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OPINION L.A. OBSERVATIONS AND PROVOCATIONS FROM THE TIMES' OPINION STAFF

BLOWBACK

Homeless enablers -- and proud of it

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A federal judge last year issued an injunction that temporarily barred the city from seizing or destroying the unattended property of homeless people in skid row. Business owners in the area say the ruling has resulted in unsanitary conditions on sidewalks. (April 13, 2012)

By Jeff Dietrich
April 16, 2012 | 7:22 a.m.

Carol Schatz, a leading advocate for downtown business owners, says in her [April 9 Times Op-Ed article](#) that a federal judge's ruling to uphold the property rights of skid row's homeless residents enables homelessness.

I am a homeless enabler. My organization, Los Angeles Catholic Worker, has been publicly accused by police and the business community of being homeless enablers because we provide food -- more than 5,000 meals weekly. We provide blankets,

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Dan Turner has been an editorial editor or writer with the Times since 2004.

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raincoats and heavy blue tarps for shelter.

We are homeless enablers, and we are proud to provide the essentials that enable the homeless to stay alive.

But the most reprehensible thing we have done is to give the homeless free shopping carts in which to store their belongings. Over the past 12 years, we have provided more than 20,000 carts that, unlike those from grocery stores, cannot legally be confiscated by the police because the L.A. Catholic Worker owns them.

It seems so unlikely that the simple shopping cart would provoke major controversy. However, when the police and city officials last year confiscated and destroyed three of our shopping carts along with the possessions of the homeless who were eating at our soup kitchen, the furor over the federal injunction issued by U.S. District Judge Philip Gutierrez that prohibits police from taking and destroying the personal possessions of the homeless made headlines.

Business and city officials claim that Gutierrez's injunction creates a health and safety nightmare because police and sanitation workers cannot remove trash for fear of clearing personal property. In the wake of this so-called emergency, the opponents of the injunction have organized a well publicized but misleading campaign in which they hold photo-ops for the media in a two-block area of 6th Street and San Julian Street, a pocket that is filled with trash. But skid row is 50 square blocks, not two; the city seems to have no problem keeping the other 48 clean.

This campaign includes the vilification of homeless advocates, civil rights attorneys and Gutierrez as "homelessness enablers," simply because they dared to affirm the rights of homeless people to the basic constitutional right to "be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects." The campaign further implies that the lives of the homeless are better off when police and sanitation workers, and not the rule of law, can decide when and how personal property can be disposed of.

The attitude of city, police and business leaders was reflected in the argument the city made in February before a panel of three U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals judges. The city asserted that the homeless have no property rights, an argument the judges were cold to. An incredulous Judge Stephen Reinhardt struggled for clarification: "What you are saying is that if you leave your property on the sidewalk in skid row, you have no interest not only in having the police not take it, but not have any interest in the police not destroying it." The city's attorney replied, "That's what I'm saying, your honor."

Though the justices were unimpressed with the city's arguments in favor of its extreme policy, they nevertheless encouraged the parties to try to resolve the issue and referred the case to mediation. But the city has refused to discuss any possible settlement. If the city were really interested in clarifying the purported confusion concerning what is or is not personal property, it could have taken advantage of the court's mediation services.

Yes, we are homeless enablers. We have been working to make the problem of homelessness publicly visible, because this problem cannot be solved by hiding it. Unfortunately, the city has chosen to deal with this publicly visible problem not with social services that work and increased supportive housing, but with punitive policing. The Safer Cities Initiative, started in 2006, essentially allows homeless people to be jailed for so-called quality-of-life crimes.

This strategy has been thoroughly repudiated. A report released this year by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, titled "[Searching Out Solutions: Constructive Alternatives to the Criminalization](#)," listed "legislation that makes it illegal to sleep, sit, or store personal belongings in public spaces" with other punitive responses that undermine real solutions to homelessness and potentially violate constitutional protections and even international law.

The recently concluded *Passover* reminds us that God loves homeless people. It is a season when Jews remember that their ancestors were homeless fugitives. They, like the people of skid row, lived in tents. Their God, who guided them through 40 years of wilderness wandering, was himself a homeless tent dweller by night; by day he traveled

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with them in something like a mobile steamer trunk, the Ark of the Covenant, in which the Hebrew people carried their greatest treasure, the stone tablets on which the 10 Commandments were written.

Today, the homeless poor carry their valuables in mobile shopping carts. At the very least these treasures deserve to be protected from confiscation and desecration.

Jeff Dietrich is co-director of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker soup kitchen on skid row and is the editor of its newspaper, the Catholic Agitator. He is the author of the recently published book, "Broken and Shared: Food, Dignity and the Poor on Los Angeles' Skid Row."

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2revurights at 8:58 PM May 01, 2012

It will need 2 becm the biggest Circus anyone has ever seen, before the D.A.s tell the Sacramento to ask State income tax filers, to contribute 50 cents, to clean up this problem a bit. I sure hope deaseszz don't start to spread!!! Oh Man God help Us all in these devilish times 20 years after those east L.A.riots.And thank God there are a few who care...Peace out *

Jeanne Brown at 12:35 PM April 27, 2012

The Catholic Church has billions to feed the world is a myth that just won't die. If the Church sold all of her assets, she could feed the world for just one day. Go spew your venom elsewhere. God bless the Catholic Worker.

NameUserOne at 1:54 PM April 19, 2012

Jeff, The catholic church has billions. They could build supportive housing and pay for all the workers in a second. The church can buy cheap property in Lancaster and provide free ambulance rides for the homeless. Make a nice water park with a wave machine and get the homeless from Venice to come surf it. Go ahead Jeff- ask for the billions.

Stop expecting others to enable- enabling keeps people sick and the business you work for- catholic- is a cheap jerk. They do just enough to look good but never enough to solve the problem.

You are in a cult and drinking the kool aid. Billions Jeff- billions.

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