

Vigil Reflection

By Shauna Romanoff

On January 18, 2024 my VSHA coworkers and I joined a total of 50 individuals outside the Montpelier Vermont State House to raise awareness of the Vermont housing crisis and to hold vigil for those who have passed as a result of homelessness. Co-Executive Director of Good Samaritans, Julie Bond, led the event. Service providers in the housing and mental health field spoke passionately and fondly of those they served, tears pooling in the corner of their eyes. Those who have experienced homelessness firsthand were given the floor to speak of their experiences. Poems were read, candles were grasped in mittened hands, and we all bowed our heads in the bitter wind for a moment of silence. While the event ran for only forty-five minutes, the events of the vigil stuck with me for days.

As we came together in a semi-circle, Julie Bond shared some statistics. Colored flags on the state house lawn represented 8,138 Vermonters who experienced homelessness in 2023 - 2,108 children, 6,019 adults and 422 elders. While the number is staggering, I personally find it difficult to actually envision the lives of over 8,000 individuals. 8,000 who are suffering. In my mind, I try to create full lives for each person. I give them full names, pets, and children. They have dreams and aspirations and faults. They have personalities, childhood memories, crooked noses, and chipped teeth. I envision life.

I think it can become routine for society to separate the person from their circumstances. "That would never happen to me" or, "they're lazy and not trying hard enough." The stark truth is it could happen to any of us at any time. Repeating and continuing to acknowledge this truth will help reduce stigma and rid us of the offensive caricature surrounding unhoused individuals. A speaker, who I will call Dan, made a lasting impression - a jovial and funny gentleman who spoke plainly about his experience being unhoused. He reported that he made the most of being a "vagabond" and met some good people during this time. However, despite his casual and comfortable demeanor, I felt a pain

in my chest when he closed his remarks. With a smile and a laugh, he confessed that he keeps a sleeping bag and everything he needs in his closet at home, should he find himself homeless again.

Another woman, "Meaghan", spoke at length of the long-term abuse, mistreatment, and dehumanization she suffered as a result of being homeless while dealing with mental health struggles. She stated something to the effect of, "your word doesn't amount to anything when you're homeless." She conjured an image that most are familiar with - walking past a homeless person. More so, seeing past them, as if they've blended with the background.

I found myself willing time to move faster as I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets, and pulled my hat over my ears, the cold piercing through my many layers. I complained to myself, and perhaps to someone else in a hushed tone, that I can't feel my toes. I found myself feeling shame and guilt. "Don't you know what we're here for? This is merely an inconvenience to you, a life is not hanging in the balance." But neither shame and guilt, nor judgment and ostracization, are vehicles for change. Empathy, humanity, curiosity, and consistently showing up at the table are what will continue to carry us towards building a future where safe and affordable housing is accessible to all. Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." I'm proud to be part of a community and workplace that is composed of individuals who encapsulate those qualities and share in the common goal of bettering the lives of those who are most vulnerable.