

Defending Human Dignity



Emily Crowley

In my second year of law school at Cal Western, I took a class called Wrongful Convictions with Justin Brooks. Our final project was to find a legal problem and solve it. While searching for a project, a friend interning with the Public Defender's office mentioned that he was seeing a lot of citations issued for illegal lodging, almost entirely to the homeless. This struck me as fundamentally unfair. I

decided that I would try to solve the problem of the criminalization of homelessness.

I started by reaching out to the people and organizations in San Diego working directly with the homeless. I spoke to the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) of the San Diego Police Department. I spoke to Father Joe's and the Public Defender's office about Homeless Court. This led me to attorney Scott Dreher. Mr. Dreher successfully settled a class action lawsuit against the City of San Diego to limit the issuance of illegal lodging citations on Eighth Amendment grounds. The City settled because of the precedent set in *Jones v. City of Los Angeles*. Due to Mr. Dreher's settlement, the City was no longer able to issue illegal lodging citations between 9 p.m. and 6:30 a.m. This was a huge victory for San Diego's homeless who have no choice but to sleep outside.

Mr. Dreher introduced me to Girls Think Tank (GTT), a local homeless advocacy nonprofit. The organization was started by a group of young female attorneys whose mission was to inspire and empower the community to advance basic human dignity. I thought, this is the group for me.

I began attending GTT's Basic Dignity Coalition meetings and listening to the issues on the streets from people living on the streets. One of GTT's founders asked me if I would be interested in looking into the idea of a Homeless Bill of Rights. I agreed and began working on a committee, and later was asked to join the Board of Directors. In fall 2013 I became president of the Board. In this time, GTT has established a free weekly legal clinic for our low- and no-income neighbors, and is completing a Know Your Rights brochure to educate those living on the streets of their rights and resources. GTT has also successfully advocated for public restrooms, distributes survival supplies and operates a storage center where the homeless can store their belongings, allowing them to meet their basic needs without risking the loss of all personal possessions.

We haven't yet ended the criminalization of homelessness, but I will continue working toward the advancement of basic dignity. ✍️

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