

What It's Like

The rain pours down, covering Seattle in a sheet of cold and damp. Walking home along the Ave, the main street that runs parallel to the University of Washington campus, I can see people tucked into every conceivable nook and cranny in a desperate attempt to escape the freezing water.

The current homelessness crisis in the city of Seattle is incredibly controversial, with many voices shouting different ideas and perspectives. Several of my classes have addressed homelessness directly, and several more have talked about issues that can be applied to the situation. My biggest takeaways came when we talked about matrices of oppression, and how that interacts to make preexisting situations worse, as well as when we talked about the oppression that occurs when people who aren't directly involved in a problem make decisions for those who are. How can someone who is privileged enough to have a home and never know what it's like to be without one, make decisions for people who are currently living like that?

Talking about that was absolutely eye-opening, and if I had not been receiving a liberal arts education through the Honors program, I never would have had the chance to discuss the topic. I always assumed that people who were trying to help were helping the best they could. I never imagined that the 'helping' could actually be hurting instead.

A service learning project was a major component of my class, and every Thursday night I volunteered at a youth homeless shelter. I enjoyed it to such an extent that I continued volunteering there for months after my project was complete. I met many wonderful people, shelter guests and volunteers alike, and adored the time I had to talk and grow close to several guests. This opportunity completely opened my eyes, and let me see a small glimpse into what it is like to be a youth living on the streets. This experience only drove the points we talked about

in class further home, particularly that the people required to fix a problem need to be those directly involved in the problem. Without that opportunity for autonomy, the cycle of privilege and oppression continues and nothing can be fixed. People will continue to live on the streets in worsening conditions, with no solution in sight.

As the weather warms and the number of tents under freeways, in parks, and on sidewalks increases astronomically, I can only hope that we're not too late to find a solution to this problem. It will need to rely heavily on several disciplines coming together, as well as taking ideas directly from the source. Without the type of critical thinking I have learned to do with a liberal arts education, I wouldn't have seen the problem with how homelessness was previously being handled and addressed. Now though, I can cast a critical eye on how my city is trying to solve this problem, and look forward to the newest initiative of UW to host Tent City 3.