

Tom Durkin: The last homeless Christmas

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By Tom Durkin

If Jesus came back today, where would he celebrate his birthday?

My guess is we might find him in a homeless camp.

Many of our homeless brothers and sisters — and their children — will celebrate Jesus' birthday outside this year because they have no home.

As in years past, compassionate people, many with tears in their eyes, will have toys for the kids and host community meals to those with no home.

What if they didn't have to do this?

What if we, as a community, said homelessness is not acceptable to us? What if we said, Yes, there is room at the inn?

What if we said no legitimate resident of Nevada County must have to live outside?

What if the Board of Supervisors; city councils of Grass Valley, Nevada City and Truckee; faith communities; service clubs; business organization; homeowners associations and the people who give a damn about their fellow human beings all came together to say:

We are better than this.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The homeless people living in the streets and in the camps and in cars and illegal trailers are our fellow citizens. These people are not transients. They live here. This is their home too.

Homeless people are not the problem. They are the symptoms of the problem.

Homelessness is our problem. And unless and until we own the problem, we are the problem.

Although I admit I have done it in the past, I'm not trying to blame or shame anybody or any entity this time. Hospitality House, Sierra Roots, Community Beyond Violence, FREED, other organizations and private landlords are all doing their best. The county is doing its part to facilitate the construction of affordable housing.

For all the good they are doing, it's not enough.

THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE

At the last meeting of the Nevada County Continuum of Care shelter committee, we learned that the best estimate is that maybe we have provided shelter to about 50% of our known homeless population. At minimum, that's about 200 people left out in the cold. The front-line people who work in the field tell us there are probably twice to three times that many people we don't know about.

National homeless advocate Mark Horvath, founder of the InvisiblePeople.tv website, calls these homeless folks "invisible people." That's because when we encounter them on the street, we pretend not to see them.

But there's another cohort of homeless people who are truly invisible. They don't look or act homeless. They are the working poor folks who live in cars, friends' garages, illegal trailers or wherever.

They have storage lockers. They have gym memberships for bathrooms and showers to keep themselves presentable. They can pay reasonable rent. Some can even buy modest homes. They are housing ready.

Problem is: There is no affordable housing.

SANCTUARY



Not all homeless folks, however, are housing ready. Sierra Roots found that out the hard way. They put 80 people in motel rooms last winter. They had to kick 40 out for drugs, violence and/or property destruction.

Private landlords are telling me they are refusing to rent to homeless people placed by some nonprofit agencies for the same reason. As much as they want to help, they can't afford or tolerate people who aren't ready or able to live inside responsibly and respectfully.

As good-hearted as the Housing First initiatives are, the reality is that not everybody out there is housing ready.

That's why Home Path is leading the effort to establish a safe-ground sanctuary camp for chronically homeless people. We are a coalition of committed citizens who aim to enlist the entire community in a public-private partnership to build a camp that will provide homeless people with services to assist them in transitioning from camps to housing.

A sanctuary camp is not just for our homeless neighbors. It's for us. It's for the common good. We can't risk campfires in the wildland. We don't want our abandoned homeless citizens loitering in business districts and squatting in backyards. We want to take pride as a community that takes care of its own.

The time to do this is way past due. If not now, when? If not us, who?

Regardless of religious or political affiliation, I think the most relevant question we can ask ourselves, and each other, is:

What would Jesus do?

Together, and only together, we can do this. Please like our Nevada County Home Path Facebook page and join our Nevada County Home Path group. A website is coming soon. You can write us at info.nchomepath@gmail.com.

Let us resolve to make this the last homeless Christmas in Nevada County.

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