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STREET Sheet

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DAVIDHELLMAN.ART

COVER ART: “GENIE IN A BOTTLE” BY DAVID HELLMAN

I’m an artist from Baltimore who’s lived in San Francisco for 15 years. I’ve done art for video games (Braid) and comics (A Lesson Is Learned But The Damage Is Irreversible, Second Quest). Member of DSA SF. Excited to be in Street Sheet! You can find my work online at davidhellman.art, and on the twitter hellscape as @davidhellman.

Lying Down and Waking Up a Slave in Texas

It’s poetic...
In Texas, we’re trapped in pits with small widows.
Inside these cells, we’re funding our own imprisonment;
the chains are encrypted inside the chips and soup sales.
We’re inside of an identity crisis believing our souls out of favors,
So we accept the chains;
believing a greater change will come save us...
Can you dig that?!?!
I guess that Willie Lynch Syndrome dies hard in some places.
Since I’m older now,
In these younger guys I see my own reflection.
It seems as if the hate for ourselves is baked in
Perhaps it takes breaking one down,
in order to build one up and to make a man.
I used to beat up on myself!
The whipping took away my strength...
Then I killed my bad habits and drug ‘em to a ditch!
I changed from a threat to a promise;
but in Texas I’ll always be a number/
Every day it’s the same old song...
In doubt: our systematic-scars found a home.
In Texas: It’s death before parole.
In unity: we can overcome!
But we won’t...
Because by the throat we’re holding our resolve
under the water.
Christians and Muslims accept this torture.
The trauma cemented the bangers in a corner;
Set-tripping, cooking drink and getting stoned.
I envision us standing up for ourselves,
and not being exploited with little to no health care.
But tomorrow we’ll be back in the “Fields,”—
under a sun giving off heat like hell!
There ain’t a night I don’t look beyond these walls—with cataract
eyes, and pull in the stars.
Today’s a blessing...
Every good one I’ll record them.
Tomorrow I’ll wake up behind these
bars.

Written by Pariah A.K.A. Robert Cooper / IG: @godhands888

BART BATHROOMS REOPEN AFTER TWO DECADES

TJ Johnston

Last month, public restrooms reopened in two underground BART stations after more than 20 years, having been closed after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Powell Street Station’s two public restrooms reopened on Feb. 2, while bathrooms reopened at Oakland’s 19th Street station on Feb. 25.

Advocates applauded the reopening but faulted the Bay Area-wide transit agency for shutting public bathrooms in the first place, which has denied the human right to accessing water for drinking, sanitation and hygiene purposes to homeless people.

“Reopening restrooms represents a big step towards delivering the world-class transit our riders deserve,” BART Board member Bevan Dufty said in a statement last month. “I thank every individual who raised their voice to insist that bathrooms are a

human right.”

John Stiefel, a water, sanitation and hygiene consultant, has examined water access issues in Africa, Asia and the Middle East for 12 years as a water, sanitation and hygiene consultant. Last year, he co-authored a report for the Coalition on Homelessness, which publishes Street Sheet. The report found that most homeless San Franciscans lack access to the United Nations’ minimum standard of 15 liters of water daily for personal use.

Stiefel says he welcomes the reopening, but that it’s unclear how much closer it will bring the City to the U.N.’s benchmark.

“The good news is that Powell Street is centrally located [for water access], and it would contribute to meeting the minimum standards,” he told Street Sheet. “But we need more data.”

As for BART’s national security rationale for closing the bathrooms, Stiefel says he doesn’t quite understand it. His work as a consultant took him to high-risk security nations, and he never saw that kind of response abroad.

“I’ve worked in fragile states and in places with high security issues, but I’m confused on how that

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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.

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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connection is made between 9/11 and public toilets,” he says.

Voter-approved measures, including BART’s Measure RR and the San Francisco County Transportation Authority’s Proposition K, passed in 2016, made the reopening possible. Prop. 1B, a statewide infrastructure bond that passed in 2006, also provided funding.

The amenities in Powell Street’s restrooms have improved since they were last open to the public. They are now all-gender restrooms, with LED lighting. A touchless sink is located outside of the restroom on the concourse, making it easily accessible for those who just want to wash their hands. There is also a drinking fountain and water bottle filling station.

BART says it plans to renovate restrooms at the Lake Merritt and Montgomery Street stations by the summer of 2022, and that restrooms in the Downtown Berkeley and Embarcadero stations could open in fiscal year 2023. Underground restrooms remain closed at Civic Center, 16th Street Mission and 24th Street Mission in San Francisco, as well as 12th Street in Oakland. ■

FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS: HOMELESSNESS IN NYC

Johanna Elattar

I'm an NYC girl. I was raised in New York City, and I have many great memories of growing up there. When I was in college, Sundays were always spent with friends, having brunch at some trendy spot that we had to get in line for at least two hours (if not more). After brunch, we'd go to The Angelika Film Center. We'd rarely know what we'd see. We'd just pick a movie when we got there. Those were some of the best times of my life.

When I was a child, my dad would take me to Coney Island. He'd take me to get hot dogs at Nathan's and go on a few rides at Astroland. I loved the Wonder Wheel. My father didn't like driving to Coney Island, and so we'd take the subway. I didn't like taking the subway, and I hated seeing homeless people on the train. My heart ached for them as they begged, slept and were ignored (or abused) by almost everyone. My father would always try to help, whether it was by giving them a few dollars, or some food, if we had it. I learned to have compassion for others by his example, and I'm grateful. (Thank you and Rest in Peace, Dad).

Whenever I saw the homeless as a child, I never thought that I would ever be one of them. I never thought I would have no place to go, I never thought I'd worry about how I'd survive on the streets of NYC. I was wrong. I've suffered from depression, anxiety and a depersonalization-derealization disorder since childhood due to several traumatic events. For those who don't know what this disorder is, it is the persistent, recurring feeling of being detached from one's body or mental processes. It is like being an outside observer of one's life (depersonalization) and being detached from one's surroundings (derealization). I've lost many things to this disorder over the years. I've lost and had problems keeping friends, jobs and even intimate relationships.

In early autumn 2001, I was living in my own little apartment and I was doing well. I worked as a freelance writer, and though I was happy doing what I love, I didn't make much money. This was a time of fear and confusion in New York City, and the country as a whole. September 11 had just taken place, and people were frightened. Being an Arab Muslim woman wasn't something that I was ever ashamed of, but shortly after 9/11, I was asked to vacate my apartment because my landlady "didn't want any problems." I never really understood what she meant by that.

Having very little money and almost no family, I had no one to help me. I ended up homeless in New York City during one of the worst times in this country's history. Before losing my apartment, I had my Depersonalization-Derealization Disorder under control for the most part. I was able to write, I was in the early stages of a relationship with someone

that I really liked, and I was in therapy. The sudden loss of my apartment was a shock for me. It caused me to regress and to lose control due to my disorder. I felt completely detached from what was going on around me. It's very hard to describe this feeling to someone if they've never had it. I felt like I was observing someone who looked like me and whose life was falling apart. I felt nothing, just numb with no feelings of my own. Everything was happening around me, but never to me. Of course, being so detached from my own reality caused me to stop seeing the person that I'd started a relationship with. He never knew why I ended everything with him. I stopped writing, so there was no money. I stopped going to therapy because it no longer felt like it mattered. I ended up alone and homeless due to mental illness. I was one of the homeless that everyone seemed to despise and blame for their condition. People called me a drug addict and other names, even though I was none of those things. I suffered from a mental illness, but no one seemed to care or take the time to find out what was going on with me.

A couple of months after becoming homeless, a friend of my father's, whom I hadn't seen in many years, recognized me on the street. He knew about my mental issues from before and he made sure that I was able to get the help that I needed. I was taken to the hospital immediately. I was very dehydrated and hadn't eaten in a while. I was stabilized while in the hospital, and I reconnected with my therapist who didn't know what had happened to me after I abruptly stopped showing up for my appointments. I started to come back to life—slowly, but I was making progress. Eventually, I was able to get another apartment with some help from my dad's friend and a social worker. I often wonder what would've happened to me if this person never noticed me that day on the street?

I now live in upstate New York, but I try to visit my mother in Brooklyn whenever I can. Even though many things have changed in New York City over the years, one thing has never changed, and that's the ever growing number of the homeless population. New York has approximately 8.8 million people, of which there's one sheltered homeless person per 181 people. Thousands more men, women and children are sleeping on the streets, subways and other public places, many of whom suffer from mental illness.

I recently had a Zoom conversation with Alison Freer, a volunteer therapist at the Coalition for the Homeless. Alison has been volunteering for the past 23 years, not just in New York City, but also in upstate New York.

"The homeless in NYC aren't as fortunate as the ones in upstate New York," she said. "Being in a rural area has its advantages, because there are more resources available, and the number of homeless people isn't nearly as high as it is in a big city like New York."

Alison shared some facts from the coalition:

In December 2021, there were 48,691 homeless people, including 15,227 homeless children, sleeping each night in New York City's main municipal shelter system. A near-record 18,704 single adults slept in

shelters each night in December 2021.

Compared to homeless families, homeless single adults have higher rates of serious mental illness, addiction disorders and other severe health problems.

Over the course of 2021, 107,510 different homeless adults and children slept in the New York City Department of Homeless Services shelter system. This includes 31,947 homeless children.

The number of homeless New Yorkers sleeping each night in municipal shelters is now 16 percent higher than it was ten years ago. The number of homeless single adults is 91 percent higher than it was ten years ago.

It has been estimated that 77 percent of adult families, 68 percent of single adults and 53 percent of families with children sleeping in shelters had at least one disability.

"City surveys and even public assistance organizations greatly underestimate the actual number of homeless men, women and children in the city," Alison commented. "The numbers are far greater, and there are thousands of unsheltered homeless that fall through the cracks. Just forgotten about."

As Alison spoke to me, I noticed that she shook her head often, overwhelmed by the facts in front of her. I asked Alison about her own experience with some of the mentally ill homeless people that she's worked with.

"Many schizophrenics, but one sticks out the most in my mind: a young man named Anthony who was quite talented, an artist. He sold his paintings in the subway sometimes, and many people would look for him every day because he was so intelligent and charming when he was lucid. Then one day, he disappeared, just gone."

"Do you know what happened to him?" I asked.

"I don't know. We looked for him, but he just vanished. Sometimes this happens with some of the homeless that I've worked with, but Anthony was different, special. I like to think that he's out there, still painting and happy, but it's probably not the case. Many with mental illness use drugs or alcohol to cope, self-medicate. Anthony had substance abuse issues, and he'd overdosed a few times."

Alison had tears in her eyes as she spoke, and I felt myself becoming emotional as well. I could almost see Anthony in my mind, even though I had never met him. I didn't want to overwhelm Alison any more than I had to, so I scheduled another Zoom call with her to discuss her experience as a volunteer therapist for the homeless in New York, and how the pandemic has affected the homeless in New York City and the state as a whole. ■

Please join me for part 2 of "Falling Through The Cracks," coming soon.

Johanna Elattar is a writer in New York. Readings of her poetry and fiction can be found on her YouTube channel Rotten on the Vine

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbl8YHfxexHQ5TGJbPw_B4Q

STREET SHEET is currently recruiting vendors to sell the newspaper around San Francisco. Vendors pick up the papers for free at our office in the Tenderloin and sell them for \$2 apiece at locations across the City. You get to keep all the money they make from sales. Earn extra income while also helping elevate the voices of the homeless writers who make this paper so unique, and promoting the vision of a San Francisco where every human being has a home.

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BECOME A STREET SHEET VENDOR

How Housing Choice Vouchers Saved My Family

Dempsey “Sunbear” Jackson

In 2011, I was homeless and addicted to methamphetamines. That year, I found out that my girlfriend of 10 years, Amy, was pregnant with our son, Marley. We went to Jelani House, a rehabilitation program, to try to prepare for our son’s arrival. But when we showed up, the shelter wouldn’t let me bring my service dog inside. Instead, I had to stay on the street and try to get clean alone while taking care of our dogs, and Amy and I split up.

I was on the street when Marley was born. With help from the San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), I was housed in a hotel in the Tenderloin. The deal was that I would stay clean and they would help me obtain housing. About the same week that Amy was getting out of transitional housing and I was timing out of my HOT team room, I was given a room at a place called the Vincent Hotel. I was furious because the Vincent Hotel meant staying next door to people using drugs; I had about a year clean at the time.

Marley, Amy and I moved into the Knox Hotel, which was a much better place than the Vincent, but alas, there was drug use all around us. We maintained a clean and sober lifestyle, but we were completely distraught about what we were going to do about permanent housing. I couldn’t work because of my disability, and Amy had a job cleaning SRO hotels, so we could not afford any kind of reasonable living situation. Cohabiting with no space with my ex-girlfriend Amy and our son had us so stressed out and at each other’s throats a lot of the time, even though we really wanted to co-parent successfully.

By that time, Marley was in kindergarten and was starting to meet other kids, realizing that his situation was different from the other kids at school. One day he said to me, “Daddy, I’m not like normal children, am I?”

He said all the other kids don’t live in little rooms with their parents with bed bugs and roaches. Honestly, my heart broke right then and there! We were dealing with a horrible manager who couldn’t stand us and didn’t treat us with any respect. That, plus having to deal with our neighbors, made our home feel like a horrible place. We had to worry about sex offenders living in the same building as our child, whom we wanted so much to protect.

Exasperated, I went to the HOT team for help and advice. It must have been fate, because my old case manager told me I should go talk to Miguel at the Coalition of Homelessness. Coincidentally, Miguel had just found out about something for families living in SRO hotels called housing choice vouchers. There were only three vouchers, I think—one for a place in Chinatown and two in South of Market. That fateful day, our lives changed. I can’t explain to you how much confidence getting this two bedroom townhouse in Parkmerced has given us. It was the first place we called once our Section 8 was approved.

Amy and I have managed to be the best co-parents I or anyone I know has ever known. She has her bedroom now, and Marley and I share a room. Hav-

ing our own space has been monumental for our ability to raise our child and become best friends in the best interest of Marley. Our relationship was rocky, we argued often before we moved into Parkmerced. The stability we have now has meant we never fight, never argue. We always do everything in Marley’s best interest. I honestly don’t think we would have ever figured it out at the Knox, and I don’t even want to think about what would’ve happened if we couldn’t both be with our child 24/7.

Not only did this enable me to stay in San Francisco—living only on the money from disability and Amy’s minimum-wage job—which means I can keep my doctors whom I trust and have a very wonderful relationship with, but it also allows us to have a real place to prepare healthy meals. Since I have health issues such as diabetes and hypertension, I really need a kitchen. It’s very important for me to have space to store items that I bought in bulk, so we can afford the expensive cost of living in San Francisco.

Having a table to eat at instead of sitting on the bottom bunk, like we had to in the SRO, the space to play board games, a place just for my medications, and a place to have houseplants, which calm my PTSD and anxiety, have all contributed to my healing and helped my beautiful son grow into a kind, compassionate, empathetic guy.

In our current situation, we have been able to climb out of debt. We both have credit scores that are better than we could ever have thought possible. None of this could have been accomplished living in an 8-foot by 10-foot room, akin to a jail cell—that’s about the same size as our kitchen is now! I can sleep soundly now that I don’t have to worry about roaches crawling into the CPAP machine that helps manage my sleep apnea.

I guess what I’m trying to say is everyone deserves a home—especially children. Broken families can come together and heal the traumas of our childhoods and not inflict them on our children. All of this has been possible thanks to the housing choice program. ■



I NEED MY OWN

Aaone Enosa

I arrived in San Francisco from Anchorage, Alaska on Feb. 20, 2008. I stayed with the father of my children and my two sons. We stayed in my mother-in-law’s apartment in the Alemany projects. It was there I conceived my second son. I drank and did drugs during this time, while working for my brothers-in-law and my kids’ father through In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS). I went to jail due to domestic violence incidents between me and my partner at the time, while in our alcohol and drug addiction. I also attended Heald College in 2010 while living at this apartment. I destroyed the apartment but still, my mother-in-law allowed me to stay there. The police were called so many times that the San Francisco Housing Authority evicted us. I felt so angry at myself for my part in the eviction. We left with our luggage on a cold December night not knowing where to go.

My then-partner and I ended up meeting with a couple he knew out in Bayshore. The couple took us in and we agreed we’ll pay rent and buy food with my food stamps. The couple had friends who came over almost every day to smoke meth. When we arrived, the two of us were addicted to alcohol and crack cocaine, but by the time we left their house we were both addicted to meth, too. Some parents brought their kids along when they came to smoke meth. It was a trap house. I left to call the police and turn myself in, because I was so tired of what was going on in that house. I had warrants so they were able to take me in. When I was released from jail, I went back to the house to look for my partner. The couple said he left.

I went to 24th and Mission, where he had hung out

VENDOR PROFILE

Stanley Michael Jackson Vendor #193

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN SELLING STREET SHEET?
Over 20 years—started when I saw my niece selling the sheet. I couldn’t believe it: People would just give me money for paper! It makes me feel good because I like talking to people and they’ll actually listen to you. You can tell them what’s happening in the Bay Area, you know what I’m saying. I tell them stories about my life.

WHAT MAKES STREET SHEET UNIQUE?
It’s like you’re looking at the real people who live on the street. You get smarter just by knowing the area and seeing what you’re gonna go through, what we go through, day by day.

WHAT STORIES DO YOU LIKE TO TELL YOUR CUSTOMERS?
I tell them about when I played pool against Minnesota. Okay, I used to be the number one pool player in San Francisco. I’ve been playing pool since I was 14. I’m turning 68 this year. I’ve won world championship poker tournaments, Texas Hold’em, Low Ball, Five Card Stunt, and they called me “Action Jackson” because I like action.

SO YOU PLAYED AGAINST MINNESOTA FATS...DID YOU WIN?
No! *laughs*

DID YOU GROW UP IN SAN FRANCISCO?
I grew up in and out of Frisco. I was born in Oakland, CA, but between 16 and birth I lived in Oakland and Frisco. I lived on Potrero Hill when I was like 8. I’ve always loved San Francisco. I moved here permanently in 2000. That was when I got out of the SRO.

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ce he was back in his twenties. I found him there
er a thorough search, asking his friends and
uaintances. The two of us camped out on 24th and
sion for years until my former partner went to
ab and found an apartment in 2016. He was inside,
I was still strung out. Every time he saw me, he
l me to go to treatment. I wasn't ready. During that
-year period from 2012 to 2017, I was in and out of
, and I had no hope.

id applied for public housing from the San Francisco
asing Authority back in 2008, but by the time my
ne was on top of the list, nearly a decade later, I
s in jail. For years I was either in the hospital, on
streets, or in jail—my second home. In 2017, I got
ested for stalking a restaurant owner who helped
when I was homeless. The voices in my head said
was messing around with my dad and I thought it
s real. I followed her to her restaurant, went inside
l confronted her, demanding she stay away from my
l. When they arrested me, I caught another charge
ail for putting hands on a deputy. I was convicted,
l they gave me three years in county jail.

as released to San Francisco General Hospital
:020, where I applied for Supplemental Security
ome. I called the Housing Authority to check the
tus of my housing application and they said I was
back on the waitlist because I hadn't responded to
ir letters. They sent me to Clay House. From there I
s taken to Napa State Hospital after I had an episode
he courtroom. I was diagnosed with schizophrenia
psychiatrists and was given psych medication. In
: 2020, I was put under conservatorship, which
ans the county appointed people to make decisions
me.

Christian, by the way. My solid faith in God moves
untains in my life. Not once did I blame Him for my
ils and tribulations.

lapsed at Clay House and I went to stay with my
mer partner at his apartment. I knew Clay House

would report me to the police because I had gone AWOL
after I was mandated by the courts to go to rehab. My
social worker told me to go to Psychiatric Emergency
Services (PES) to start the process all over at San
Francisco General Hospital. My conservator begged me
to go to PES, and said that if I refused I'd be sent back
to jail. PES sent me back to the psych ward, and after
a week I was sent to Hummingbird, a mental health
respite center. Next I was sent to Grove Street where I
went AWOL again. Every rehabilitation center I went
to in San Francisco I never stayed. I just wanted to be
with my partner, so I ended up at his house again. I did
drugs and drank alcohol again. We fought and we had
sex only when drunk and high. It was so unhealthy. I
was so tired of arguing and of the voices in my head
that screamed, "Get your own apartment!" so that
I could do whatever I wanted. I wasn't taking my
medication so I was hallucinating and getting violent
with him, accusing him of cheating on me.

I ended up panhandling in the Tenderloin. One night,
a woman approached me and bullied me. I didn't say
anything. I minded my own business. I saw her again
the next night and told her I wanted to fight her. She
came back late that night—I figured she was waiting
for me to get high and drunk. I dropped her to the
ground. She grabbed a crutch from an old man and hit
me with it. I grabbed the crutch when all of a sudden a
knife came out of nowhere! She stabbed my left hand.
I took my bandana off and wrapped my hand with it.
My partner showed up and took me home. He fixed me
up with salt water and peroxide.

I got arrested again in April 2021 and spent one night
in jail, then they transported me back to the psych
ward at SFGH. I was happy to see my favorite nurses. I
left in July for my current home at a healing center in
Lompoc! I am happy to be away from San Francisco so
that I can stay focused on my recovery. Away from my
former partner. He's been showing me tough love and
giving me ultimatums to stay sober: Maintain it or he
will not marry me. I love it here. I discovered my gift of

writing poems and short stories, and I am also working
on my autobiography.

Please pray for me that I succeed with my writing.
I believe I will. It's a gift from God. I am making a
difference sharing my experiences and my voice with
you. I have been calling the San Francisco Housing
Authority to check the status of my one-bedroom
apartment every month. Last week I applied for
their emergency voucher through the Department of
Homelessness and Supportive Housing at hsh.sfgov.
org/services. A screener indicated I was eligible and
so in February they will email me to see if I can come
in for an interview if I'm chosen. I am planning on
going back to Clay House. I see myself succeeding at
this residential place. The area is good, without liquor
stores or drug activities. There are hills which are good
for exercise! I plan on staying there until I get housing.
It's hard to get housing in San Francisco or anywhere
when you're drunk and on drugs.

My brother, may he rest in peace and love, died from
alcoholism. I am breaking the vicious cycle of
alcoholism in my family. He was diagnosed with
epilepsy. This tragedy opened my eyes to stop drinking
for good. I am done! I have said this several times and
relapsed but I am for real this time. I am dedicating my
life to the Lord. God knows I'm trying. I want to live
eternally. Being a Christian, refraining from sin, and
staying clean and sober, I will be responsible and
independent to keep and maintain my housing. I take
the initiative while in treatment to make phone calls,
communicate with the right people, and do the
footwork to make things happen in my life. It's hard
but with hard work and a desire to help myself, I know
I will succeed. With God, anything is possible. I know I
will get my own housing soon. I'm a changed woman. I
have been on the SFHA waitlist for public housing for
13 years now. I know that some people wait more than
that. It's ridiculous. That's my story of housing status.

■

Can you tell me a bit about what homelessness has meant to you?

Well I became homeless because of my pool playing. I wanted to play in a bunch of different areas so I just took off, you know what I mean? I've been to 47 states, sold papers in Denver, Seattle, and Portland. I've been around; I like to travel. And my papa was a rolling stone. I never made no place my home.

Since you were a kid, how have you seen San Francisco change?

I've seen San Francisco change from like day to night, you know what I mean. I remember like back in '69 everything was alright. Then, I don't know, everything is getting too expensive. They used to have a thing called Hot Bed here, where they would give you a hotel room for a week for free, every week. I think now-Governor Newsom changed the law [back when he was mayor] where he went from "cash" to "care," where he only gave you a shelter instead of the \$400. A lot of people don't want to stay at a shelter, and they get nothing, almost, they get like \$60 a month. How could you live on that?

If you were mayor of San Francisco, what would you change about the way San Francisco addresses homelessness?

I'd say build more homeless Navigation Centers. Because at the Navigation Centers you can go in and out as you please, you know? You don't have to go check in at 5, and they have people to help you with medical [needs].

Anything you want to add?

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SEPARATING FACTS FROM FALSE NARRATIVES OF SHELLENBERGER'S "SAN FRANSICKO"

Jennifer Friedenbach

On February 3, the author Michael Shellenberger climbed the fence of the City's new Tenderloin Linkage Center to try and take photos of clients seeking services there. It was an attempt to "expose" the City for providing an outdoor space that allows drug use. Overdose rates have been skyrocketing, many attributed to the availability of fentanyl, combined with the deep despair the pandemic brought to unhoused San Franciscans who have been suffering through a lack of shelter, housing, treatment and even basics like water for two years. The linkage center is the City's attempt to give some respite from the streets and connect folks with services. The camera Shellenberger was holding was knocked from his hand, and he lunged into the center screaming. A citizens' arrest was made by the center director, and staff called the police. Shellenberger demonstrated little respect for the privacy and dignity of those the center is attempting to support, who frankly deserve an apology from him.

Shellenberger is a writer who weighs in on evidence-based discussion, often without evidence. He plays fast and loose with facts, decontextualizes the findings he presents, and flagrantly cherry-picks data. His past books have been controversial, using a formula that plays well in right-wing media. He uses a basic formula that gets him publicity in right-wing arenas by identifying himself as an independent thinker who walked away from a bad marriage with the left—then trashes scientific thinking around topics such as global warming. His latest book tour included appearances on Fox News, the Joe Rogan show, Glenn Beck and the Manhattan Institute. Despite the expert consensus that America's homelessness crisis is primarily fueled by stagnant incomes and out of control housing costs, Shellenberger's central thesis is that homelessness is driven by a combination of rampant substance use, mental illness and a climate of decadent moral permissiveness in liberal cities. We break down some of these illusions here.

FACT: PROGRESSIVES FIGHT FOR EXPANSION OF SHELTERS FOR HOMELESS RESIDENTS WHILE ALSO PUSHING FOR PERMANENT HOUSING.

Shellenberger falsely asserts that progressives oppose the creation of shelter beds, leading to high rates of unsheltered homeless people in San Francisco. On the contrary, our city shelters more of our homeless neighbors than almost every other West Coast city partly due to the work of progressive advocates. The Coalition on Homelessness pushed for Proposition C, which is set to expand San Francisco's shelter capacity by 1,000 beds, and we have pushed for policies that make it easier for homeless people to access shelter.

Shellenberger writes, "The leading advocates for the homeless often oppose shelter. ... Advocates for the homeless at the national level similarly oppose more shelters."

He also chooses to ignore low health outcomes of those living in congregate shelters and the inappropriateness of congregate shelter for certain populations, such as those with severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Shelter plays an important role, but it is only one piece of the solution.

FACT: THE HOUSING FIRST MODEL HAS PROVEN EFFECTIVE AGAIN AND AGAIN.

Housing First is an approach to solving homelessness that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, without requiring staying in shelter or transitional housing first. The idea is that by ending an individual's homelessness, an individual is stable and able to flourish. By opposing housing first, and pushing only for more shelter beds and treatment centers, Shellenberger chooses to ignore best practices across the country from cities that have taken a hard look at all their homeless spending and readjusted, using modeling that ensures people move through the system and out of homelessness. If a city overspends on shelter and invests little in prevention or housing, individuals get stuck in a cycle of going from shelter to shelter, while more and more people become homeless. By analyzing the system as a whole and making adjustments, many cities have been able to make episodes of homelessness more brief and rare.

Shellenberger argues that some less liberal cities like Houston are better on homelessness. But every city Shellenberger cites as being successful, including Houston, uses a Housing First model—the model Shellenberger is saying isn't working.

At the end of the book, after examining his central thesis—that housing does not solve homelessness—Shellenberger calls for more housing. Go figure.

FACT: SAN FRANCISCO'S HOMELESS POPULATION HAS RISEN MUCH MORE SLOWLY THANKS TO THE EXPANSION OF SHELTER AND HOUSING OPTIONS.

Shellenberger notes that San Francisco saw a large growth in homelessness between 2005 and 2019. But he fails to mention that we saw minimal growth in municipal homelessness between 2016 and 2019, compared to other West Coast cities like Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland and Bay Area counties like Santa Clara and Alameda saw 10% to 20% growth between every biennial count. This is because our City continued to expand its shelters and permanent supportive housing investments, while other municipalities did not.

FACT: RISING RENTS EXPLAIN THE RISE IN HOMELESSNESS IN MAJOR CITIES.

Shellenberger also fails to cite studies that looked at why West Coast rates of homelessness have risen and found no other contributing factor except rising rents.

Shellenberger's argument relies on a Zillow study that he blazely misrepresents, wrongly interpreting the study as demonstrating that affordability doesn't matter. The study in fact found that rent affordability explained significant differences in homelessness rates in different geographic areas. With the exception of the Miami metropolitan area, all of the cities Shellenberger mentions as counterpoints to the West Coast experience score fairly well on Zillow's rent affordability index. So even though average rents in those cities have been rising in absolute terms, the households are not paying a significant share of income where Zillow's model predicts they would be associated with rapid increases in homelessness. However, on the

west coast, and in particular San Francisco, already inflated rents rose even higher, sending struggling households into homelessness.

FACT: CRIMINALIZATION EXACERBATES POVERTY AND DOES NOTHING TO MOVE PEOPLE OUT OF HOMELESSNESS.

Shellenberger claims SF does not criminalize homelessness, and that by focusing on housing homeless people San Francisco has driven up homeless rates. In fact, police issue between 10,000 and 20,000 citations to homeless people each year, according to numbers released over the past many decades by the Superior Court, and according to the San Francisco Department of Emergency Management, operations occur daily to remove unhoused people from public spaces with police present.

Shellenberger interviewed several experts about criminalization, including Christopher Herring of Harvard. Herring is cited and even indexed in Shellenberger's book across more than a half-dozen pages. Yet he never once cites any of Herring's peer-reviewed articles in top social science journals about how San Francisco has actually increased the number of officers addressing homelessness between 2015 and 2020 and intensified policing during this time. Nor does he review all the negative impacts of this criminalization found by numerous other social scientists and criminologists cited in that work.

FACT: ONLY 6% OF SAN FRANCISCO'S BUDGET IS SPENT ON SOLUTIONS TO HOMELESSNESS.

Shellenberger claims that San Francisco spends an exorbitant amount of money on homelessness, but never acknowledges that our "Homeless Budget" mainly comprises spending on permanent supportive housing. He fails to mention that even though homelessness has been a major issue in San Francisco for decades, only 3% of the City budget went towards ending homelessness, which increased to 6% annually when Prop. C was implemented.

In the book, he argues that the \$350 million San Francisco spends annually on shelters and emergency services is wasted, when in fact according to Jeff Kositsky, former Director of the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing as quoted in a January 10, 2022 interview on KALW, a large portion of the department's budget goes toward supportive housing for over 8,000 households who would otherwise be homeless, costing the government many times more in increased health care and social service costs.

Shellenberger also distorts the per-person cost of homeless spending by failing to accurately reflect how many people experience homelessness each year in San Francisco. Shellenberger relies on the PIT count number, which is notoriously a dramatic undercount, and thus erroneously inflates the per person spending.

FACT: SIMILAR TO OTHER MUNICIPALITIES, MORE THAN 70% OF HOMELESS PEOPLE IN SAN FRANCISCO BECAME HOMELESS WHEN THEY LOST THEIR HOUSING HERE IN THE CITY.

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continued from page 6...

Shellenberger claims that San Francisco is a unique magnet of homeless people, wrongly taking the point-in-time count survey that finds that 30% of those experiencing homelessness are from outside the City out of context. Surveys from other West Coast counties such as Washington’s King County and California’s Los Angeles, Fresno and Kern counties also show that 20% to 40% of people experiencing homelessness say they became homeless outside that city. Shellenberger conveniently ignores this in his book.

In fact, SF is a leading exporter of poor people due to rising rents and real estate speculation. Not only does San Francisco bus hundreds of homeless people out of town every year, but Black and brown low-income community members have been displaced out of San Francisco in large numbers, while many more have ended up homeless.

FACT: MAKING SOBRIETY A PREREQUISITE FOR ACCESSING SERVICES WEAKENS OUR ABILITY TO TRANSITION PEOPLE OUT OF HOMELESSNESS.

Shellenberger argues that Housing First doesn’t work because some studies have found that the addiction rates of those who receive housing compared with those who remain in shelters are not significantly different. He doesn’t deny that Housing First has been shown to successfully end homelessness, reduce jail time and reduce costs to other public services; he just argues that we should be using this housing exclusively as a reward for those who will go sober. What he ignores are the findings from studies that demonstrate that there is little difference in outcomes from those who enter treatment before entering housing and those entering housing directly from the streets, except the latter saves public funds.

Shellenberger focuses on studies with people who voluntarily opted into sober living residential rehab programs that worked for them (SF also has these programs that have shown success). What he ignores—and what the Coalition on Homelessness found in our 2020 report, Stop the Revolving Door, is that over one-third of those who complete residential rehab programs end up back on the street, and that many of those who return to homelessness report relapsing or being unable to maintain their recovery due to a lack of housing. Less than 20% had stable housing after leaving treatment.

Shellenberger ignores countless studies that show that access to housing decreases substance use and improves mental health, including a recent UC San Francisco study that looked at shelter-in-place hotel resident outcomes and found that residents reported decreased substance use while stabilized in hotels.

FACT: HOMELESS SAN FRANCISCANS ARE NOT “SERVICE-RESISTANT.”

Shellenberger suggests the main problem of homelessness is service resistance. He argues that there is a lack of demand for services rather than a lack of supply, and that San Francisco’s homelessness problem would be solved if only its police and courts forced people to use shelter and treatment.

Although he contradicts himself on this point when he mentions the City’s shelter shortage, he never describes the immense desire and demand among those experiencing homelessness in San Francisco who are trying desperately to access drug and alcohol recovery programs, shelter, or voluntary behavioral health services, as we found in our Stop the Revolving Door report, which we shared with

him. The overall perspective readers are left with is that San Francisco has invested in services that are readily available, and that people just simply won’t use them—when in fact demand far outstrips supply. No one could police people into nonexistent services. Instead, the outcome would clearly be incarceration.

FACT: THE LACK OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE UNITED STATES PROLONGS HOMELESSNESS AND EXACERBATES DRUG USE.

Shellenberger draws on examples from Portugal, The Netherlands and Germany to show how societies use both coercion and care to address mental illness and drug use. However, the comparisons are so wildly out of context as to be useless. All these countries have universal health care, some semblance of universal basic income, and available housing, as well as prison systems that make our homeless shelters look horrific. The primary study he cites to show how European cities used both policing and social services to shut down open-air drug markets indicates how such initiatives failed when there were not adequate long-term services to connect people with first voluntarily and only as a last resort, coercively. But Shellenberger uses this study to claim that San Francisco needs to increase policing, ignoring the fact that this City, and more broadly the United States, has a near nonexistent welfare system in comparison to the places that carried out these efforts.

FACT: HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE NOT ALL STRUGGLING WITH SUBSTANCE USE OR MENTAL ILLNESS.

Shellenberger contends that the vast majority of those experiencing homelessness in San Francisco are both drug addicted and mentally ill. But many studies show this is not the case. According to the 2019 Point In Time (PIT) count, about 42% of homeless San Franciscans say they struggle with substance use. It is important to note that the PIT count dramatically undercounts families with children, and other unhoused people whose housing status is not obvious at first glance, which may suggest that an even larger proportion of unhoused San Franciscans are not struggling with these issues.

Shellenberger also fails to account for the many people who have substance use and mental health issues as a result—not as a cause—of homelessness. According to the 2019 PIT count, alcohol or drug use was the primary cause of homelessness for 18% of those counted, while mental health issues accounted for just 8%. This is key: It points to the need to ramp up homeless prevention efforts—something that does not fit into his lack of personal responsibility drives homelessness narrative. Shellenberger also extensively criticizes Prop. C, which is funding the first significant expansion of treatment, and prevention for these challenges in more than five decades, while calling for more mental health and substance use treatment.

FACT: SAN FRANCISCO SHELTERS A GREATER PROPORTION OF ITS HOMELESS POPULATION THAN ALMOST ANY OTHER CITY ON THE WEST COAST.

Shellenberger claims San Francisco has a super high rate of unsheltered homelessness compared to other cities. This is true when compared to New York City, Denver, Phoenix, and Miami. But Shellenberger chooses to ignore that San Francisco has a higher rate of sheltered homeless people compared to every one of California’s major cities except San Diego. Given similar levels of rising rents along the west coast, it is an important comparison. ■

TOGETHER WE CAN FIGHT DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE

Samantha Damien

Homelessness is associated with several factors and I am going to share one that I personally have been affected by: drug use and addiction. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 14.5 million Americans have an alcohol use disorder, and according to the National Institute on Substance Abuse, 11.7% of Americans over 12 have used illegal drugs in the past 30 days. This story is how I became a data point.

As a young lady I always loved flying and everything that comes with it. When I visited the airport, I would always admire the airplanes and all the staff members working on a plane. All I needed was to complete my education and focus on passing my exams so as to follow this esteemed career path. Well, I worked hard, got all the support I needed, and finally my grades came as expected. Full of excitement I enrolled at a University and there I was, getting my degree to join an airline cabin crew. This was a dream becoming a reality so fast. It was a long journey but my patience and hard work finally paid. Finally , I was fit for the air as a complete Flight attendant.

The job was interesting and I loved it. The pay was good and I enjoyed traveling to different parts of the world, learning different things and experiencing other people’s cultures too. I met people from different parts of the globe, made new friends and that’s when I started getting introduced to drugs, little by little. One beer became one too many, a puff of a cigarette led to a pack, and a sniff of illegal drugs led to a life of misery. On landing in different destinations we would go clubbing in the name of adventure. I sunk into a whole different life, a party life. I would miss flights and stay home due to hangovers.

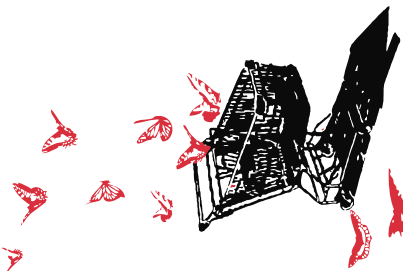
I loved the bottle more than anything. My employer, family and a few friends realized I was not heading in the right direction but I was already too deep into it. After several warnings, I lost my job.I did not realize what I had done till it was too late. The partying did not stop and having no job and bad company by my side did not help the situation. Day in and day out, night in and night out, we partied hard. I listened to no advice and at the end of it all I was left with nothing, evicted from my house.

Abandoned by friends, family and former colleagues I had no one. That’s when I became homeless. Eating from trash cans, begging and sleeping in the streets of San Francisco. For two years, I was in a dark place until one day something great happened. As I was on the streets, a former schoolmate saw and recognized me. We got talking and that’s how I got a Guardian Angel. The guy was a blessing; he took me to his place without a second thought. He clothed and fed me and I finally had a roof over my head. He paid for my rehabilitation and as we speak he is my boyfriend.

I am not homeless anymore, I have worked my way through rehabilitation and I am sure soon I’ll be free from this mess. Please look out for your friends, colleagues and family. Sometimes all is not as perfect as it seems to be. Alcohol, drug and substance abuse is a real menace towards individual, social and economic growth. ■

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MAR 1, 2022

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DIVISION STREET AN UPCOMING PHOTO BOOK BY ROBERT GUMPERT

During the 2016 Super Bowl, held in San Francisco, the unhoused were “urged” to move to the ironically named Division Street, where they would be, city officers hoped, “invisible”.

Amid the unlimited wealth and consumption of that “super” week, the unhoused went about their lives, crowded together in their tents or sleeping rough on the ground. There were no facilities, no promise of permanent housing. Division Street is where this project began and from which it gets its name.

From the late 1930s until the 1960s, San Francisco was a center of “community modernism” with well-paid working-class union jobs, city programs, affordable housing, clean streets, and a diverse, vibrant social and economic culture.

“Community modernism” has given way to “corporate modernism” where property signifies worth and status. Public housing and affordable rents are considered breeding grounds for crime and laziness, the tenants undesirables.

The voices of the unhoused and others are integral to this project. First-person storytelling, messages left on the street and on neighborhood listservs, media headlines and politicians’ characterizations make “Division Street” a collaboration between many communities.

“Division Street,” in photos and words, has become a metaphor for the “division” of communities, between the wealthy few and the expendability of the many, in San Francisco, in the U.S. and the world. ■

Find more at www.robertgumpert.com Division Street, the book, can be ordered from Dewi Lewis Publishing: dewilewis.com/products/division-street

