

Homeless in Seattle

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Have you heard of The Jungle in Seattle?

When you think of Seattle, maybe you conjure images of the Space Needle or some cool high-tech place, or mountains or lakes, Evergreen trees and rain.

The Jungle I'm referring to is a lawless homeless encampment along the elevated section of Interstate 5 that snakes into Seattle and has become the underbelly where hundreds of people live in tents and makeshift structures.

I ask, because The Jungle or the I-5 East Duwamish Greenbelt (recently renamed by Seattle City Councilwoman, Sally Bagshaw, because in her words, "...words matter.") has a new jingle.

Obviously as a writer, I believe in words.

What I don't believe in is renaming a place littered with trash, used heroin needles and feces where people are being raped and killed, where there is human trafficking and people are living in squalor and despair.

Taking time to rename the Jungle into something more palatable is a perfect example of the dysfunctional politics surrounding the homeless crisis that is taking on a "Spinal Tap" kind of reality in Seattle today.

When it comes to homeless problem in Seattle, I lean in towards the saying: Do not be wise in words—be wise in deeds.

Maybe it's because I'm not a politician. But I was homeless as a kid...it was horrible. It's something no matter how entrenched in middle class you become you NEVER FORGET.

Something else you never forget when you are homeless at eight-years-old is kindness, support, compassion, but most of all a plan. Being at the mercy of people who are in a position of influence and power and the hope is that they will help your mother get out of a bad situation.

In our case she had been wooed by a pied piper away from Seattle—the allure of a new life meets alcoholic boyfriend awaited us in Santa Barbara. Our prospects were dismal with high rents and low skills and housing never materialized and it all went downhill from there.

We moved our caravan of cars all over (not unlike the tent cities in Seattle) following the tides of compassion and politics... the other homeless people we met along the way at campgrounds where we congregated were diverse.

This is where I learned first hand that there are so many reasons why people end up homeless, from losing jobs to tragedies to drugs and alcohol and yes, the chronic homeless who choose to be homeless.

Over the past five years, I have brought my kids to the tent cities around Seattle bringing food and comfort items because it's a small thing I can do. It's also a way to share my experience with my kids in a meaningful way... homeless people are not people to be feared and certainly not to be shunned. They are people who need our help not judgement from ivory towers.

I've never been to the jungle, but since the killing, a shooting that occurred in January 2016 which not only put a highlighted spotlight on the Jungle, but left two people dead and three wounded over drugs.

The aftermath has put a considerable amount of pressure for the powers at be to actually do something.

This past May 17th the Mayor's office announced that the homeless encampment in The Jungle had two weeks to pack up.

A million bucks was diverted from the transportation budget to support the Mayors plan to clear out and build a fence around The Jungle.

Social workers were dispatched from the Union Gospel Mission with offers of temporary housing and services. But the message was clear: The Jungle would be cleaned up and secured with a permanent, 8,000 feet of 6-foot high fencing made from heavy gauge metal with razor wire wrapped around three strands of barbed wire.

It only took a week of criticism and pressure from homeless advocates and some members of the Seattle City Council for the Mayor to begin back pedaling and waffle on the two week eviction.

It was painful to watch...particularly when he said, "I don't have the answers, we are making this up as we go along."

As a result, every week there was a new ration of dysfunction for pundits to ponder and ridicule our elected officials over what to do about The Jungle a place that homeless people have sought refuge since the 1930's.

Social media feeds have been on fire with news reporters bringing cameras into The Jungle and doing in-depth profiles on the homeless.

Negative stories of the homeless from The Jungle fueled the age old debates about how helping the homeless only enables the homeless.

This past Friday on the local Ron and Don show, Don O'Neil called for the Mayor's resignation, "The mayor needs to resign. He does not know what he's doing. This is the fourteenth largest metro in the country. There are 3.6 million people living here — the wheels have come off for him. This has turned into coo coo for cocoa puffs. There is something wrong here."

I agree that there is definitely something wrong.

But for me, it was this headline:

"Rent Slavery on the Rise in Seattle, Paul Allen Moving Homeless into Shipping Containers"

This article, made me angry, like Hulk angry. Obviously, Paul Allen doesn't need my protection, but really, the headline about Paul Allen got me going...the homeless problem doesn't lie in tech billionaires.

Yes, as a result of the tech boom there is gentrification, the raising of rents and home prices, new people are being drawn to Seattle for opportunities. Yes, the massive construction in downtown is displacing homeless people embedded in the nooks and crannies that were here-to-fore seen, but unseen.

But I'll tell you this. If I were homeless today with my children, I'd take my chances with tech billionaire and philanthropist, Paul Allen than the current politicians, rhetoric and bureaucracy.

If you drive around Seattle and see the conditions people are living in, well you wouldn't accuse Paul Allen of putting people in "boxcars."

The problem doesn't lie in the high tech billionaires who are reshaping Seattle. It lies in politics and a lack of leadership that instead of working on resolutions they are renaming The Jungle.

They are backing off of a plan because it becomes controversial. But at the end of the day The Jungle is exactly where it was back in January.

The pointless action of moving tent cities around? Who does that help?

Seattle is one of the richest cities in the country, the envy of many, the birthplace of Microsoft, and so many other innovative companies with amazing leadership and philanthropy. We are really missing an opportunity here to create something from the ground up, to create the infrastructure to support high tech and our most vulnerable citizens...a model for a civilized society and city.

Homelessness is not something that will be easy to fix, but is something worthy of our attention, time and resources.

"Mom, look at all those homeless people." My eight year old said as we drove past the Social Security building in downtown Seattle. Our minivan rolled by the wall to wall tents on the promenade of the old building, reminding me of a scene outside the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The Jungle, like Occupy Wall Street is a symptom of the larger problem: inequity, lack of infrastructure and imbalance in our current economic system.

If I were a politician, I would see this as an opportunity to create something amazing here in Seattle: affordable housing, temporary shelters like the shipping container community with resources and support to get the homeless into permanent housing such as the one Paul Allen is funding, and mental health care and addiction treatment assistance.

But number one, we need to commit to "Housing First." Which is not penalizing the homeless for being homeless. A strategy that attempts to permanently house those without shelter first before dealing with other issues, including substance abuse or mental illness.

I have lived in Seattle most of my life and believe me, I for one am getting tired of waiting for elected officials to do something about it.