

San Francisco Chronicle

Don't dehumanize people without homes

November 17, 2007

Editor - I was momentarily heartened the morning after the election, when I turned to the Bay Area section of the San Francisco Chronicle and read that writer C.W. Nevius (known to me as Chuck) was calling on newly re-elected Mayor Gavin Newsom to clean up the streets ("What's next for the mayor? How about cleaning the streets?" Nov. 8)

However, it didn't take long to learn that what Chuck was calling dirt were actually living and breathing men and women without homes, living in San Francisco. As the founder of the John Burton Foundation for Children without Homes, and a long-time advocate for our most marginalized residents, I find the current discourse about the homeless uninformed and unconstructive.

The homeless in San Francisco are our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and perhaps most sadly, many are our children. They are, by and large, not violent criminals, and they do not need to be swept away or cleaned up like trash.

Characterizing the homeless in this manner promotes a climate of hatred and fear. The very real suffering of the homeless should not be dismissed as an unsightly inconvenience. It is a genuine human tragedy that is our collective responsibility.

In fact, the homeless aren't as different from us as Chuck would make you think. The solutions that work for us are the same ones that will work for them: access to quality education, health care coverage, affordable housing, living wage employment and high quality child care. Sound impossible? I don't think so. San Francisco has a long track record of developing solutions to hard problems and committing the necessary resources to implement them, such as the city's adoption of the Healthy San Francisco program.

San Franciscans want to genuinely solve the problem of homelessness here, not simply sweep the homeless off the streets. I liked Chuck's writing better when he was beating up on the Bay Area sports teams, not just the least fortunate people in the City of St. Francis.

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