

Previously, I have described our overarching policy foundation as “Contact, Enforcement, Accountability”, and also that our mission here on Chico First is focused on public safety and quality of life for all Chico Citizens.

We have also said repeatedly that we are not about solving the homeless problems, though we acknowledge that there is some connection between homelessness and crime. We also acknowledge that not all homeless are criminals, and not all criminals are homeless. Condition and status should not make you a target, nor grant you a pass.

Yet recently we posted two stories about homeless men; Tom, whose story ended tragically, and Grant, who is at the beginning of a newfound hope to “get his life back” as he described it to me. Grant’s story is still unfolding.

So, the question arises, how are posts about these homeless men consistent with our mission and policies? I’ve been thinking about that. Let me try to explain.

The first principle of “Contact” is that no one gets to live in Chico anonymously. I have posted other pieces on some experiences I’ve had making contact with people camping or otherwise “squatting” illegally on private and public property. All have a unique story for how their life journey landed them on the other side of my questions about where they were born, where they went to high school, and how they found their way to Chico.

I have said that contact, no matter who it is that makes it, is the first step to moving people off the streets and out of the bushes, because doing so is essential for improving the quality of life for them, and for us living here in Chico. This improvement is something that we all appear to desire.

Contact is intended to begin the process of moving people towards one of two doors: either they move into some kind of services voluntarily through door #1, or they move into the justice system involuntarily, through door #2.

This second door exists because public safety and quality of life is a right of every citizen. Our laws, and the enforcement authority we grant to our police, courts, and in some cases jails, are designed to protect those rights. It is the gap between feeling the impacts of crime at all levels, and the inadequate enforcement effectiveness, that is helping to create the current focus on increasing enforcement efforts.

From a city policy perspective, I have heard that this year will be known as the “Year of Accountability”. We are all anxious to hear that spelled out in more detail. Consequently, in the near future, we will be talking more and posting quite a bit about the nature and effectiveness of door #2. What happens when you walk (or are carried) through that door, and what does success (or failure) look like?

But what about the other door? I have to admit I know very little about what is behind this door, how things work, where the gaps are, which kind of person goes through it and which ones find their way to some form of a better quality of life? The hope is that those who are successful, even minimally, gain something they don't want to lose, if even just their hope of a better life. Eventually, with work and commitment, the result is that they rise out of their situation to become contributors to those high community standards that in the aggregate, define the qualities of life in Chico that we cherish and long for.

Another goal of Chico First is collaboration. Public safety and quality of life issues affect and motivate nearly everyone who lives, works, or raises children here. The desire for improvements in these areas are unifying. They tend to foster cooperation among diverse individuals towards achievement of common goals. The measure of our public safety and quality of life is based on the community standards we set, the actions we take to achieve them, and the awareness we maintain for problem areas. We have adopted the slogan, Unity, Action, Vigilance as a way to embody these ideals.

Acting as a community of Chico residents, we are unified around common principles and shared community standards; we act in collaboration with others to achieve articulated common goals, and we remain vigilant at all times to ensure that we identify problems early, and don't lose the ground we've gained.

As many of our formerly homeless members have pointed out, it is not necessary to trash public places, steal from citizens or victimize others because you are living without shelter. In fact, some believe that those who want help, who seek a hand up from others to make changes in their own lives, are much more likely to receive that help if they demonstrate an attitude of respect for the community by being accountable for their conduct.

When a person feels accountable to their community, they make an effort to be respectful of others. This might involve refraining from abusing drugs and alcohol, using offensive language, and keeping their surroundings clean, and not posing a threat to others by stealing, harassing or otherwise victimizing the more vulnerable. Respectful conduct is more likely to invite meaningful contact with someone willing to help out. Disrespectful behavior is likely to attract contact of another kind.

A person is not required to have a roof to commit to these principles. While not a guarantee, conducting oneself along these lines is one way of letting people know that you can be trusted, and that you are not one of the bullies or brutes that will eventually be going through the law enforcement door. Our justice system is not an effective approach for those who desire a better life, and are willing and capable of more than simple incarceration. But for those who are unwilling to be accountable voluntarily, legal coercion is an option.

All of this is just a way to say that differences in attitudes and conduct exist, and some are more helpful to self and others. It is impossible to accurately generalize any particular attitude as

representative of “the homeless”. The homeless are people too, diverse and complicated, but that does not imply special rights. Being homeless is not a pass for illegal and disrespectful conduct. We have to learn to better apply our ability to discern the difference between lawlessness and desperation. But that difference is largely a matter of attitude, and attitude is a personal choice of the first order. We are accountable first and foremost for ourselves and what we choose to do.

I make these point to confess this to you: Grant is such a person to me. If you have ever met him, you know well that he is neither a bully or a brute. He is a good candidate for door #1, and recently he walked through it, and is no longer living in the Downtown Plaza, or moving into the bushes when the police come around at night. How long that lasts and where he goes from here is up to him, and perhaps a few others who respond to his request for a little help.

After considerable discussion among ourselves within the administrative circle of what is Chico First, we have concluded that the portal to services is also part of the conversation we need to have, on equal footing with our conversations about law enforcement and accountability for lawlessness. Both are within our scope and focus, and will be pursued here in a context of civil discourse.

As a result, with the consent of the parties involved, we have decided to follow the progress of Grant as he navigates his way along the path he has chosen. I will be learning more about what happens, what is available and what is missing, what is being done and what needs to be done. Hopefully we will all learn that he has permanently given up his seat at the Plaza benches and finds a better life for himself, with a little help from friends, both new and old. I will be sharing this with you through periodic posts on this page, and from time to time, I’ll let you know how he’s doing and what his next challenges are.

In many ways, Grant is not special. He did not win the lottery here. He may succeed or he may fail. There are no guarantees in life, especially when starting out from that bottom of a deep hole, and at a mature age. But we have come to know him a little bit, we respect his attitude, and realize he can teach all of us something about what happens when you go voluntarily through door #1. Please join me in wishing him well.