

July 1, 2010

Claire Neilund Kelly
St. Ignatius College Preparatory,
2001 37th Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94116

To the esteemed member of the Sacramento City Council,

When I first entered the Safe Ground camp a few days ago, I was surprised and delighted. I was soon embraced by many. I was invited to play dominoes, talk, and swim. They even made a delicious dinner for us because they knew of our arrival. I felt like I was part of a big family. People were helping each other set up tents and prepare for the upcoming day. I was surprised to find a community filled with so much love and support.

These past two weeks, I have immersed myself into the lives of the homeless community at Loaves and Fishes. I have listened to their stories of suffering, fear and loss. It is hard for me to imagine living a life of constant fear. Many people walk the streets of Sacramento all night because they fear that someone will inflict harm on them or steal their only possessions. Many women are raped simply because they have no protection. It is likely that their sleep deprivation will make it difficult to find a job. Safe Ground is a community that helps people escape the dangers on the streets. Without shelter, the ability to maintain a job, protect oneself, and get adequate rest are threatened. Until more resources are provided, Safe Ground is the best alternative solution to these many basic needs.

Sincerely,
Claire Neilund Kelly

Caithin Nicole Ng, class of 2011
St. Ignatius' College Preparatory
2001 37th Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94116

July 1, 2010

TO the esteemed members of Sacramento City Council,

After visiting the former site of Tent City last week, I became irrate when I found out that the homeless of Sacramento had lost a community in which they could be safe. These homeless no longer had a place to call their own. However, later on in the week I was invited to visit Safe Ground, a place in which homeless people regained that strong sense of community.

The system on which Safe Ground is built embraces the idea of acceptance and acknowledgement. The elders, who are in charge of Safe Ground, also fellow homeless, welcome all people into their home. I experienced this sense of hospitality when I was first to receive my dinner that night at Safe Ground. I initially thought I was served first because I was a special guest, but I later learned that all new guests of Safe Ground are treated the same way. The elders also look out for each and every member of Safe Ground and truly care for their well being. One of the elders I met carried a woman of 72 years of age's bag, while another elder bicycled all of another man's belongings. These elders are selfless people who embody the principles of helping others and creating a safe place. However, the elders are not the only people who demonstrate acceptance and great kindness. The guests also look out for one another by pitching each other's tents, watching someone's stuff, or playing a friendly game of dominoes. Each and every member of Safe Ground truly cares about one another, which creates a safe and communal environment.

Another aspect of Safe Ground that impressed me was the fact that it is alcohol and drug free. This rule further unites the community. Without alcohol and drugs, violence is reduced. There is a slimer chance that someone's stuff will get stolen when sober. Fights are also less likely to break out and the possibility of entering the cycle of addiction is cut off. On the streets however, drugs and alcohol are more prominent which is one of the main reasons for all the street crime. At safe ground, drugs and alcohol are not tolerated, allowing the guests to focus on recreating and rebuilding their lives.

Lastly, Safe Ground is a community that promotes engagement and healthy interaction with others. One man exclaimed that part of the benefit of living at Safe Ground is the insight you receive from others' experience. Because everyone is so open and willing to share their own personal stories with other guests, guests learn different survival techniques and learn from other's mistakes. This exchange of stories leads to a safer and more stable community.

At Safe Ground, I also met a student, who has perfect attendance, good grades, and who recently got accepted into med school. He is also homeless. Without Safe Ground, this man would not be where he is today. If he had to fend for himself on the streets, and worry about his stuff being stolen, getting into med school would have been a lot more difficult. At Safe Ground, this student had others to rely on, did not have to worry about theft, violence, or alcohol and drug abuse. By having a shelter, a strong community that supported him, and a place to call his own, in which he is truly cared for and acknowledged, he was able to begin building a new life. Hopefully, all other homeless at Safe Ground can begin building their own lives. Safe Ground provides not only safety, security, and comfort, but also the opportunity to form relationships that are critical to human growth and flourishing.

Sincerely,
Caitlin Ng
Caitlin Ng

Ryan Patrick Spiers, Class of 2011

St. Ignatius College Preparatory

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July 1, 2010

To the esteemed members of Sacramento City Council,

Last week, I was invited to Safe Ground by multiple guests of Loaves and Fishes. My first thought of Safe Ground was a simple campsite. What I saw was a simple campsite. Although, what I discovered was a home.

After ducking my head under a tree branch to enter Safe Ground, I looked upwards towards all the people and tents surrounding me. It could have been the sunset over the river or the falling cottonwood from the trees giving the impression of snow, but I felt immediately comfortable at this little camping spot. But it wasn't only beautiful scenery that consoled my old feelings, ~~the guests~~ it was also the guests of Safe Ground who took me in as someone who has stayed there for months. For example, one of the men bought us soda since he knew us "normies" were coming even though he was low on money. More importantly, the same man taught me how to play a still-confusing card game called Cribbage. This old cowboy game was both fun and relaxing, which are two adjectives someone hardly hears when talking about living on the streets. These people truly care for one another.

Safe Ground is a strong community that supports each other by listening and acting for each other but also one that enforces rule to keep things in order. Safe Ground is built off this motto and would have never been able to take the first step to where it is today without the rules. Even a year after its opening, Safe Ground displays strong devotion and enforces the rules when needed. If you worry that this program is a dangerous "sub-culture," then you are clearly wasting your time.

This isn't an issue about God, money, or politics. This is simply about providing a safe place for the homeless. In fact, those who live in Safe Ground should not be called homeless but rather houseless. These people may not have a house but they do have a home in Safe Ground.

I imagine these walls and a door around me during my own game...
if no different than my very own home. Like the card game, every person
could have an equal chance to win or succeed. So I ask of you, the council, to
help even out the oddities of this unfair world and give our equals
an inherited human right: a home.

Sincerely,
Ryan Spiers

Kaitlyn Hameister
Saint Ignatius College Preparatory
2001 37th Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94116
July 1, 2010

To the esteemed members of the Sacramento City Council,

My name is Kaitlyn Hameister and I am a high school student in San Francisco. Over the last two weeks, a group of 9 others and myself have been on an Immersion trip to live among and volunteer for the Sacramento homeless community. We have done this to better understand the needs of our fellow human beings, and attempt to respond to those needs. Two of the most significant needs I have observed were dignity and security.

The leading cause of homelessness continues to be the lack of affordable housing. Although this problem cannot be solved easily, Safe Ground offers an alternative to street life. On the streets, nights are often sleepless and tense in fear of violence, robbery, and intimidation. Safe Ground offers the security and community that all people have a birth-given right to experience. Homeless people often are denied the right to dignity, and Safe Ground also works to restore that need.

Last week, when I visited Safe Ground, the sense of community surpassed all expectations. I felt completely safe among strangers I'd been told my whole life to avoid. I was comforted by the three rules of Safe Ground: no drugs, no alcohol, and no violence. These rules separate Safe Ground from other homeless groups. Contrary to my previously held qualms, ladies were served first and I was referred to as "miss" and "young lady," titles and manners that "higher society" has long removed from basic etiquette.

There was a moment I can recall when I looked around with a plate of franks and beans and saw a familiar scene: The river side barbecue at sunset, with its surrounding huddles of tents looked exactly like my family's annual camp out on the delta. It was a community eating a meal, united in compassion and understanding. It was truly a safe ground, and undeniably successful in its goals.

made many friends over the last two weeks, and I understand all the thought of their lives in danger. However, this is their reality, and I cannot ensure their safety. I can only hope for more communities like Safe Ground to gain support, so that those who choose a life of dignity and self security can have an opportunity for personal success. I can only ask that you, the Council, will legalize their campsites and not arrest men and women who simply seek a place to call home and feel safe. Should these safe havens be eliminated, my friends and others who have committed themselves to clean, nonviolent lives will be forced to live in the substance tainted and violent life on the streets. I hope you consider my voice and the voices of others in your decisions pertaining to Safe Ground's future. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kaitlyn Hameister

Kaitlyn Hameister

Gerard Christopher Kelliher, Class of 2011
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July 1, 2010

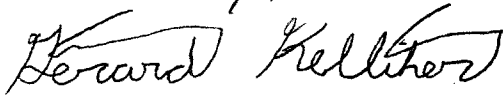
To the esteemed members of Sacramento City Council,

On June 23, I arrived at ~~lowes~~ and fishes Friendship park as a high school student pretending to be homeless. Within the first half hour, a park guest noticed that I was new, and warned me of the streets' dangers. He told me to never sleep out alone and always stay within a group. He recounted the shivering story of a homeless female and her ordeal five days prior. The female and the guest were both sleeping in the same group, when the female left to make a phone call, she walked fifty feet from the group before three men kidnapped and raped her. Despite my initial fear from this story, the guest provided me a solution - safe ground.

The guest told me to join safe ground, so I could sleep in a regulated group free from drugs or violence. Several days after talking to this guest, I had the opportunity to visit safe ground for myself. A handful of elders control the camp and enforce the rules. The rules are simple and outlined in a contract signed by all participants: no drugs, no booze, and no violence. These rules ensure absolute protection from any kind of abuse or harm. Although I was only at safe ground for a few hours, I personally saw the elders expel a man who tried to bring in alcohol. Clearly, the rules are important to the elders and they work to enforce them.

For the many defenseless homeless living on the streets, safe ground offers a beacon of protection. If the city of Sacramento is not going to provide enough affordable housing to the homeless, then they cannot remove the only safe alternative.

Sincerely,



Gerard Kelliher

Brian K. Yee
St. Ignatius College Prep.
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July 1, 2010

To the esteemed members of the Sacramento City Council,

On my first day at Loaves and Fishes, a classmate and I visited the main elder at Safeground. He is a scrawny average height man who is always sporting bike gloves. He let us in on all of the details about Safeground. At the end of the week, my classmates and I were invited to have dinner with Safeground at their campsite. When we arrived, I noticed that the elders were reliable and trusted by all members of the Safeground community. All of the elders at Safeground are homeless and all of the members of the community share common support for their movement. Safeground hopes to make camping legal. At the same time, it offers a safe place for the homeless of Sacramento to spend their nights. Safeground only has three rules: no booze, no drugs, and no violence. As reflected by the main elder in his introduction to Safeground, every member of the community take the rules seriously. We witnessed the seriousness of the rules when the elders had to escort a member from the camp. The one aspect of Safeground that truly impresses me is the fact that the community is solely run by the homeless for the homeless. Safeground is a great example of a community that is self-governing and positive. It does no harm to anyone and brings only good to the homeless community.

Sincerely,

Brian K. Yee
Brian Koa Yee

Kelsey Krook, Class of 2011
St. Ignatius College Preparatory
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July 1, 2010

To the esteemed members of the Sacramento
City Council,

When I learned my high school group was going to spend a night with Safe Ground, I worried that our group would be an intrusion into someone's home, ultimately unwelcome there. But I got swept up in the feelings of love, generosity and community within minutes of my arrival. I felt deeply moved by the meal that the members brought and prepared for us. Generously, they allowed our group to eat first, even though we had eaten a meal that day that they hadn't. Everyone laughed together and I personally learned a lot about what a true community looks like. Safe Ground is a strong loving community; one that provides its citizens with vital human interaction.

A member of the Safe Ground community best described and articulated the importance of social skills for the homeless. He explained that because many who end up homeless lived a childhood when they ran through many institutions, they don't develop a complete set of social skills. Through time at Safe Ground, people can pick up these skills by observation, then practice them in the community. It is these very skills that allows them to pull themselves out of homelessness and into a job and a new life. Human interaction is a key part in bringing about what I assume the city hopes for Sacramento's homeless; that they will no longer live in such poverty. In this regard, Safe Ground is necessary in the battle against homelessness and allows people to live happier and more full lives.

About a week after our amazing journey into the Safeground community, I was approached by a man while I worked at leaves and fishes. He told me he had been robbed of all his possessions and wanted someone to spend the night. I quickly directed him to the safe ground office, believing in its ability to protect him physically, socially, and emotionally. People should feel a sense of community and human engagement. They should feel comfortable sleeping at night after a long day. Safe ground provides them with this opportunity and I strongly believe in what it does.

I hope that you can see its importance.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Kelsey Krook

Grace Elizabeth Buckingham
Class of 2011
St. Ignace College Preparatory
San Francisco, CA 94116

July 1, 2010

To the esteemed members of Sacramento City Council,
Upon arrival at Leaves and Fishes two weeks ago, I found myself in a completely unfamiliar situation. Curled up on a sidewalk at 5:00 in the morning, I experienced the feelings of fear and uncertainty as Sacramento's homeless swirled around me. Four days later, at the end of my time as a guest at Leaves and Fishes, my feelings of fear had mostly ebbed but exhaustion and weariness filled my body. It was then that I was welcomed at Safe Ground, for a meal completely bought and prepared through the pooled resources of the homeless Safe Grounders, themselves.

Descending the trail into the camp, I was greeted with more gracious hospitality than I have ever experienced. Within minutes, I was pulled into a game of dominoes and handed an enormous bottle of bug spray with the friendly reminder to "spray up." Relief flooded over me and I felt comfortable for the first time in four days. Among the most diverse group I have ever been a part of, I felt the most at home. As the night wore on, I began to realize I was in the presence of something truly unique. Listening to story after story, I became aware that I was in the presence of a community unlike any other. In the cutthroat world of Sacramento's streets, Safe Ground has accomplished something greater than most people realize.

Stories of hardship were shared, and I found myself drawn to the story of one guest in particular. This man* is generous and kind-hearted, living on the streets because as he admitted to me, he had made mistakes as a younger man. Attempting to turn his life around, he found Safe Ground, a community in which he can live in relative safety while he makes the steps to get back on his feet.

During my two weeks among Sacramento's homeless community, my previous ideas about homelessness were completely shattered. As someone who clung to the stereotype of a "lazy alcoholic on the park bench" my experience served to open my eyes to the truths about homelessness. I did not see one person at the Safe Ground camp who fit into my stereotype and everyone I met told me of plans to improve their situations. For many, Safe Ground provides a safe transitional step out of the cycle of poverty.

I can honestly say with absolute conviction, that Safe Ground provides Sacramento's homeless with a step up to actualize their plans for themselves. The Safe Ground movement should be a model for other cities around the United States and should be allowed to flourish in Sacramento. I encourage those of you who doubt the Safe Ground movement to visit a camp and experience what I have seen.

Sincerely,

Mr. B

Grace Buckingham

*name omitted for safety