

“I know jail is likely the worst place for a person like him to be”

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 Latest in a series of posts on the Arts in Bethlehem 

Kimberly Schwartz is a student studying Sociology & Anthropology at Moravian College. She is passionate about criminal justice reform, equal rights, feminism, and climate change. This piece was originally written for a course at Moravian titled Writing as Activism, taught by Dr. Joyce Hinnefeld, in which students are encouraged to consider topics such as mass incarceration, migration, and how to change the world through writing.

What I Know, Right Now, About Incarceration in The United States:

A History of Learning Through Experiences and Exposure

part 9

I am still 24 years old, and I recently admitted myself to a behavioral hospital in Philadelphia to cope with major trauma and changes in my life. Today, a new patient arrives in my unit. His name is Kai, he is an alcoholic, and he has been homeless for eleven years. Kai is extremely talkative and immediately opens up to several of the other patients. I learn that, before the outbreak of COVID-19, he was living in an extended stay hotel instead of on the streets. When the pandemic began to worsen, the hotel kicked him out, and he lost the construction job which had been paying him under the table. He used the remainder of his money to buy alcohol, and he spent his nights sleeping on benches in

southside Bethlehem. He received three public drunkenness charges in the span of two weeks and was facing jail time and fines he had no way of paying when he decided he no longer wanted to live. He borrowed a gun from a friend and contemplated pulling the trigger. Instead, he walked to the local hospital and told the ER staff that he was thinking of killing himself.

After being released from the hospital, I kept in touch with Kai for about a week. I knew he was still facing charges, and he told me he wasn't sure what was going to happen to him. It has now been two and a half months since I last heard from him. I do not know if he is staying at another hotel or shelter, living on the streets, incarcerated, or if he is even alive. I know Kai has multiple mental illnesses including substance abuse, and I know jail is likely the worst place for a person like him to be. As far as I can tell, he is not a danger to anyone but himself.

ninth part in a series . . .

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