

Homeless People Face a Ban on Existence

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by Becky Johnson

The death toll rises each day. More and more bodies are being found — people whose lives were ended in a premature and unjust way. These are our own American citizens, who have, in many cases, lived full and productive lives before they were ripped away from their homes and families. Shipped to war in Iraq? Guess again.

The streets of America haven't had this many homeless people since the Great Depression. But for local cities, the only crisis is how to get homeless people to "just go somewhere else."

In Santa Cruz, the most flagrant and institutionalized example of this policy is known as the "Camping Ban," MC 6.36.010. Section (a) prohibits the act of sleeping between 11 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. anywhere outdoors or in a vehicle on both public and private property within the city limits. Activists call this the "Sleeping Ban." One aspect of enforcement of the Sleeping Ban is for police to show up late at night with flashlights, and then rock and bang on vehicles to wake up anyone who may be inside sleeping.

One disabled man, Trebor Ruomyes, who is legally disabled and on Social Security, lives in his van while waiting for his name to come up on a Section 8 subsidized housing list. His van, though registered and licensed, is showing signs of wear. He has all of his personal belongings inside, and he, himself, looks worn from the years and stress.

He wears a long, white beard, common among homeless men who both need the warmth and sun protection a beard provides, while not having access to bathrooms as regularly as housed people do. His body is slight, and he says he cannot keep any weight on

All these factors have made him a mark for both police enforcement and for trollbusters. Police have called him a scary-looking speed freak. You would never guess, looking at him, that he worked as a civil engineer for 35 productive years.

"I've been hit every night," he said, "since I had surgery on my ear." He shows the bandages on his right ear where the doctors had peeled his ear open and removed three tumors. Trebor suffers from emphysema, hepatitis C, and a tumor on his kidney.

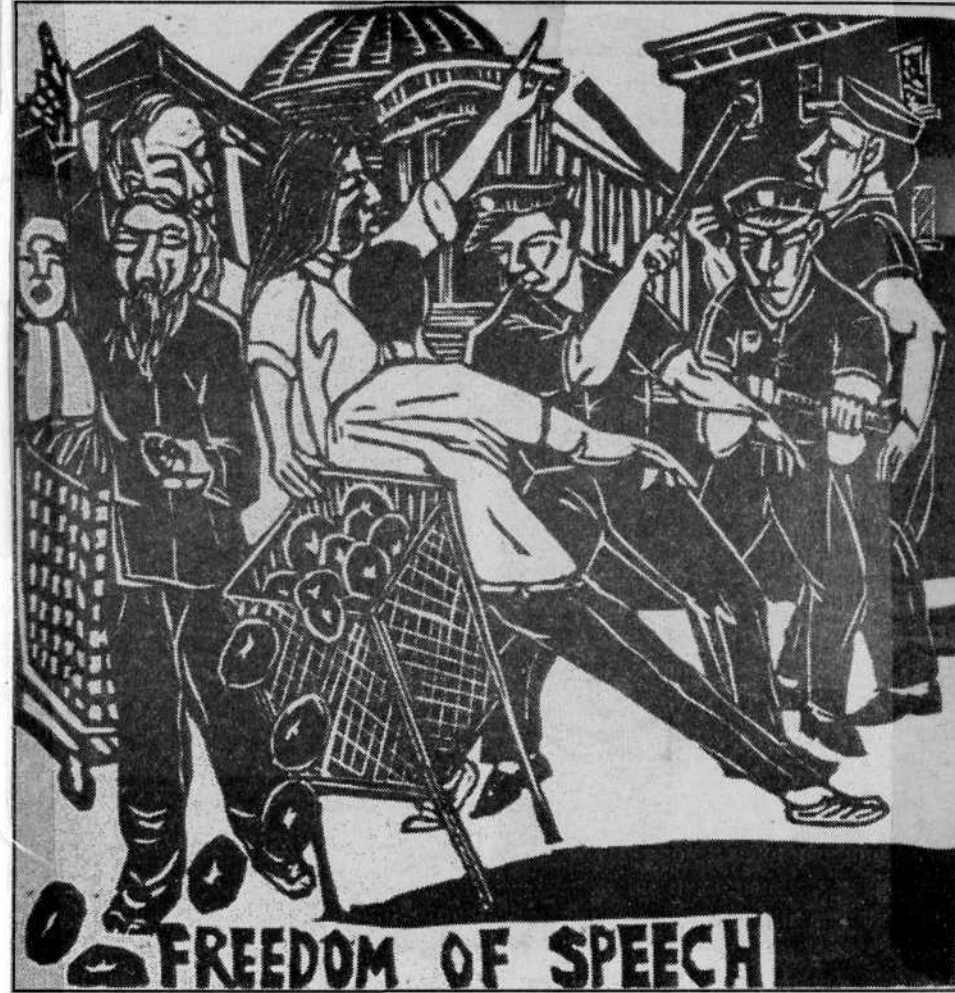
He is unable to work, but has found a good Samaritan who lets him park his van near his house at night. It hasn't kept the police from harassing him. Graffiti depicting a crude drawing of Trebor's van and the words, "Van Troll move on," have recently appeared on a sidewalk near where he parks.

"I just want the right to exist without being hounded to death," he said. "They did outpatient surgery — and the cops wouldn't leave me alone the night after the surgery."

Trebor no longer answers when his van is pounded on late at night. For the short run, this strategy has been working in that he has avoided getting a Sleeping Ban ticket. But he's not getting much sleep.

Sharon also lives in her vehicle. She had it parked at night in the designated parking lot of a fitness center that is open 24 hours a day, and where she is a member. It is on private property and she has never received a complaint from the management. Nevertheless, police still gave her a Sleeping Ban ticket.

Sharon is taking her ticket to court and fighting it pro per, acting as her own legal defense with the help of Jhon Golder, who is also vehicularly housed, and a three-year veteran of police harassment. "Because it's an infraction, she doesn't qualify for a public defender," explained Golder.



"Freedom of Speech"

From "The Four Freedoms." Art by Art Hazelwood

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