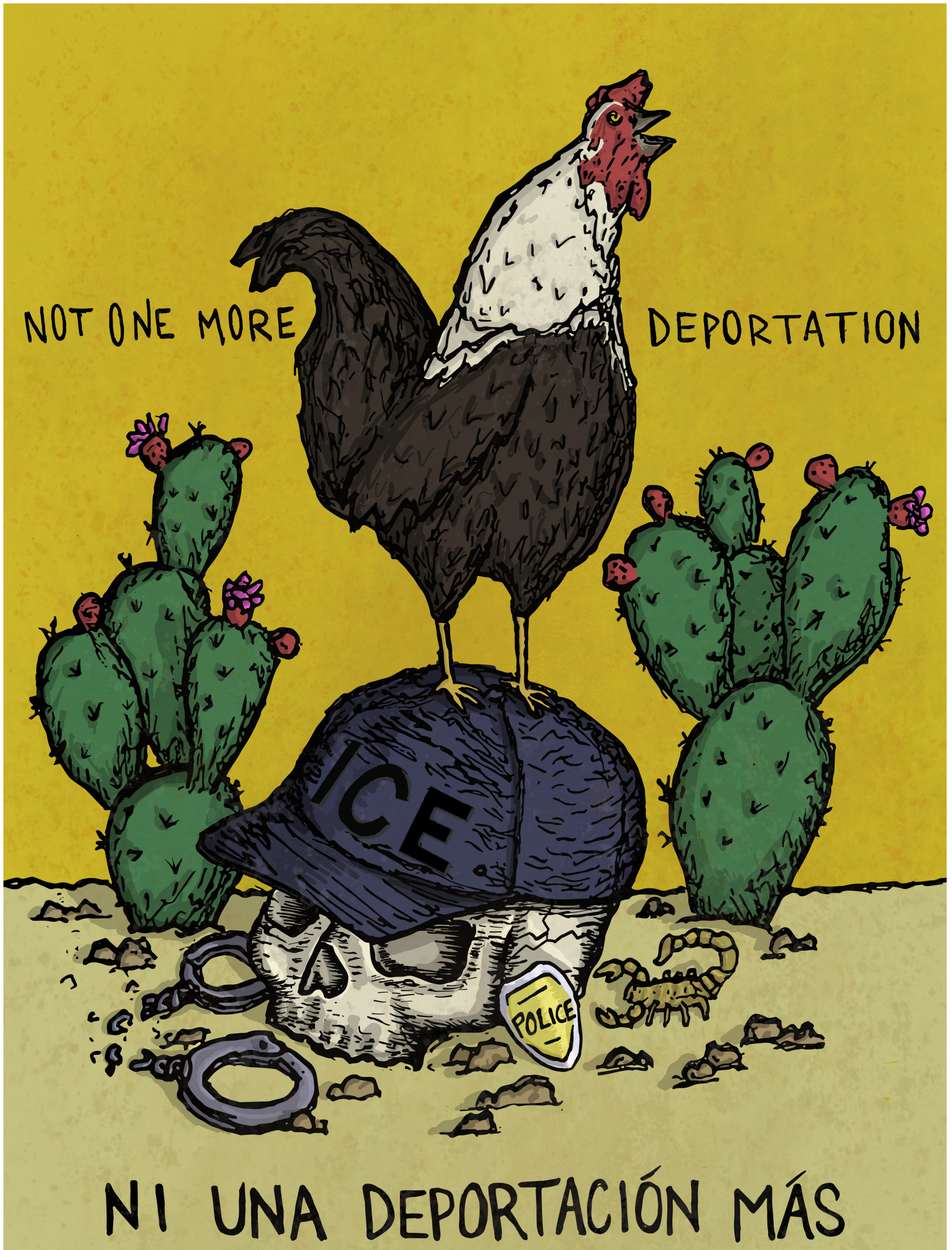
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# STREET SHEET





## CONTENT WARNING:

This newspaper often runs stories that include the experiences of trauma too often shared by those living homeless, unsheltered, or in poverty in this city. We're including this content warning because the stories throughout this issue may be especially activating for some readers. Many of the pieces involve descriptions of traumatic experiences including domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, queer/transphobic violence, in addition to the violence of states and false borders. We encourage you to take your time reading through these stories, and to be gentle with yourselves.

## COVER ART: Lotería by Xavier Lepe

Artist bio: I'm first generation Mexican-American. I was born and raised in California from immigrant parents coming from Jalisco and Guanajuato. Been making art my whole life and just started a little online shop out of Tuscon which you can find at machetazo.bigcartel.com and find some future art and things on instagram: @pinche.policia

# HOMELESS SAN FRANCISCANS STILL HAVE HOPE THAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN MAKE THEIR LIVES SHINE AGAIN

Galijo

TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH

*The challenge of how and when continues to be the dilemma of a society that is desensitized to the crisis of homeless people .*

People in a crisis of homelessness have great physical, psychological, spiritual, and emotional stress. Being exposed to life on the streets and the uncertainty that condemns them to confront inclement weather and the scourge of hunger, cold, disease, drugs, white slavery, hate, violence, and other manifestations of social decomposition that degrade and violate them.

The government bureaucracy and its indifference to administrative reforms to prioritize assistance to our homeless community is disappointing and frustrating, even though we do not know if it is committed by omission or commission. But what we do understand is how people in a crisis of homelessness are turned away, a deep anguish, where their cries for help are drowned in despair and a depression that condemns them to survive or die trying to be rescued. Simplifying the process for homeless people to get help should be everyone's commitment. In this way, we can start to heal the person in distress, always in a dignified and less bureaucratic way and with the firm commitment to provide assistance and help our homeless communities re-enter life in society .

Eradicating poverty and homelessness is a challenge and task for all individuals, and private and governmental institutions. The insensitivity of people who live in a society that faces the challenges of individualism, consumerism, social networks, and other deformations affect the sense of solidarity.

The violence, public insecurity, drug trafficking, corporate

greed, and displacement through gentrification alters the dreams of our local communities, because their goals become more unattainable, opportunities disappear, and a cycle of frustration begins. Consequently a different future arrives, but with poverty and pain. Thus in many cases, people begin to become destitute.

The suffering of people trying to find a "home", a job, and help from our government offices sharpens and postpones people's ideals of living. Meanwhile, society comes and goes, looking at these homeless people every day, forgetting their faces and ignoring them. They see them as shadows that should be taken care of by the government and charities, and not as their responsibility: "I pay so much taxes and these streets do not disappear!"

People do not want to help these homeless people, because it delays their own life plans. They look at these people as a bad example, as something that could happen to them if they do not move away from poverty and everything that means emotional and social weakness in the search for wealth or demands of modern life. Thus this society continues its path, looking, listening to our homeless, without any empathy as they get used to this "normality". Which is not good from any human perspective.

Racial hatred, xenophobia, and the most inhuman and insensitive indifference of the people who look down at them and throw them a coin of contempt is another very powerful reason that makes people not stop to think that each shadow is a life, a human being at a disadvantage and who needs protection and help.

For all this we must change the policy of having to fill out long questionnaires to get help when we are in a crisis. The people staffing these bureaucracies say "in a month we will see if you have a place to sleep, or an appointment for medical treatment, or some place to eat, or some training to

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## COALITION ON HOMELESSNESS

The STREET SHEET is a project of the Coalition on Homelessness. The Coalition on Homelessness organizes poor and homeless people to create permanent solutions to poverty while protecting the civil and human rights of those forced to remain on the streets.

Our organizing is based on extensive peer outreach, and the information gathered directly drives the Coalition's work. We do not bring our agenda to poor and homeless people: they bring their agendas to us.

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## STREET SHEET STAFF

The Street Sheet is a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness. Some stories are collectively written, and some stories have individual authors. But whoever sets fingers to keyboard, all stories are formed by the collective work of dozens of volunteers, and our outreach to hundreds of homeless people.

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continue being productive until you achieve your stability and resume your lives again."

While the people in a crisis of homelessness need help that same day, the bureaucracy delays and distances them, affecting not just individuals. The saddest thing is an entire family in despair—they may once have had a home, a job—but the adversity that could also reach us forced them to live in homelessness.

These people and their shadows wander around the city looking for a place to call home. Every day, every night people find ways to shelter at the train stations, at the bus stops, parks, by garbage cans. People sleep on the buses that serve as home for a couple hours while the route lasts, then get off at the end of the route to take the next one, waiting for dawn to come, then return to being the shadow that wanders looking for the next "home", or a hand that helps them get out of this labyrinth, always aimlessly.

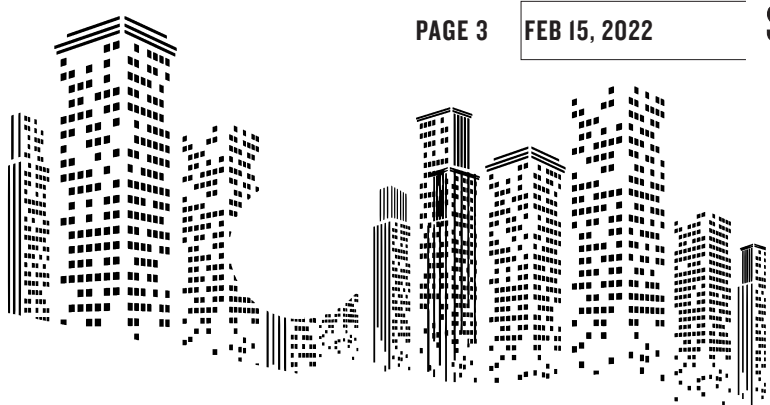
The bureaucratic municipal system was created for other times and not the challenges of today. Without initiative and only with the bureaucracy, they organize their systems theoretically and without interest in the experiences of those they claim to be serving. The prejudices and demeaning stereotypes that are used against homeless people

are immeasurably unacceptable. We need to connect in good faith, to incorporate and seek creative, dignified, and compassionate solutions to heal and protect the person in crisis.

The experiences of survivors of homelessness must be the cornerstone to understand this deep and complex social problem. The wealth of experience in how to overcome homelessness must be summoned, and programs meant to help homeless people should be designed with their voices and opinions at the center. Homelessness is often used as a pretext in political campaigns but when promises are not kept people become detractors, attacking the laws and proposals that should be helping pull people out of homelessness.

Finally, human beings experiencing homelessness in our cities and neighborhoods are just waiting for an opportunity to achieve their dream of finding a safe and dignified home. There needs to be a process to definitively transform the lives of people experiencing homelessness so that they can again undertake their own destiny, helping themselves and helping others so that the shadow of homelessness does not take them away from happiness and peace. ■





Manuel Esteban

## HI OR BYE

The floor is hard and unforgiving  
Every day and night  
The cold gets deep inside  
People think I chose this life  
And they say it's not their fight

The hunger gets unbearable  
And even with my pride I beg  
If not,in the garbage I dive  
And fish for whatever was leftover

I watch traffic go by  
and busy people pass by  
it's like I don't exist at all  
Since none say hi or bye

I thank the higher power though  
For there are some good folk in this land  
Who give people like me a hand  
And give us hope for a better land.



My name is Manuel Esteban, a home-less immigrant living in San Francisco. I started my journey to America from Columbia. It was a rigorous journey from my home to Mexico. Since by then I had run out of money, I was detained and put to work for a drug packaging outfit for almost three years, where we were worked to the bone to be able to afford the next leg of our journey. Some decided it wasn't worth it and tried to run, with catastrophic results if caught, so that those of us remaining wouldn't attempt it at all.

Finally, it was decided that some of us who had been there long enough had paid our dues and we were finally brought over. The only people I knew in the states were in San Francisco, so I made my way here to begin my life. I always thought that once I got to America, it would be all worth it for a piece of the American Dream. But when I got here, I found out that not one of my acquaintances had jobs. We had to do manual labor, and that was when we were lucky to be picked for daily chores. We lived together to try and save the little money we could manage to make, but since we all had people depending on us back home, no one really had the time or patience to baby others. I have been a short person since birth and I have little education, so I was rarely picked to work and eventually found myself out on the streets. I don't blame anyone because they did what they could under the circumstances.

I have been living on the streets since, eating from dumpsters. I have stolen food from restaurants, and snatched it from people just to make it through another day. The nights are cold and the concrete is hard, but it's my new reality and I have gotten used to it since it's better than going home. I stay because I have hope that one day, my circumstances will change and I can get a chance to build something for myself.

I hope my story helps and you can also help me too. ■

Luna Nova

The forgotten hungry and homeless nowadays are found everywhere. There are thousands of them in San Francisco and maybe millions in the U.S. Denied shelter in a world in which everyone is supposed to be equal; after all, we breathe the same air. But the poor, the homeless and the hungry immigrants cannot feel that life is very fair when the minority—those who are too wealthy—hoard too much of everything. Everyone should have a home to live in and nobody should go hungry or have to wear ragged clothes. Immigrants remain undocumented, the poor become poorer and the rich become richer. That is a very sad thing to say in this country at this time. I feel for them, for I am one of them!

They forget that we are homeless, not harmful; jobless, but hopeful; penniless, not dangerous. We will work, not steal. We are looking for compassion, not violence; seeking employment, not harassment; gaining hope, not property. Life is so free, yet so restricted. With all the joy in this earth, I am evicted. The earth is so full, yet we go hungry. We sit in silence as all passing eyes watch us. All their children go to school, learn, play and have fun together while our children have no homes, no schools, no play and no hope. They are made fun of and sadness slowly creeps in. Every day we see them, very well fed and dressed children with expensive toys to play with, yet our kids live in abject squalor. It's not their fault—they're just victims of bad luck!

On the streets, I have been hit and hurt, sexually assaulted and sexually discriminated against. It has got to a point where I can no longer feel pain. I know tomorrow they will do it again, laugh about it and call me names, but with a good heart and clear conscience I will still pray for them. I know the sun will shine for me, for us all, the homeless. We wake up every day praying and hoping that soon all this will change, and we'll be seen as human beings again. The cold nights, people walking past, not caring at all, no food, no shelter, no blankets at night — all this will come to pass. I wake up at night crying and asking myself if I really deserve this, but honestly, no one does!

From the deep down in our hearts, we ask for your compassion. Please do not just walk past us with noses raised and eyes filled with hatred, while we look down silently weeping. Feel pity for us as we have a lot to endure—the harshest of winters and the scorching heat of the summers. Please show a bit of respect because we are also part of this city. We might be in the poorest of slums, but we are still part of it.

Don't just walk past, look at us please.

Thank you to those who show mercy and visit us despite our poor health or poverty. You make our days better and our nights shorter. We are people, but few can tell that we are human and should be treated well. Just be nice — it costs nothing and goes a long way!

To the San Francisco community members who go out of their way to provide us with food, water and health care no matter how little: may you be blessed and never tire nor forsake us as if we are a burden to the majority. To the Government: please put in place better options that are safer for homeless folks — not just in San Francisco, but all over the USA — for protection from the harsh weather, sexual predators and much more of whatever we go through out here. Please consider coming up with supportive housing for us. We need it! ■

Tyler Smith

Hello, my name is Tyler. I am an immigrant that came to study in the U.S., San Francisco. Just like many other immigrants who visit the USA, after my studies, I didn't want to go back to my country. I had a few friends who worked in science, technology, engineering and mathematics who were lucky enough to extend their stay by being involved in STEM; I understand these subjects are quite a good deal for students who want to continue with their studies. I wish I had taken one of them. I tried many ways to extend my stay including getting married (for business reasons only) to a U.S. citizen just to get papers, then later get divorced. I was misled into thinking that was the easiest way, but it turned out to be the biggest misfortune.

I looked for a gay man as a partner, since I am also gay and, being in the USA, that was perhaps the easiest part of the process. Luckily, I found N through a mutual friend (I only had like two friends). We met a couple of times and talked about the business on the table, benefits and also risks associated with it. We started going on dates soon enough just to be seen together, took photos and posted them all over social media to show how much we were into each other out there. Within no time, I had moved in with him and we were officially a couple. At that moment, I did not know who was fooling whom. So days passed and we had to officially start the business, that's where money started being an issue. N asked for \$10,000 for the whole process but there were to be other expenses involved along the way, all under my belt. This was a "do or die" situation, and crazily enough, I went for "die."

I was able to bargain with my "husband-to-be," and the amount went down to \$8,000. Well, this was a good deal to pay for citizenship, which is not easy to get following the legal process. Raising the amount was not easy, but with time I was able to raise it through family and friends who had no idea of what I was borrowing the money for. I promised to refund it within no time after getting my first job. Our dates continued, and I finally made the payment without a second thought. Weeks went by, and N didn't give any negative energy signs.

Clearly, I thought this was it until one day the unexpected happened. N left the house as I was outside getting groceries and never came back. He was nowhere to be found on the phone, in emails or on social media. Days became weeks, and my world started spinning in a different direction. I did not know anyone else, and my time as a student in the USA had lapsed. Rent would be due soon enough, and the landlord was on my case. I had to run. Unfortunately, I could not report any of this, considering I was attempting fraud. Any legal approach on this would have led to deportation. I had been scammed, something I will never recover from. With no house, no money and no documentation, I was homeless without a doubt. For various reasons, no one would take me in, and the streets became my home to this day.

Why can't the government just offer an option for immigrant students to stay around in the U.S. if they wish? Why can't the government allow immigrants to come in with the proper qualifications and documentation and work for a period of time without making it difficult? Why can't immigrants search for greener pastures here without having to suffer like this? I wish I could answer all these questions running in my mind every night as I lay my head to sleep. ■

Anonymous

When the first case of Covid-19 was reported, no one felt or knew how far it would spread or impact our lives. No one would have known that it would affect us so much health-wise, economically and even mentally. As I write this the impact of this pandemic has been felt across borders, affecting everyone regardless of age, sex, religion or even social status. What we used to see as a normal routine became a luxury with movement restricted by lockdowns and self-isolations. Businesses got shut down, companies had to switch to Work from home and life was not the same again, it has not been the same till date. People lost their loved ones, families got broken and there was a whole level of disconnect among families, friends and even colleagues.

We all know the cost of living in America demands that you have to work hard and no one is exempted from this. Being an immigrant doesn't make the situation any easier but America is great and there are so many opportunities to explore. After completing my studies, I was able to secure a job and got shared accommodation with a roommate just to make bills a bit lighter. Everything was normal and moving on well until Covid-19 hit the world. At first it was just a virus in China, now it's a catastrophe that I believe at least most of us have a story to share about it. Many businesses and workplaces got so affected and suffered financially due to the economic setback. They ended up closing and laying off some of their employees either permanently or temporarily until they were able to stabilize again.

Months after the virus got into America, my workplace was not spared. We woke up to letters of certain positions in the company being laid off temporarily. I thought I was lucky that this would only last a few weeks but there was no duration on the letter indicating when we would head back to work, it was still a tricky situation. Months passed and efforts of hunting for a new job ended up in frustration. Companies were not hiring new employees in fact they were planning on reduction, this was the story almost everywhere. Falling behind on rent and having used up all my savings I was facing imminent eviction with nowhere to go. Weeks later, I was homeless and had to hit the streets. That is where I met Tyler. We became friends and since he had been on the streets for a while he showed me how to survive out there. It was not easy but I had to adapt.

Luckily, one day I was called by my previous employer and went back to work. I was able to stabilize again a bit fast since I got a part time job to increase my savings. I use some of my income to help the homeless including Tyler. I visit them as much as I can, we share a meal and at least I can see a smile on them. I wish I could help more and more people but am restrained financially. If anyone is capable of providing assistance, please go ahead. These great humans need you, they need me, they need us all. ■



# BLACK IMMIGRANT STORIES



## Michael

I came to America as part of a n LGBTQ group seminar 3 years ago. Coming from Africa, this was the best moment of my life. Filled with excitement, we began the journey and on getting here I wasn't disappointed at all. I was happy with what I saw and the idea of sticking around wasn't that bad, at that moment.

Time passed and I was supposed to head back to Africa, but decided to stay around even though I didn't have documentation. With a few referrals I finally got a host—his name was V and he also promised to assist in getting documentation to be an American citizen.

I thought this was a good deal and, although it had to come at a price, I thought it was totally worth it. We planned out how this would work and even agreed on the payment. I gathered together my savings from my previous job and a few loans from friends and family. Within a few months I was able to raise the agreed amount and I paid V in cash—he insisted on cash. I should have read that as a sign that this was not heading in the right direction.

Days after I had made the payment, my worst fear became a reality: V went missing. His phone was off and attempts to trace him through his close friends bore no fruits. No one seemed to know his whereabouts, or maybe no one was willing to snitch. I got the feeling that this was just a scam that they all run as friends, that the studio apartment we were living in was just a temporary house for him to be able to dupe me. I tried asking the landlord and apparently V was not even his real name, he had used different documents.

I sunk into a world of desperation, anger and depression. I did not know anyone else in San Francisco apart from this kind hearted man who turned out to be my worst nightmare. The worst part of it all is that V had even stolen my passport so I didn't have any identification documents on me. Reporting this to the police was not an option because I was already living in America illegally. With no money to pay rent or buy food, I had to leave the house and head for the streets.

Life out here is not easy and every passing morning I contemplate whether to just surrender myself to the authorities and deal with the consequences or continue living in these streets. Thanks to Joccy and others like us here we support and encourage each other hoping that one day things will get better. It's so painful when you have to go through what we go through because of someone else's greed. Being a member of the LGBTQ community doesn't make the situation any easier. Sometimes we have to do sex work in exchange for even a plate of food. Please, help us find a place we can call home! ■

## Anonymous

I am an immigrant from Uganda, Africa. I came to San Francisco five years ago to attend a cousin's graduation. Everything was going so well and I decided to extend my stay in the United States without proper documentation. As everyone else left for Uganda, I made that terrible mistake of staying behind. It was an awesome experience. The U.S.—San Francisco and other places that I visited—is far more developed than Uganda. It was my first time visiting. I was excited and did not see any reason to get back to our slow-developing, struggling economy and opportunity-deprived Uganda. I was having first-hand experience of “The American Dream!” Little did I know all hell would break loose. My advice to anyone trying to do this: Don't!

I was able to secure a low income job at a restaurant while still being hosted by my cousin, who at that time encouraged me to stick around and promised to help get me documented. The pay was something I had not earned before, and with very few bills to take care of it was enough at that moment. Unfortunately, my cousin passed on in 2020 due to COVID-19 complications and I was left alone with all our bills. As time passed, I couldn't afford rent or the house's maintenance, and I was kicked out after a while.

A few months later, our workplace was closed due to COVID-19, and that's how I lost my job. From then onwards, life has never been the same again. I've had to do crazy stuff just to afford food, medicine and clothes. It has come to a point where I have had to do sex work for these basic needs. I can't pay any rent of my own and have to couchsurf at friends' houses. Some of these “friends” demand sex for hosting and saying no to their demands will either lead to rape or getting chased from the house.

I cannot mention names but I would like to thank the few organizations that offer us food on a weekly basis or even twice a week without asking for any form of identification and without discrimination.

With my undocumented immigration status, I have limited options when it comes to accessing jobs. Most employers do not want to collide with immigration or law enforcers, so they just send you away. Some organizations also require payment methods that do not include cash to offer monetary assistance and this is quite a challenge since I do not have the proper identification documents to open these accounts.

Sometimes, I think of going back to Uganda but I have a few challenges there as well. For one thing, my family will be disappointed, and I will also be disappointed. Although the cost of living is quite high, America is great, and I don't want to leave. Lastly, I cannot even afford a plane ticket back home. I wish there was a way I, and others in similar positions, could be assisted to get documentation. That would help us live more comfortable lives without having to run away from the law to avoid deportation. This would also play a huge role in securing jobs and therefore being able to afford rent. ■

## Anonymous

Back in South Africa, just like any other part of the world, education is considered the backbone of our country's economy. Most governments invest in it, and the fruits can be seen in producing well-educated graduates who help run various sectors. As a young girl, I always dreamt of studying abroad, and kept on applying for sponsorships. One day my dream came true and I landed my chance in San Francisco. I went through the necessary academic and medical procedures to avoid any delays and I started my schooling abroad. The school covered most of my tuition, I had a host, and all I had to do was study.

Being the social person that I am, it was not before long that I started making friends. In the process of making friends and everything, I got a boyfriend: Diego. We got to liking each other, and that's when I learned that Diego was rich. He'd drive to school and could easily afford everything that I thought was a luxury. I started hanging out with him a lot and that was a huge problem with my host. The situation got so bad that I walked out and went on to live with my so-called boyfriend. At first, everything was smooth and quiet, but then little by little there were small parties here and there at the house.

The small parties became frequent, and then became disastrous when police started coming in, claiming reports of disturbance to neighbors. There were hard drugs and weapons I had never seen

before with Diego's friends, but he assured me there was nothing to worry about, nor should I mention anything to anyone. I should have seen these red flags but the fun was too much to let go. Diego would give me everything I asked for but he never let me have money of my own—another red flag. Time went by and I started missing classes due to overdoses that led to days and weeks of recuperation. The university could not condone my behavior and within no time I was scrapped off my sponsorship and student visa at the same time. This was a nightmare. Everything that had brought me to America was gone.

I was required to head back to South Africa, but Diego convinced me to stay behind and that he'd protect me—the third red flag. I ignored them all. Apparently, Diego remained in school. Party life went on and since our circle was small, I didn't have any worries. I was Diego's illegal housewife, an illegal immigrant and a peddler for his illegal drugs just to keep the money coming. This went on until Diego wanted to turn me into a sex worker and slave for his clients. How could things change so fast? He was done with me, leaving me to be used by other men. I refused to abide by his commands and he threw me out of the house. Disowned by my host, cast out by my boyfriend, sent away from school and undocumented, I didn't have anywhere to go, and that's how I became homeless.

There are so many victims of immigration, ill-fated relationships and homelessness out here and we all have one wish: to be assisted to get documents to be able to work in America, or just have assistance go back home. ■

## Anonymous

I came to the United States five years ago from Uganda with an invitation from my husband who had secured a visa a few years back. My husband and I were both brought up at a children's home in Kampala. Luckily after studying until A-level, my husband got a visa and came to the United States eight years ago.

When we arrived here everything was OK. We were living a good life until 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and that's when everything started going south. My husband was working for an IT firm in San Francisco. In April 2019, the company had to lay off some employees and, unluckily, he was one of them.

We had saved up some money for a rainy day so we were still not too bad off, and I was working as a waiter in a nearby restaurant. We tried to survive the situation until August when the restaurant I was working for also closed, and we were both unemployed. At this time my husband was stressed and had started drinking. I was optimistic about the situation and encouraged him to keep looking for another job, as I was doing, too.

At the start of 2021, my husband had become depressed and was drinking too much. He would come home and start beating me up, but as an African wife that I was, I endured and I was still by his side. Around March I received a letter from the landlord that we hadn't paid rent so I confronted him to ask him about it only to find out he had used up all the money we had saved. I talked to the landlord and explained our situation and he was sympathetic. He allowed us to continue living there and asked that we pay as soon as we had funds.

Two months later, the landlord couldn't put

up with us and again we were given an eviction notice. By this time my husband was not even living in the house. He had started using heroin, and most of the time I had to get him from the drug houses. After I was evicted, I was willing to go back to Uganda so I contacted the embassy. Little did I know that my husband had sold my passport so that he could buy drugs. It had been used illegally, and the embassy was actually looking for me.

At that moment, I was confused. I'm a fugitive. I don't have papers, I'm homeless, and I really didn't know what to do. The few friends I had wouldn't pick up my calls after they heard my husband was on drugs. I used the little money I had to rent a hotel for a few nights and buy myself some food, but because I didn't have any income shortly it was all over and I was out on the streets.

I was still trying to get a job but most of the hotels and restaurants had closed so there wasn't much I could do. I turned to shelters for sleep and showers, but I wasn't able to get a bed consistently. So I decided to become a sex worker — at least this could feed me, and I was able to sleep at the client's place at times.

When I was working the streets, I would go check up on my husband in the drug houses, but shortly after I was informed that he died after he took a bad batch of drugs.

I'm still working the streets, but it's not paying as well so I'm still homeless. I can't find a decent job because I don't have papers, and also I can't approach my embassy because my passport is flagged. I'm just living under the radar hoping I will earn enough to rent a house and also get a lawyer who can help me with the immigration. ■



# ANT

## Jocey

The rate of homelessness in San Francisco is currently alarming and it's quite unfortunate that I have been a victim of it. My name is Jocey, a 28-year-old divorcee, and this is my story...

I came to the United States in 2016 on a tourist visa to attend a church seminar. That's how I met my now ex-husband, and being a young Black lady I fell in love with this white man. He convinced me to stay and get married to get documentation. It wasn't an easy decision, but somehow I got convinced and stayed behind. We got married and even had kids together. Everything was going so well and I even managed to secure a job. Being married in the U.S. meant I would get citizenship, beautiful kids and a job, I wouldn't ask for anything more.

Things started taking a wrong turn after I lost my job. Our workplace closed down due to negative financial effects of COVID-19. I became a stay-at-home wife and mother of four. I got so depressed at one point because my husband started cheating. Raising any questions resulted in mistreatment and abuse, and I couldn't do anything, because he was our only source of income. My marriage took a wrong turn and ended in a bad divorce. Unfortunately, my ex-husband is a prominent official and was able to bend a few laws, and I ended up with almost nothing. I moved out of the house but in a short while all the funds I had gathered before the divorce got used up paying rent and buying food for me and the kids.

I fell into depression and turned to drugs for comfort. I spent most of my time and remaining money in bars and doing drugs. The situation got so bad that I was evicted from my house due to rent arrears and even lost custody of the kids since I couldn't take care of them anymore. Since then I have been through a lot—bad relationships with people who just wanted to use me, couch surfing at friends' houses—but it has not been easy being hosted, especially being a drug addict. That was a deep fall, from grace to grass in a very short while. I would never wish this even to my worst enemy.

With no job, no income, and no housing, even getting food was tough and I had to depend on assistance from individuals and organizations. It got to a point where I had to enroll with a support group and it's been really helpful. I am currently undergoing lots of counseling and slowly recovering from the addiction. I would also like to start looking for a new job just to get back on my feet again. Everyday I wish I could spend more time with my kids and be a complete family once again.

I wish the government would come up with a strategy or a good way to cater to people like us: immigrants, divorcees, homeless people, drug addicts. It's really tough out here and it's not getting any better. Sometimes I wish we would get one individual who would fight for us all. I am sure the government is capable of providing this assistance but there are a few individuals who only think of themselves, at least that's how I feel. I am grateful, though, that there are few organizations and well wishers who throw in some loose change, food and even offer emotional support, when sometimes all we need is a shoulder to cry on. You never find this in the streets.

I hope this and other people's stories that we share may reach you, readers. Please share this and maybe it will touch somebody's heart somewhere. Thank you, good people. ■

## Sofia Henry

Africa is a beautiful land full of resources, tourist attractions and diverse culture, but still many of us leave it to visit the U.S. and look for greener pastures. Either legally or illegally, we find a way in without the intention of leaving. America is great, but my advice is to always choose the legal way. Coming illegally doesn't always end well, and you might struggle with the police, life and the streets themselves. One of these will catch up with you faster than you might think. I wish we would have someone warn us before setting foot on that plane. I hope to share what goes on beyond borders and serves as a lesson for anyone wanting to come to this side of the world — and how my life ended after landing in San Francisco, one of the most expensive cities in the U.S.

Back home, I would say I had a good life. It was not very comfortable, but I was well-sheltered, well-clothed and had enough on the table. But I still dreamt of how life was better for my friends living abroad. That was all I wanted for myself. I left a few phone messages and soon I was able to find a distant cousin of mine, James (not his real name), to host me. I planned to stay with him for a short period of time since he was a guy, and I did not want any situation. I gathered my resources and applied for a temporary tourist visa. That was the

first difficult task I had to complete. Luckily, I passed the test. Next I asked people to raise more funds for a plane ticket and to keep me going until I got my first job, and they didn't disappoint. I was able to raise quite a good amount to sustain me for a while since I did not have to pay rent.

The day came, and I boarded a flight. Hours later, I landed in San Francisco and James was kind enough to pick me at the airport. When we got to his house I rested, and I thought I had found the perfect host. Three months later, an opening came up at his workplace and, being a manager, he was able to hook me up even without proper documentation. When my tourist visa expired, I did not see any need to worry with James right by my side. We maintained a good friendship and respect at the workplace.

But men—you can never trust men. James started asking me out on dates and making passes at me but I brushed it off. At first, I thought it was just an infatuation since we both know, though we're distant relatives, we are still family. The situation became serious and he attempted to rape me one night as I was sleeping. Raised in a Christian family, I did not believe in sex before marriage, and I wasn't ready for marriage, especially not to my distant cousin.

The advances went on but I stuck to my word. That is when I saw James' true colors. He became violent and attempted to rape me a couple of times again, but I kept fighting it until one night the worst happened. James raped me, beat me and chased me out of the house with nothing but the clothes I had on and some money that I had managed to save up. No phone, no passport and no visa. I could not call anyone nor report him to the police, since that would have meant more trouble for me. The following morning, I went to work and James falsely accused me of theft and told me to leave, that I was fired. He threatened to call the authorities. I could not hang around and wait for this, so I fled.

With no phone, I have no contact with anyone around here nor back home. They have no idea what happened to me. I was and still am really affected mentally, and I am struggling with my mental health every day. Starting over has not been easy. Sometimes I think of going back to James but he is an animal. Being a woman in the streets, I feel vulnerable every day. I just wish I could get my passport back and face the authorities, but the consequences would be so severe. I need help going back home! ■

## Anonymous

I am an immigrant from Malawi, and I have lived in San Francisco for the last ten years. I came to the United States for a wedding and afterwards I decided to stay and try to make it in America. After all, it's the land of opportunity, and I could get a chance to experience the American dream. My sister helped me get minimum wage jobs and I lived with her for a while, until her husband got a good job opportunity and they had to move to New York. I couldn't move with them since they had already done so much for me, so I stayed in San Francisco and tried to make it on my own.

Slowly, bills started piling up and I couldn't keep up with the rent, so I was evicted and had to live with friends for a while. These so-called friends would occasionally demand sex as payment and due to lack of options I would sometimes grudgingly agree. When I refused, I was raped, beaten and chased out like an animal. Eventually, even they got tired of hosting me and I ended up living in my car.

During the pandemic, I lost my job and had to sell my car for basic needs like food and medicine. I finally ended up on the streets and I have been unsheltered since then. Due to my immigration status, finding employment has been a nightmare, since almost all employers require one to be documented. If am being honest, I have had to engage in acts that I am really not proud of, like doing sex work and offering sexual favours for food or shelter. This has really had a negative impact on my self worth and image.

I have on a few occasions contemplated suicide and even tried it once, though I was rushed to the hospital in time. I dream of going back home but I have lost the confidence to face my family and the people back home, since I feel like I have completely messed up my life and they wouldn't accept me as I am now. Occasionally I go to shelters, but life on the streets is hard, especially for a Black woman. It's unsafe outside due to fear of rape, beatings, even getting killed. Cops also harass us just for being homeless. Most of us on the streets are just happy to see another day, even though we know it might be our last day on Earth due to horrible living conditions and excessive drug and alcohol consumption. But we have nothing and no one to turn to except the few individuals and organizations that will from time to time help us with food, warm clothes, socks and other necessities. It is truly a terrible way to live and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. ■

## Anonymous

America is a free world, offering the freedom to work anywhere with no discrimination or favoritism, or so it seems. It is a place most of us have heard through social media, relatives, friends and even through movies, a dream to anybody living in other developing or underdeveloped countries. Our countries have so much corruption: even your qualifications mean nothing unless you know someone who knows someone to connect you to even a construction job. Most of the educated people have nothing to do, to such an extent that they prefer to buy a motorcycle to be able to work as taxi drivers—boda boda riders, as we call them back home—and pay the hefty loans and taxes that come with it while carrying their master's degrees and diploma certificates around like normal valueless papers.

This makes one grab any chance to escape such harsh and unforgiving realities with both. This has made most of us, like me for example, go from the heat and into the frying pan. I am writing this to serve as a lesson to those out there who would want to try and get to the green pastures of America without the right papers or through the right channels. This is my story for those who will care to listen or read.

Having come from a humble background my poor parents sold most of their inheritance to send me through school so that I could be the breadwinner of the family and help my other six siblings through school once I got a job. Being a first-born in the family, I was like a third parent to my siblings.

With my qualified degree papers, I looked for a job within and outside my qualifications to no avail. It so happened that my first cousin, who was a close friend, was to graduate from a university in San Francisco and I was invited. Everything was a struggle, but I wanted the exposure to a different environment and so we came to celebrate with him. When the event was over, I decided to stay a while longer to at least get to know it better and maybe start a new life here. I hoped to find a job, get some money and start some investment back in my home country to be able to help my parents and siblings. This was my personal decision that I only shared with my cousin later on when our other relatives returned to Africa.

My life changed. I had a sweet life that one would never wish to leave behind, coming

from the difficulties of my home country, mostly staying indoors while my cousin went out for his daily hustle to be able to afford rent and other basic needs. I would walk him a few miles then come back, lock myself in the house, and live an introverted life with no friends or anybody to talk to until he returned. He had shown me how to get paid to do some online surveys, which wasn't bad for someone with no bills. I could save the money and only chip in when need be.

One day, I had a loud bang on our door and I thought I had been caught being in the country illegally, that the authorities had come for me, so I hid behind a closet. The bang got louder, and then someone shouted that my cousin had been shot. I never understood what my cousin did at work. This was the day I learned that he sold drugs and, since he had a lot of debts, he jumped from one street boss to another to just make sure he made enough to sustain us. I was devastated because I immediately knew it was going to be tough to survive without him, but little did I know that someone has to pay his debts and, there being no one else, I was the guarantor.

What began as an opportunity in America became a nightmare in a second. I had never pushed drugs, let alone used them, but suddenly I had to do so to pay my cousin's debt and the mortgage. I was never told which hospital he was taken to or if he is still alive or in jail. I wonder sometimes if he played me and became a street boss that I am working for. Whatever the reason, every day I would get a package and ship it to locations shown then pick up funds and deliver them to a location. Remember I am undocumented; I am dealing drugs, and using some for courage purposes.

Since that was too much already, I was thrown out of the house and I was forced to live with someone I barely knew. We shared everything and still continue to pay the street bosses debts, that just keep on increasing. It is so hard to live in San Francisco as a drug pusher; a lot of the drug distributors you work with would either steal from you or sabotage you to make the street bosses relieve their debt and transfer it to you. I have since been lying to my relatives about having a job, and in addition promising to send them some lump sum which I have never done for over a year now. I am always trying to save documents which have never come to fruition. I have no choice but to survive by selling drugs. It's a survival game in the streets. My life depends on how much I do to convince the bosses that I am worth more to them alive than dead. ■



# UNDOCUMENTED IN SAN FRANCISCO:

## MY STORY

Detroit Richards

I am undocumented, and so is my son. We are ‘illegal’ because our coordinates don’t match our birthplaces, because my legal dual American citizen husband beat me mercilessly for years and I had to run to try and save the two of us. Running meant leaving behind my visa, which was totally dependent on my staying in the marriage and thus being compliant to the sexual and physical violence he subjected me to on a daily basis. My son, who was under 10 at the time, was constantly bullied by his father, my husband. He was bullied for not being perceived as loud and macho enough for his tyrant of a father. I protected him as best as I could, but that was increasingly inadequate, so I took the two of us on a trip to visit his family in the U.S., having won my husband’s confidence that he had absolutely crushed me. I pushed myself down deep within myself in order to keep him happy and make him believe I was absolutely compliant. I made him believe I had no fight left in me. I made him believe he had won. I took every rape, every beating, every broken finger, smashed head, cruel word. I withstood him starving me, only allowing me to eat a few times a week, in order to stay to protect my child. I had only one change of clothes and no access to medical care. I had to survive him killing my beloved pet cat—something that still causes me great shame, even though I tried to protect my little friend, taking a nasty injury to do so. I had to survive being told every day that the only way out of the marriage was in a box, and that no one would care if I was dead. I believe this still to be true. If I had stayed with him in Asia, he would have killed me. He would have been minimally punished, if at all, and no one but my son would care.

I still have to cope with people not understanding that although most people don’t see the particular country we lived in as dangerous, or lacking in the ability to seek justice, in fact domestic violence was totally legal in the jurisdiction until relatively recently. When a law was finally passed that made hitting a spouse somewhat illegal, it only made it illegal by civil, not criminal, law. The reality was that the cops would come, they would apologize to my husband for bothering him, and tell me to be quieter. The cops would tell me to get beaten up without causing distress to my neighbors by doing so noisily. I made myself be silent in order to not to make things worse.

I don’t want pity. My life was what it was for a long time because I had no legal means of taking my child out of the country without severe repercussions. Those whose lives have not fallen to pieces around them do not seem to see the stories behind the undocumented and our reasons for coming to the United States. I came here because this was the only place I had any chance of outrunning him, because his sister was sympathetic and married to an American, and if something happened to me I supposed she might support my child. I came here because I had friends here at the time, and a little bit of support, so I would not be totally alone. I came here because I had already tried returning to the jurisdiction of my birth and had been forced back to Asia under the Hague Convention on parental child abduction. The ultimatum I had been given was to either go back to him or else face a long jail sentence and my child being sent back to him anyway, this time without me to protect him.

Staying was not an option. The police were not interested and I was being told on a daily basis, in between violent and bloody rapes and beatings that the only way out of the marriage was in a box, feet first. He told me that he would ‘say sorry’ if he killed me, and that he was ‘stressed and crazy’ and he wouldn’t even go to jail. I used to lay in bed wondering if, after he killed me, whether he would choose to kill our son, too. I could not let it happen, I had to run. I was fighting for my life. I was fighting for my child. I was just

trying to survive.

My story is just one of the many devastating stories that lay behind the simplistic arbitrary declaration of ‘legal’ and ‘not legal’. It is hardly unusual, or even particularly extreme. I simply came and overstayed my welcome. When my husband returned to the U.S. to work and live legally—having chased me out here—he demanded I return to him. He said he would renew my spousal visa, but I told him to forget it, that I would rather be ‘illegal’ and free and safe, and so would the kid. It cost me dearly, but I would do the same again, even with hindsight. Becoming illegal under the law saved my life and that of my son.

I do not enjoy my status as outside of society. I never feel safe. I rarely feel welcome. I have to live with the fact that most of America detests me because I am undocumented. The media peddles the narrative that my son and I are a danger and that we are immoral. Being part of a group that is constantly scapegoated wears on the soul. I am constantly asked about my accent. The question ‘where are you from?’ is often followed by the question, “when are you going back there?” Being asked where ‘I am from’ is an attack, it is a danger, and it is not safe for me to say, yet the question is there every time I open my mouth. It is always made absolutely clear to me, that no matter how long I have been in the U.S., I am not American, that I do not belong here, that I am not accepted and that neither of us are wanted. I am not even a second class citizen; I am not a citizen at all. My son was turned away from Little League baseball for not having documentation, and I have had trouble getting him into schooling, eventually finding him a safe solution online that was paid for by friends. Without a community around us, but a few good friends, we survived, but struggled to thrive.

When we came to the U.S. we were homeless, living in parking lots and campgrounds with a very kind American friend of mine that I had known for some considerable time. I had tried to access help in different states, all up the West Coast, and even over in the Midwest. My American born friends formed a circle around me and the kid, and although it was very hard living outside for years, I had the comfort of being able to move on geographically when I felt as if the world and my husband was catching up with me. There was no help, because of the simple fact that I was ‘illegal.’ I couldn’t even access a domestic violence shelter in Washington State when I tried. I had no paperwork or documentation, nor did my child. We were turned away from food banks, we were refused legal aid, my child was turned away from schools despite my trying very hard to work with the system; the system was stacked against us.

My child and I spent over 5 years unhoused and traveling across this beautiful country before we got inside. It was only when the pandemic made being on the road an impossibility—closing down campgrounds, showers, and bathrooms, so that we never got a break with electricity for warmth, and a safe place we would not be moved on from—that I took a breath and decided to try something else. I sat down by the campfire and thought hard. I had to think of where we could go and possibly get some help to survive. After living remotely for so long, the idea of being homeless in a city with a child was almost too frightening to consider. I had been homeless and city-based when I was a young childless woman, but the brutality of being both undocumented and unhoused with no friends to help me, and being in a city that I did not know at all was overwhelmingly terrifying.

I realized that there was one city that might just be safe: San Francisco. It has a reputation for being a sanctuary city within a sanctuary state, so I figured there might well be some kind of resources available to us that was not there in northern rural coastal towns, and

if it came down to it and we had to be in a tent, then the weather was survivable for the most part. I looked at the boy sleeping by the campfire, and the shame and guilt of being undocumented, of being unhoused, of not having anything to offer him but my love and protection overwhelmed me. I knew I had to try something different. I decided to go to San Francisco and see if there was anyone there that might understand why I did what I did, and consider helping us, or at least helping my son stay safe.

Getting down here was a problem. I was advised that ICE was occasionally raiding both the trains and the Greyhound buses. Trump had whipped up anti immigrant sentiment into epic proportions. I was legitimately scared. Every pro-Trump sign felt like a threat to our existence and safety. I had no one to drive us down to San Francisco, and the idea of driving illegally for hundreds of miles just seemed to be tempting fate. One cop traffic stop would mean jail, deportation and the prospect of never seeing my child again. I knew one bad day, one wrong police traffic stop and the possibility was there that my son and I would be put into an ICE facility, and separated possibly to never see each other again. I was terrified that he would not cope. Every photo of these facilities full of children missing their loved ones and family and being treated appallingly made my heart sink for them. This is not the America I know and love, this is the dark underbelly of hatred that I cannot fathom.

In the end, the individual kindness of friends pulled me through. A very kind feminist friend offered to pay for a very expensive taxi ride and ten days in an AirBnB if I agreed to try and seek help in San Francisco. I threw everything we owned into two bags, grabbed my little tent just in case, and put us in the taxi. As we pulled into San Francisco at night, driving over the bridge into Outer Sunset, I had the feeling that things might just be ok. I thought that perhaps things might be ok because this great liberal city on the Bay has that effect on people. It gives people hope. It gives people the sliver of a prospect of not just surviving, but also possibly thriving. It gives people the space to feel as safe as they can possibly feel in a society that demonizes them for trying to survive situations that would otherwise be fatal.

At least it used to. Mayor London Breed’s new ‘Take Back the Tenderloin’ militaristic push has left both me and my son feeling absolutely terrified that we might be the next targets of the ‘clean up’ of society, as the compassionless politicians see it. San Francisco is being driven in a direction that is against everything this City of beat poets, hippies, and vibrant immigrants have ever stood for. The city knows who it is at the heart of everything: we are progressive, we care, we do not victimize, but the influx of the rich and successful has led to a city riven in two. We are now a polarized ‘have’ and ‘have nots’, and the ‘haves’ do not feel much like sharing. San Francisco is fighting for its very soul, but I believe that the power of love, kindness, acceptance and independence is so strong here that we have a chance of keeping San Francisco the kind of place that remains a shining beacon of hope amid a sea of dark hatred.

I was lucky. When we got into San Francisco, I was able to secure a place at a SIP Hotel. It saved our lives. We were allowed access, despite being undocumented, and given food, help, support, acceptance and understanding. For the first time since we had been in the U.S. and been undocumented, I felt like people cared for us, and wanted to protect us both, and for the first time we were given assistance. Eventually we gained a housing subsidy via a domestic violence charity and therefore a chance at survival. We now live in the Tenderloin, and are very happy here. We both love our adopted country. I love the America that I know, and the kind and decent people that live in it. The loud voices of those who spout hatred and lack of understanding and tolerance, that refuse to share the huge bounty of our society, are just that - loud, but oh so damaging. Since coming to the city I have met people who are devoted to a more equal society, a society that includes those who are undocumented, unhoused, those who struggle with various issues that put them outside the accepted privileged norm. For once my son feels like it is possible that one day he might be allowed to participate

within society fully and equally, and all that is being threatened, all that good is being dragged down by the weight of hatred and a new vigor towards a right wing agenda. He still can’t play in a little league game, I still have to fund his schooling, and he still worries every single day that the DREAM act will not pass, but he has hope and a place to live, and we are together, and that is the greatest gift anyone could ever give either of us. Thank you, San Francisco.

Whilst I am immensely grateful for the help I have received, life is still not easy, not absolutely safe, and my daily struggle to survive exhausts me. The rhetoric that the undocumented get everything for free disgusts me. The actuality of the situation is so far removed from that it is unreal. We had no access to any healthcare and still do not. When my son had an accident, a very kind nurse in the ER made sure he got treated, but that was the action of a single caring individual who worked around a system that barely cares for citizens that are poor and fall through the cracks, let alone those it is hostile to because they are undocumented. I have not been able to access any health care at all, and live in constant pain from injuries that have never healed properly. I have not been able to find any legal support that is able to deal with my complex case. I have no bank account, and cannot even use Western Union, Venmo or Paypal without a social security number. I survive on the kindness of friends, who seem to be delighted that I survived and who understand the impossibility of my situation; and my situation is almost impossible.

Every day I wake up wondering if today will be the day ICE makes an appearance. Even writing this down for others to read is an act of defiance and feels hugely unsafe, but if I don’t speak up, then others will not either. That is perhaps the most damaging and hurtful part of being undocumented: you lose your voice out of fear. I am compelled into silence for fear I will be deported. I rarely voice opinions because my voice does not matter. I have been told many times by legal citizens that I have no right to a point of view because I am not documented. Opinions are not only forbidden for me to hold, but are also dangerous for me to have. In order to survive I have had to abide by the edict of ‘low profile’ because to be loud, to speak out, is to be noticed, and to be noticed is not safe. When getting on a train is dangerous, and that danger has not abated even with a Democratic President, who has failed to abolish ICE, then there is something very wrong with society. The undocumented are being used as a political football, with the Dream Act still not passed, and the border being used as a battering ram with which to attack along political party lines. Politics is not solving problems - it is the problem. Nothing can be done because people are not being seen as individuals, with individual stories, and reasons for coming to the U.S..

This is my story. It is only one amongst many of the stories of the undocumented who live, work, and try and survive and thrive within San Francisco, and every single one of those stories are worth compassion and understanding. I am sure many who read this would be happy to see me thrown on an airplane and deported, and my son thrown into a dangerous and uncertain future without me, simply because I am ‘illegal.’ These people never see the person that I am, who has done so much to survive. Many people seem to think they could do things better in my situation. Privilege blinds people to the reality of survival. These judgmental souls always seem to think they can do better, and do it in a way that would be more socially acceptable. I do not care. I am alive. I saved my child. I am still here fighting for a long term solution so that I can stay in my home, because California is my home. San Francisco is my home. This is where we belong, and a piece of paper saying I have permission does not make that any more or less true. When the politicians start up their rhetoric, which detracts from their own failings, and pushes the need to hate and blame for those inadequacies upon the vulnerable, if only one person thinks of my situation and pushes back against the drift towards inhumanity, then perhaps the risk I took writing this will be worth it.

Peace. ■



Anonymous

I had to change my name for my own safety. My family was originally from Ukraine and we were dirt poor with no future. My younger sister and I tried everything we could to get our family out of poverty by doing odd jobs, bartending, stripping and eventually prostitution, but it was never enough.

We finally got a chance to immigrate to America as models through an online advertising agency, which paid for everything from processing of passports to air fare, accommodations and everything else. We should have known that it was too good to be true, but desperate people usually have limited or no options, so we agreed and unknowingly signed our lives away.

When we got to the United States, the first thing they did was give each and every one of us a bill showing how much it had cost to bring each one of us here plus interest, and told us we had to pay it off. They then immediately took our passports and we were taken straight to a brothel where we were to pay off our debts. All kinds of clients would come and pay very well to do whatever they wanted to do to us, like we were animals. It was as if we were modern-day slaves with no control over our lives. We were beaten, raped and even starved at times until we had enough.

Ashina

Immigration is the movement of people from one country (mostly developing or underdeveloped countries) to another (usually developed countries) in search for better livelihood. Homelessness is the state of one being without shelter. The main causes of both immigration and homelessness are poverty and unemployment, which make it impossible to afford basic needs and can force a person to be homeless or move to another foreign country with the hope of securing a job with at least minimum wage.

My name is Ashina (though it's not my true name). I come from the most remote part of South Kivu province in Congo. I am from a humble background: a family of six siblings and our single mother. My mother tried her best to bring us up but there was never enough for us all to go to school and have at least two meals in a day. When things got harder, I dropped out of school and was connected to a job agency that promised to get me a well paying job in the United States. In all my life this was the first good news I had.

The joy of going overseas, the stories told of how safe, clean, and full of opportunities America was, and happiness all flashed through me. I thought I had finally made it in life, that I would change my family's story. All I could think of is how I would be sending money home to educate my siblings and provide decent housing for them. Due to my naivete, I did not think any dangers would befall me. I didn't know yet that things would not go as I imagined.

A month later, all my documents were together, arrangements were made, and I was set to leave. October 4, 2020, is a day I will never forget. That day, my situation got worse. It marked the beginning of a time I yearned to die and get away from all my troubles. I felt like I was a cursed lady with no chance of good luck around the corner.

By around 11 a.m. the next day, I was in California and was picked up by people who took me to San Francisco to meet my employers, who seemed like a really nice Christian family. They received me well and showed me my room in the basement of their house, where I was to live. For that month, things were just fine and peaceful. But at the beginning of November, everything changed. This Christian family became my doom. The lady of the house had two grown-up sons and an abusive husband.

The men started mistreating me, demand-

Without going into much detail, we managed to get away with no passports or any identifying documents on us, and since we did not know anyone in the U.S., we ended up on the streets. My sister and I are still stranded here without any documentation showing who we are and where we are from—that's why we took on new names and identities. Though we are homeless, we much prefer this life since we at least get to make our own decisions, and any money we make from prostitution we get to keep and send a little back to Ukraine. As we speak, we are still living on the streets of San Francisco with little or nothing. We do occasionally go to shelters for a warm meal, socks, soup and other necessities, but most of our time is spent on the streets because even in the shelters, bad things still happen to women—my sister was raped in a shelter once.

Before we got to the U.S., all we knew was what we would see on television with the picket fences and well manicured lawns. On TV, the people seemed so friendly, giving and warm. The buildings were so tall and magnificent it was unbelievable. In real-life San Francisco, there are still good people who come and visit us with food, clothes and even phones, and then there are some truly despicable ones who will beat you up for the fun of it. All in all, I'd rather be here than back home because here we at least manage to send money to our father back home. Since our mum passed on, he takes care of our youngest brother and my child, whom I left in search of greener pastures. ■

ing I do my chores in a bikini when the lady of the house left for work. I could not refuse, since I was in a foreign country with no one to run to. Weeks later it graduated to sexual harassment. All the male members of the family would break into my room in the basement and take advantage of my innocence. I tried talking to the boss lady but she turned a blind eye. Instead she accused me of seducing them and plotting to steal from her. She took away my phone and passport, limiting my movements out of her place.

My whole body was in pain. I was physically, mentally and emotionally abused with heavy beatings every now and then. One time, the boss lady burnt my feet for breaking a cup, and wouldn't allow me to go to the hospital so I wouldn't report them to the police. My wounds got worse, popping and bleeding every day. A bad smell started coming out of the wounds but instead of getting help, I was abused and told that Black people should be strong and should be seen but never heard.

Enough was enough. I ran away to try and save myself from this harsh and dangerous family. I followed the first route I found to a church we once attended when I was new. Near the church there was a homeless shelter which only had a roof with no walls and was overpopulated. I stayed there for some days and made one male friend who introduced me to a new way of earning a living by selling drugs on the streets. He taught me how to avoid the authorities, the best selling points and territory and camouflage in case we were ambushed either with our rival drug gangs or the police. Having left my passport and papers, I became homeless and hopeless.

At first it paid, and I was able to buy some clothes and covers for the night, living day by day. One day, while on my routine duties of selling my portions, the rival gang ambushed us, claiming that we had infiltrated their territory and were in to fight us. I was caught in the middle. I knew this was the end. I had no papers, no passport and no money, and worst of all I had no contacts. I hid, but the boy who introduced me to this business was badly hurt.

I couldn't do anything to help because I was running away to save my life and to avoid the police. My plan is to start fresh, for even when I think of going home, it feels like I will be giving in to the hardships I had promised to work and change. The reality is that the suffering out here on the streets is real. What remains is that I have to get documented to live free and work to achieve my goals. It is the only way for me to survive, since I am far away in a foreign country. ■

## TESTIMONY OF MR. LINARES LUIS, WHO ARRIVED IN SAN FRANCISCO 25 YEARS AGO AND LIVED ON THE STREETS FOR MONTHS.

TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH

I came to this country fleeing from terrorism and also so that I could help my family back home. I lived on the street until the happy moment when I was able to rent a couch for \$400 a month in an apartment on 20th and Bryant. There I couldn't sleep until midnight because there were ten people living there. Some worked until late at night and others left very early in the morning, and the sofa was in the place where everyone prepared their food and it was also by the main door of the place. I didn't sleep properly, but I had a roof and protection. Then I rented my first room with a roommate and from there, I was able to rent a studio and thus I had my own place, which helped me to be at peace and have a better life and concentrate on working and studying.

I remember when I arrived from Los Angeles (I came from San Isidro, where I crossed to enter the country). I had 25 cents to make a call to some "friends" from my country, so that they would receive me in their homes and not let me spend the cold days of December and January, which was when I arrived in San Francisco, on the street. I could spend my last 25 cents on a coffee or to make a call so they could come for me. I decided to make the call, but the public telephone swallowed my currency. My coffee and my help would have to wait. And so the saddest days of my life passed.

I did not speak the language, and there were no public bathrooms. For work, I had to look for construction sites or go to Army St, now Cesar Chavez, where I became a day laborer and learned to work in all kinds of trades. Some places gave out free food, and on Saturdays the churches came with breakfast and lunch—that was a party for many homeless immigrant colleagues who hung around that street waiting for someone to come hire them to do some work for the day. Other days the garbage cans were buffets. Other times good people would take us to a fast food restaurant and to buy food and share it. God, I hope you have blessed those good people.

Lunar Ramires

Hello, I'm Lunar Ramires, an immigrant. Three years ago, I met an agent back in Mexico who promised to bring me to the United States and help me get a housekeeping job. I was so excited! It seemed like a dream come true. She arranged everything and helped me get the travel documents.

In two months, everything was ready, and I came to the U.S. There were about five of us girls and we were all psyched that we had a chance to start living here and that we would be able to help our families back in Mexico. On arrival, we were put in a house with other girls. It was like a dormitory, but we were told it was temporary until they could secure jobs for us. They also took our passports and told us it was for safety purposes.

After a week, we were separated, and that's when I was brought to San Francisco with three other girls to start working. On arrival we realized that we were not going to do household chores but instead had been brought to a brothel. We were really angry and disappointed, but the owner of the brothel threatened us and said we had to pay her back for our documents and transportation, a cost she calculated to be around \$500 per person. She said she would give us back our passports after we had paid it.

There was nothing we could do but comply. I worked my ass off trying to

So I spent a few months studying at CCSF between jobs. I was able to study the language, take courses, and study to continue with my spiritual career. In my country I studied law for 5 years. I have always believed that culture and education is the way to develop our communities.

I ask that you not be indifferent, when a homeless person is on your way. Give them a smile of hope. Support all the proposals or policies that help to change the treatment of poor people and to offer assistance to our homeless brothers. They helped me, although some public agencies were the worst, because when I went to ask for help they treated homeless people as if we were guilty of something. Sometimes it felt like being in a prison—they always put us big and rude men in the hostel beds and, since they didn't understand our language, we were doubly ignored and neglected.

Creativity, humanism, compassion, and solidarity will help to achieve justice for homeless people, and thus open a horizon of opportunities that allow us to be new, productive human beings and a light of well-being as an example that it is possible to get out of homelessness. That can only happen with a home first and the timely help of experienced people and organizations, and when our community is represented in their non-profit organizations and local government, in good faith and with follow-up reviews of their employees, policies and clients. Finally, understand how this crisis is being handled and how budgets are managed. The biggest prize for those who help in this process of serving a homeless person is the smile and the bright look in the eyes of the homeless person who speaks and describes the deep appreciation for the honest effort made without bureaucracies in the fight to get out of homelessness in all its forms and levels.

In solidarity with homeless people who met God in an attempt to be rescued. ■

clear my debt so that I could get my documents back and go look for a decent job—but last July, during routine HIV testing, I was found to be positive

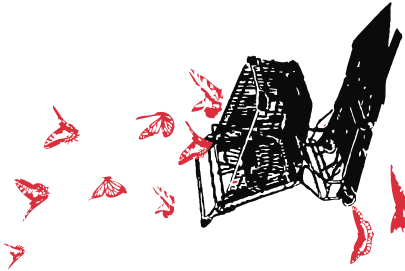
The owner threw me out on the streets, and I have been living out of dumpsters since then. It's been hard to get food and the HIV medication I need. I can't go back to Mexico because I don't have my documents or any money.

I am just taking each day at a time hoping things will change and I get a better life. I'm surviving on the streets doing any kind of job that can feed me. I rely on free pantries that give out food and medicine. Sometimes, I have had to go for days without anything to eat, so I look through fast food garbage cans to look for anything I can eat. Some days I'm lucky and get a cleaning job in a nearby household, where I get food and am paid \$10 or 20, but it's really hard to get a more stable job without papers because people are afraid of being robbed. The few of us with papers are lucky: They almost get jobs daily. The little cash I get I use to buy medicine and some food. I mostly rely on shelters, but at times they are full and I have to sleep outside. On the streets it's cold. I don't have anything to keep me warm but I endure with the hope that tomorrow will be a better day. It's also dangerous at times because you meet all kinds of people—some just harass me for no reason; others try to rape me—but all in all I have to survive. ■



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## Come Celebrate Black History Month

This is the **2nd Annual** Code Tenderloin & NCLF **Black History Month** Workshops

Three workshop series:

Feb. 8th- Theme: **Black Health**

Feb15th- Theme: **Black History, "Walking Through Time"**

Feb 22nd- Theme: **Black San Francisco**

Workshops are held virtually Tuesdays in February afternoons from 3pm-4 pm

Click link to join( All is welcome!):

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