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Homelessness in Haight-Ashbury

Walking down Haight is just like you might expect walking down a dirty street with graffiti on the walls and people experiencing homelessness anywhere else in the world. Whereas in other places those who live on the streets are seen begging for loose change, Haight-Ashbury is different. Here, the homeless are friendly, unassuming, and unthreatening . One day when I was walking around one person even asked me if I had “any old demonic relics” I had no use for. When I told him “no, sorry,” he didn’t force me to cough up any change or buy him a coffee, he just went on with his day. Some of them chose to give me advice, and others just asked for a smoke, but none of them wanted to hurt me. The first people I met were Jasmine Drake and Clay Pallum. They stood out to me because they were homeless, but they were outgoing and funny. The day was windy, but it was warm still. Jazz was strumming her guitar and Clay was freestyle rapping to it. When I first introduced myself I could feel the positive energy radiating from them, and when Jazz played her guitar I felt as though I was connecting to her, listening to her story through music.

The importance of Haight Ashbury, to me, is that there are so many people who have literally been kicked to the curb. They have nowhere else to run, so they turn to drugs and

alcohol to avoid the pain of real life, living in homelessness. Jazz and Clay understand the dangers of using opioids “because that makes you act retarded and crazy... stealing from your own people just to get another high.” (Jazz). Jazz elaborated and said that those who hurt or steal from others sometimes get kicked out of Haight. These two show the perspective of people experiencing homelessness, showing how homeless people have tons of hope, humor, and least of all, Haight (hate).

Haight Ashbury has a short history, but it is great. Back in the 60’s when the hippie movement was at its prime, people flocked to Haight because of the electric energy there. People that lived in the district felt free to be themselves, but also understood that they were still part of a greater community. It was an amazing way for musicians, artists, and ordinary people to connect over a common interest: freedom. Even today, the energy, the smells, the look of everything, and the sounds feel like a different world, completely separate from the rest of San Francisco.

In recent years though, the Haight district has undergone a huge wave of gentrification. For an area to be gentrified means for it to have improved living conditions, and therefore increased costs of living. Jazz, a long time resident of Haight Ashbury, told me about the gentrification, “in the 80’s there was this thing goin’ around where they could fix their rent, people that have houses, they like, lock it, so that it can’t be changed.” She knows that people are concerned about the increase in rent, and cost of living, so they are able to lock in the rent on houses they already live in, so they are able to continue living in Haight Ashbury without paying

more. Not only has the gentrification affected individual people, it has also affected small businesses in the district. “The Psalms Cafe went out of business at the end of 1979... was supplanted by a stylish restaurant, the Yellow Rose, catering to a more affluent clientele.” (Godfrey, 79). Godfrey uses the example of the Psalms Cafe closing to show that Haight Ashbury has been changing since the 80’s.

Haight is a place with a lot of history, but also a lot of potential for the future. Clay has big dreams and lots of hope. He knows that “despite my current homeless state, I am not a homeless person. I am a man in transition that is on his way to housing. There’s no other way around it. It’s fully inevitable and there's nothing else that’s going to happen. You know what I mean? There’s no other way around it.” He is positive that he will create a living for himself, and prosper later in life.

Clay has huge dreams of being a worldwide touring DJ and will stop at nothing to get there. To him, “all these things that are taking place now are simply steps toward that eventuality. There’s nothing that can stop it.” (Pallum).

Works Cited

Drake, Jasmine. Personal Interview. 12/3/2020.

Godfrey, Brian J. "Inner-City Revitalization and Cultural Succession: The Evolution of San Franciscos Haight-Ashbury District." *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1984, pp. 79–91., doi:10.1353/pcg.1984.0004.

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