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2020 High School Scholarship Essay Contest Third Place Winner
and Recipient of \$2,000 Award

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Hobo Johnson

I have found that prejudice often lies right under our noses, and we fail to recognize it for what it is. One of the first times I recognized this in people's behaviors was last summer. My friends and I were looking forward to a free concert in downtown Sacramento, but the parents of one of the other girls wouldn't let us go alone. They insisted that, since it was a dangerous and "sketchy" area, we needed a chaperone at all times. I was shocked when I later found out what their definition of "sketchy" was.

Everyone always speaks of individuals experiencing homelessness like they know their stories. People say "they should just get help, get a job, pull themselves together." But don't you think they would if they could? In the city of Sacramento, to qualify for federal homeless aid, you must be "unhoused" for 365 consecutive days. This number gets reset every time the individual stays in a shelter, stays at a friend's house, or gets arrested. Further, it is illegal to camp on public or private property in the city of Sacramento. This means that at any time, law enforcement can throw away the tents, clothes, food, everything that individual has, and arrest the individual, resetting their countdown towards government aid and leaving them with absolutely nothing.

That summer, after the concert, we were walking to the car when we passed an individual experiencing homelessness. The individual held a sign, attempting to explain their situation. My friend's father ushered us away. Later, as we were driving past the same spot, my friend's father began to voice his opinions. He didn't even dignify that person with so much as an individual identity. He spoke of "their kind," of "the homeless," and how they were making the area "unsafe and unsightly." I found myself mute in the face of these statements. This is what they had meant by a "sketchy" area? I was the only one who saw the irony in the situation. The artist we had just seen had been without housing in the Sacramento area for years, and his stage name was "Hobo Johnson".

There is no grand war occurring. There are no strategic battles between the people with and without a roof to sleep under at night. There are no weapons, no prisoners of war, no avid protesters, but you cannot call this peace. This fight isn't only for those without housing. This same fight is happening every time someone struggles to earn a livable income, struggles to be treated the same as their coworker or their neighbor, struggles to be heard or understood. Because it is not the big wars, the headlines and the nuclear threats and the angry politicians that are the

main threat to peace. It is the small, everyday wars, the daily fight for survival, the desire to tell the story of oneself and one's people, the desperate struggle to be treated like a human being, that stops peace in its path.