

2013 *What Matters?* Competition

YEAR 5/6 WINNER

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Hammering Homelessness

Meandering through the alleys of Darlinghurst in Sydney, one cannot ignore the poignant sense of despair and desperation. In the heat of the summer sun and in the chill of the winter wind, people lie along these streets, some scantily clad and many requiring a good scrub and shower. Here are just some of the pockets where Sydney's multitudes of marginalised and homeless congregate.

Juxtaposed against the revelry and affluence in this suburb, these people are my neglected neighbours. How often have we passed with oblivion, with no further reflection upon them or upon the greater issue of homelessness on our streets? Turning a blind eye or a deaf ear does not miraculously melt this problem away like marshmallows. Conversely, the problem is escalating and society must promptly counteract this catastrophe!

There are numerous charities, religious and philanthropic groups who have taken some positive action in alleviating the discomfort and disparity experienced by the homeless. Typically, food and clothing banks, soup kitchens, temporary shelters and refuges have been established to address the more immediate needs. Organisations such as Oz Harvest are even actively engaging restaurants, cafes, food retailers, schools and businesses to donate excess food for sharing with the needy. Such positive endeavours are to be applauded.

Despite such efforts, homelessness persists. We have resolved the immediate need to feed and shelter some of our homeless, but all these are peripheral to the crux of the issue. Why does homelessness exist?

People are excommunicated from their families and forced to live on the streets for many reasons. These may include domestic violence, family breakups and financial stress or for other related social issues such as drugs and alcoholism. Having no home to return to at the end of each day is an excruciating sensation. I personally cannot face this trepidation. As a result, many homeless people shun solitude and neglect. They often yearn for friendship, companionship and compassion, a simple sense of belonging. Stopping to chat with them, enquiring after them, or showing some interest in them helps to heighten their sense of self-worth.

In order for the homeless to reconnect with society, they must be self-sustaining and financially independent. Gaining employment is not a simple feat for the ordinary person, let alone one who calls the streets his or her home. Many of our homeless require vocational training to help them acquire skills in order to be employable. Changing society's preconception about the homeless is of utmost importance if the homeless are to secure paid employment. Society generally views the homeless as people with a repelling disease. The homeless are superficially assessed and face discrimination and marginalisation. This must cease!

The government needs to engage itself by offering sponsorship programs and perhaps taxation benefits to businesses that are prepared to provide vocational training to the homeless with the view of migrating them off the streets. Large corporations such as McDonald's or businesses in the hospitality and retail sectors could easily assimilate such vocational training into their programs. They need not be offering the individual substantial wages as the skills and self-confidence acquired in the process are priceless.

Addressing homelessness starts at the grassroots. At school, we have drug education. We celebrate Harmony Day and Australia's multiculturalism. Why not incorporate into our curriculum activities to promote our empathy for the marginalised and take steps to prevent and minimise the occurrence of events that could potentially lead to homelessness for our future generations?

Solving any social issue requires positive participation at all levels. Let us all take a stand now and help to abate the issues associated with homelessness!