

# A window into life on the streets

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By [Ned Delmore](#) | *Special to The Times*

My mother tells the story of the Depression days, when she would leave on the light on the back porch to let the hobos know there was soup for them. The word got out, and my mom became a very good soup maker. She welcomed all and carried a loving place in her heart for those in need.

At St. Vincent de Paul of Seattle-King County, there is a river of hungry people coming to our food bank every day. And a stone's throw away, outside of my office window in Sodo sit two rickety RVs that are not a visual delight. These roaming RVs showed up at our curb one day, and eventually their stay turned into several months. No doubt the availability of parking and access to our food bank, water and a commode solidified their decision to stay.

There is another truth as to why these RVs are planted in our front yard. The residents trust being in proximity to St. Vincent de Paul. They don't feel hassled or threatened that law enforcement is on their way. They feel safe and have a place to stay where they're not worried about their next meal or being evicted.

These individuals have checkered lives with some living a nomadic, transient existence and others who once had a place to live, had a job that helped support their families until layoffs hit, their incomes dried up, and health conditions took them to their knees. One loss begets another and inevitably they lose their sense of place, and then it becomes a mad scramble to survive.

One individual who I came to know as Jerry would not look at me, would not let me near him as I brought him food, but he would come out and smell the roses on our hedge. These folks carry deep wounds that may lead them to withdraw or at times trigger the impulse to anger, becoming unhinged and finding themselves heading back to jail.

It has taken me considerable reflection to walk this mental tightrope of tolerance or drawing a line in the sand. One day, our front yard is orderly and clean. The next day it is littered with garbage, and it really bugs me. I begin to objectify these individuals and my blood begins to rise, and I step back, take a deep breath and consider the psychological toll of grinding poverty and mental illness on their lives. Some days, these are hard folks to love.

The Catholic social activist Dorothy Day would say, "It is not love in the abstract that counts. To love is the hardest thing in the world. It is never the brothers right next to us, but the brothers in the abstract that are easy to love."

My Seattle politicians, what is your responsibility to our mentally and physically broken neighbors? At times I sense we would all like to see them disappear. Out of sight, out of mind. Another human being unwelcomed and ostracized. Particularly today, who wants to be around people who are dirty and may be infected? These are truths you need to face up to. Who is responsible for this travesty?

How about showing some guts and imagination and taking some of those millions of dollars you may cut from the police department, find an open building and create an in-patient mental-health facility that is staffed by compassionate professionals. Otherwise, the beat goes on, and our city and our most vulnerable will continue to wander, deteriorate and be ignored like lepers.

These are the neighbors St. Vincent de Paul engages with daily and advocates for their human rights. It takes hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to provide an array of services to our neighbors living on the streets, tents, RVs or in their vehicles. We cannot provide these services alone.

Even in the midst of this pandemic, if you show up at our doorstep, we will extend ourselves and welcome you. Through social distancing, our 50 community-based outreach teams across King County continue to engage with neighbors in need no matter your color, creed or temperament. St. Vincent de Paul will be there for you as we have for the past 100 years.

Each one of us needs a mental shift to see our neighbors in a new way, by recognizing their dignity as well as our own vulnerability and our shared humanity. A window into life on the streets offers us an opportunity to move from the abstract to compassionately engaging our neighbors.

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