

Nelson Mandela once said, "To deny any person their human rights is to challenge their very humanity. To impose on them a wretched life of hunger and deprivation is to dehumanize them." The anti-houseless legislation in the state of Oregon perpetuates blatant dehumanization of and disregard for thousands of members of this community. Many in this community, including those in power, often view unhoused people as numbers and statistics, as a problem to be swept under the rug and hidden from public eyes, rather than the glaring example that it is, of rampant classism and the deeply engrained failings of a capitalist society to support its most vulnerable. For those who have never struggled, have never worried about where their next meal was going to come from, have never slept huddled against the cold under a bridge in the height of winter, it can be hard to put yourself in the shoes of those who are living on our streets, in our shelters, hidden in plain sight all around us. But as someone who spent many years on and off the streets of Portland (and in cities all over the country), I can tell you this: It can happen to you, too.

Other than the wealthiest in our society, every one of us is one missed paycheck, one unexpected expense away from losing everything. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted this, as its aftereffects (and the lack of *adequate* federal aid) sweep through the city, causing countless people, families, children, to lose their stability. The most important thing to remember is this: Houselessness is not a state of being, it is a state of circumstance. When referring to "the homeless," many begin to see these people as a nameless, faceless demographic, a problem to be handled. Those on the street are not all addicts, they are not all violent, they are not all in these situations because of their own actions, and in my years I have rarely met anyone on the street who was there by choice. Those who do struggle with these things, are often in those situations because of trauma, because of abuse, because of the ways that society has continued to fail them. People so often forget, that those living on the street are human beings. They are your neighbors. Your parents. Your grandparents. They are your pastors, your teachers, your children.

Outside the Frame, the nonprofit I work for, has been following and lobbying for this bill since its first vote. The houseless young folks we serve (one of whom was me, when this program helped me get my voice back over a decade ago) know first hand what this bill could mean. And now, more than ever, the impacts of the housing crisis in Oregon are so boldly underlined. While I am of the mind that this bill is only a step, it is a big step; and it can get things moving in the right direction to uplift the *people* living on our streets, and give them a bit of much needed dignity back.

Sleep is a human right. Human beings cannot live without sleep. We are always told "Move along, you can't sleep here." The question becomes, then: Move along to where? Allowing people the basic right to sleep, to eat, to congregate, to pray in public on the streets of their home (because it is their home, just as much as it is any of ours) is a massive move toward giving peace and dignity back to those from whom society has already taken everything. We need to remind ourselves, our neighbors, and our families (including those of you with the power to make a change) that every person on the streets of our cities is a human being. They've lived deep, full lives. They have stories. They have families. They are no different from any of us. Power to the people.

"My life was a wandering; I never had a homeland. It was a matter of being constantly tossed about, without rest; nowhere, and never did I find a home." – Jan Amos Komensky