

Why we must pass the Right to Rest Act (HB 2367) and finally begin to respect the human rights of all our state's peoples. I am a long time Eugene resident who has been in stable housing for 12 years now. I arrived in Eugene as a houseless teen in the mid 1990's and spent my first night here in Washington Jefferson Park. This park was not at all safe for youth, and a group of about 8 of us (most who were kicked out by their family for being queer) created a hidden community camp on the side of Skinner's Butte park. While there, our encampment was targeted by police officers, who would slash our tents and throw large, heavy objects on top of them when they thought we were away. We would hide and watch as officers in uniform slashed our homes with knives and ransacked our tiny refuge from the elements.

When we moved closer to a road after several attacks on our tents, the City arrived to pack up and cart away our homes while police sat in their patrol cars watching. If we packed up our camp and put on our packs we would find ourselves being approached by officers who demanded to see our ID and search our packs. They would claim that we matched the description of a suspect or that just wearing a full pack in town was suspicious behavior. If we refused, a K-9 unit would be called and we would have to wait with a growing number of officers until a dog was brought to bump our pack so the officers could search it. They would ask you to dump it out in the pouring rain, and if you refused they would cuff you claiming that you were now being detained and dump your pack out for you. I did not use any form of drugs or engage in any illegal activity short of sleeping outside and being too poor to sleep inside. I found this violation of my rights disgusting, and it shattered my faith in society. It was a routine pattern of abuse from local authorities that we all had to adapt to, or else try to hide ourselves further from society and the services we require to survive.

I eventually found a day labor position and worked my first day there, which inspired hope in me, only to arrive home and find that the city had seized my home while I was away working. The rain was falling at a pretty heavy pace then, and I began roaming the streets seeking shelter from the worsening weather. I would spend a very cold night shivering inside a dumpster full of cardboard wrapped in trash bags I had turned inside out. If the dump truck arrived as I slept I would likely be crushed so I slept very little and was unable to work the next day and so lost that job.

Now over 20 years later, I volunteer delivering emergency aid to victims of the city of Eugene's policy of harassment, sweeps, and stealing away the meager possessions of our houseless neighbors here. The great tragedy is that now, my tax

dollars go directly into a system that only creates further barriers to getting into housing and punishes residents for being poor and not having family or church resources they can turn to for emergency aid. The sweeps slowed for a short time due to the pandemic but as the Proposed Olympic trials near and as investors hear more about the tantalizing high rises of “middle housing” the city of Eugene has ramped up its evictions on the unhoused at a breathtaking rate, literally killing people.

I first met Ivory McCuen in November 2020. She was crying behind a building near Westmoreland Park. We talked a bit and I understood that she was fleeing abuse and that she was generally afraid of me, and likely all men for that matter. She did accept my meager help that day and I made it a point to check in with her and follow up. I called the battered women’s shelter to inquire what was required for their aid and was told that they were full at this time but that they might be able to provide housing vouchers for a hotel stay if the victim called them and had children with her. She had none with her. The last time I saw her she was being displaced by City staff at a sweep in Westmoreland park. This sweep was in January and was displacing an existing camp so the city could drop an 18-unit hut site on that exact location, an ironic tool the city will sometimes use to displace an encampment. The huts have a 2-year wait list to get into and are run by volunteers. This site to this day has few residents living in it . City staff would return several times taking tents and sleeping bags and harassing residents out of the area at all hours.

Ivory died of hypothermia on Jan 24 nearby. Calls for help for a young woman in need of medical aid freezing behind the Safeway came in all night for 5 long hours. Dispatch may have been asking as it has when I have called for paramedics, “does she appear to be homeless?” I imagine that the security guard who was calling it in several times that night might have said yes, and that the paramedics here in Eugene have no interest in responding to calls of medical emergency for the unhoused. I fully understand that Police are not helpful in responding to the unhoused community, but I am concerned that fire and paramedics seem unwilling to respond to calls for aid from residents they might believe are not currently paying taxes. Do we lose our rights’ when we can no longer afford to pay taxes? Here is where we ask ourselves if being poor should be a crime in our society? Should it be illegal to be unable to make enough money, have enough money for first and last month rent, and safety deposit, or have a high enough credit score to get into housing?

If you do not do everything in your power to pass the Right to Rest Act (HB 2367), then we will know that you believe that being poor is a crime and that the only housing the poor should get into is prison. There are other acts and bills set before you that claim to address homelessness. These bills and acts are a façade of action, hollow shells with good titles that do little or nothing to protect our civil liberties or human decency.

I also need to ask how many of you have been homeless? How many of your consultants, advisors, or lobbyists have themselves been homeless? Think about that. What is that number? Remember that number now as you seem poised to reject a bill that is based in the experiences of the unhoused and deny us our civil rights again. How are you qualified then to deny this Act? Do you truly believe we the poor have no place in “WE THE PEOPLE” and that the constitution only applies to wealthy white landowners? If so, then our nation has made no progress in the passing generations since we “gained our independence” from a distant monarch, only to establish here a racist, settler colonial monarchy of the wealthiest.

Or perhaps it is time for a real and lasting change. That you will be inspired to bring liberty and justice to our poor and low-income neighbors and extend to them the rights afforded to the more affluent in our society by passing the Right to Rest Act (HB 2367) now. You have a chance to make history in the name of justice. What will you do?