

“I am sure this experience had no positive effect on his alcoholism or mental illness”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Arts, the November 29, 2020

 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 7

Nandini Sikand’s documentary INSIDE/OUTSIDE is especially eye-opening in the way it portrays the effect incarceration has not only on the person incarcerated but also on that person’s children. A particularly poignant scene shows one formerly incarcerated woman’s teenage son struggling not to cry when describing the time he spent away from his mother while she was incarcerated (Sikand, 2019).

I am 23 years old and working at a local gas station while attending community college. A local homeless man is outside panhandling for the

third time this month. I go outside and ask him to leave, a request he normally listens to. Today, however, he responds belligerently, suggesting I call the police if I really want him to leave. I tell him I will, hoping I won't actually have to. Ten minutes pass and several customers have come inside to complain. I call the non-emergency police number and report that a man I had asked to leave is refusing to do so. I make sure to include that he is not violent and likely mentally ill. The dispatcher informs me that an officer will arrive shortly. Another ten minutes pass and two police vehicles approach the homeless man, who is standing in the parking lot and smoking a cigarette. The officers immediately handcuff him, pushing him up against the wall and patting him down. The man remains in cuffs for nearly an hour before an officer comes inside to question me. I tell him the situation, and he takes down my information. They finally release the homeless man, who scurries away as fast as he can. I am told that I will be called as a witness and that he was charged with criminal trespassing. I never see the homeless man again (my witness testimony was apparently not needed), but I am sure this experience had no positive effect on his alcoholism or mental illness.

seventh part in a series . . .

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