



OUR NEIGHBORS One evening last week, I was driving down Orient Street near downtown Chico and saw a fully nude woman walking down the middle of the road toward me. She looked disoriented, had some bruises and scratches on her body, and was walking barefoot and holding her back in pain. I got out of my car and offered to help—to call someone for her, to drive her to the hospital. She looked at me, then looked down without responding and continued down the road. At the next block, another car stopped and appeared to offer assistance as well. She kept walking. I called 911 and was told by the dispatcher that I wasn't the first to report. Help was on the way.

Before I finish telling the story, I want to stop and ask: "What's your reaction to the above scene?" Surprise? Concern? Empathy? Fear? All of those feelings stirred inside me as my mind raced trying figure out what was going on and how I might be able to get her some help.

Until right now, I haven't asked anyone for a reaction, but I would've guessed that most folks in Chico would have similar responses to the situation as I did. But I would be wrong.

Chico police ended up picking the woman up a few blocks away. The next day, I found her mug shot on the Chico Police Portal site (crimemap.chicoca.gov). She was arrested and charged with being drunk in public, a misdemeanor. Members of the Butte County Fires, Accidents, Crimes (BCFAC) Facebook group also found her mug shot, and among the 100-plus comments on the day I looked, there was very little empathy for the woman's situation. Among posts that made fun of her body (yes, someone took a photo of her that evening and posted it) and feigned confusion over whether she was male or female were these sorts of comments: "She should have to register as a sex offender," "Hella nasty," "Chico's usual shit show," "Yuck!"

I am not going to go too far down the road of judgment in this space, other than to say that I certainly do judge people based on how they respond to a person in distress. Cruelty is the wrong response, by the way. In that moment, you are a bad person. And in this city where so much noise is made in social-media echo chambers like the one above about how addicts and homeless people are supposedly ruining Chico, I'd counter that the real scourge in our community is a lack of empathy for each other, especially for the most vulnerable among us. Not only is it cruel, it's poisoning the well before any conversation about solutions even gets started.

Frustration over the visible impact of Chico's social ills is understandable. I don't want trash in Big Chico Creek, either. But the much bigger concern with homelessness, or addiction, or mental illness, etc., should be the impact on the person experiencing it. That person is part of our community, and if we can process whatever feelings are at the root of our own fears (of course your feelings are valid) and empathize with the person, then we might be able to start working on solutions that would help *them*, which, it should go without saying, would help everyone!

This past weekend, long-time local advocate Siana Sonoquie and her partner, Paul Alvarez, memorialized some people from the homeless community who have died in recent years with a mural on the side of the 1078 Gallery: Jasper Townsend, Vance Lee, Tyler Stevens, James Wedge, Bobby Talk, Curtis "Bear" Aguirre, Gary "Country" Titus and Robert "Smurf" Donahue.

Most of us—myself included—don't learn much, if anything, about the people we see living in the parks and on the street but homeless folks are our neighbors, too. The very least we can do is learn their names.



Chico homeless community memorialized with new 1078 Gallery mural. (Photo by Jason Cassidy)

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