

When Journalism Stoops to Homeless Bashing

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by Becky Johnson

Lee Quarnstrom, columnist for the Santa Cruz edition of the *San Jose Mercury News*, has sunk to a new low in his already tattered history of writing about the homeless and the poor. Those who have the misfortune of falling within eyeshot of Mr. Quarnstrom are likely to have their morality, personal integrity and even their right to exist questioned and impugned by his words.

In two recent columns in the *San Jose Mercury News* (August 26 and September 9), Quarnstrom's descriptions of homeless persons include "leeches", "shiftless cronies", "bums", "street scum", "pieces of garbage", "motley gang", "human detritus", "layabouts", and "flesh-eating bacteria trying to infect Santa Cruz". And this passes for journalism in what should be a respected and trusted paper.

Quarnstrom's obvious distaste for homeless activist Robert Norse Kahn is evident in his derogatory title of "King of

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the Bums." It is unprofessional at best and criminal at worst to use the power of his column to personally malign a private citizen, with concocted stories, inflammatory pejoratives and few real facts. When Robert was jailed for 28 days this summer for having served bagels to homeless people, Quarnstrom wrote nothing. But his recent diatribe accused Robert for not getting arrested at a Santa Cruz protest!

And in two recent columns, he accuses a group of Campbell Street residents who fought their eviction of having "flung buckets of urine" on the police who had arrived to handcuff and arrest them. Since no such events ever happened, it is irresponsible in the extreme to publish that they had. I personally was at Campbell Street the day of the eviction in my capacity as a video-journalist for a Community Access Television station. Karen Clark of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* was also at the scene. Why she reported what she did is a mystery to me. Dozens of witnesses observed a police officer dropping some gallon-sized plastic jugs

filled with urine from an upstairs roof to the sidewalk below, where they, of course, broke, splattering urine everywhere. I have videotape of this.

Two days after Quarnstrom's column appeared, a homeless man was brutally beaten underneath a bridge. Quarnstrom's rhetoric leads to vigilante "trollbusting" by fanning the flames of hatred against the poor souls who happen to be homeless. I spoke with Quarnstrom on September 9 and asked him directly if he thought his column had anything to do with attacks on the homeless. He denied any responsibility for these violent assaults.

I spoke with Theodora Kerrey, a local hemp activist, about comments attributed to her in Quarnstrom's column. "I was used," she replied.

Missing from Quarnstrom's article was that the eviction made 20 people homeless. Missing were reports of unnecessary roughness used by the police in making the arrests. Missing was any information about the youth arrested who had his hands too

tightly bound. The police took nearly 13 minutes to loosen his bindings as bystanders begged Lt. Joe Haebe to intervene before any permanent nerve damage took place. Missing was any information about serious allegations of negligence and scalping committed by the owners of the building, Donna and Forrest Moore. Missing was any information about the larger problem of lack of affordable housing in Santa Cruz, in which only 5.6% of housing is considered long-term affordable.

Vilifying, dehumanizing and blaming a whole class of people is a time-honored tactic with brutal, militaristic regimes. In other times and places, this kind of scapegoating has led to boxcars and death camps. Is this the sort of journalism that the *San Jose Mercury News* is willing to tolerate? Are these the ideas a respected paper should promote? I believe the only course of action the paper has the option of taking is to stop publishing the character-assassination-disguised-as-reporting of Lee Quarnstrom.