

## A Response to Ramona Ripston's ACLU editorial on March 12, 2007

Like the police officers that patrol Skid Row in Downtown Los Angeles, I am truly disappointed with American Civil Liberties Union President Ramona Ripston's complete distortion of our efforts to stem the lawlessness, suffering, and human misery that was commonplace on Skid Row a few months ago. I am deeply disturbed Ms. Ripston implied our officers violate the very Constitution they are sworn to uphold and protect. I am also perplexed, because just last year, Ms. Ripston herself walked Skid Row streets with our officers, rode around in a Black and White, and personally witnessed the horrific conditions under which our most vulnerable citizens survived. How soon she forgot!

She forgot that 3800 parolees, 300+ registered sex offenders, convicted murderers, rapists, and robbers call the 50 square blocks of Skid Row home. She forgot the dealers dangling drugs in front of people trying to "kick" drugs, the myriad of predators hiding among the street dwelling population, preying on the weak, addicted, and mentally ill. Fortunately, the terrible culture of lawlessness that was once the norm on Skid Row is quickly becoming a nightmare of the past.

Despite the thwarting efforts of the ACLU and other self-appointed "champions," the LAPD will continue to protect the weak and vulnerable on Skid Row, and end the culture of lawlessness. We are succeeding in every dimension. Fewer people are dying of overdoses, Paramedic calls for service are down, crime has plummeted 36% so far this year, and on top of an 18% reduction in 2006, no person wanting a bed has been left on the streets. Furthermore, missions report that more people are seeking beds and treatment, and our Streets or Services (SOS) program is diverting misdemeanor arrestees away from jail into treatment and housing programs. The people living on the street and the people living in the missions, hotels, and apartments in the area report feeling safer, because they are safer. These results show the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) in Skid Row is working.

Ms. Ripston tells stories of several people on Skid Row who claimed that they were stopped and "harassed" for no reason, and also decries the "jaywalking tickets" written by our officers. Yes, we write jaywalking tickets, just like police throughout Los Angeles. We write traffic tickets to change the behavior of people who choose to ignore the law, not to harass the homeless or anyone else for that matter. Consider that in 2006, 4 out of 6 traffic deaths in downtown (Central Area) were caused by pedestrians in the roadway. So far in 2007, 3 out of 3 traffic deaths downtown were cause by pedestrians in the roadway. When you stand over the dead body of a homeless man, killed because he was jaywalking, suddenly the idea of police officers changing behavior by issuing jaywalking tickets makes sense. I offer no apologies for the traffic enforcement conducted by efforts our officers make to save lives of people. The expectation is that people will obey the law, just like they do in Van Nuys, West LA and San Pedro.

Just a few months ago, the streets of Skid Row were a place where "anything goes." It was a free-for-all, from the open-air drug bizarre with people smoking crack and injecting heroin, to the blatant outdoor acts of prostitution. Today, approximately 1200 people who were dealing (selling heroin or rock cocaine) are in jail. Hundreds of parolees in violation or with open charges are back in prison.

Ms. Ripston asked, "Where did all the homeless people go?" I am sure some people have chosen to go to other communities where they can get continue their criminal behavior. Many other people who used to hang around Skid Row actually had a place to stay; they just chose to stay on Skid Row because of the cheap and plentiful drugs, alcohol and prostitution.

Who would come to Skid row just to hang out? How about Jason Johnson? An Azusa gang member, who last year at 2 A.M. on a Thursday morning, stabbed a Skid Row homeless man to death in a dispute over a bicycle? Johnson lived in Azusa, and had a home, but chose to "hang out" on Skid Row because he liked to smoke rock cocaine and liked the "party" atmosphere. Yes, he is one of the people in prison, where he belongs.

How about Kristi? a woman from a prominent family who found herself addicted to drugs living on the streets of Skid Row. Despite every effort by her family and outreach workers to get her back home or into an apartment, she chose to live on the sidewalk at 5th Street and San Julian, right next to an open shelter with empty beds. She was killed last year: beaten to death on the sidewalk by a drug dealer, probably over a drug debt. He was arrested at the scene by our officers. Her family is devastated.

What kind of other people are our officers arresting on Skid Row? How about Jimmy Lee Smith, who we caught two weeks ago hiding among the homeless on Skid Row? He was arrested for being a parole violator. You may remember him as The Onion Field Killer, and responsible for the murder of LAPD Officer Ian Campbell in the 60s. Or how about Demond Little, an East Coast Crip gang member who was also arrested by our Safer Cities Task Force. Mr. Little was convicted of a home invasion, rape, and murder, and was hiding out on Skid Row as an unregistered sex offender.

Do you want to find out the truth about Skid Row? Do you want to see if our officers are trampling on the civil rights of homeless people? Come down and see for yourself. Walk around and talk to people like our LAPD officers do every day. We take members of the public, City officials and members of the media out to see the reality of Skid Row. And don't take my word on how the homeless are being treated, ask them yourself. Or ask one of the 400 courageous men and women working LAPD's Central Area about life on Skid Row, and the human suffering they see every day.

We are proud of our officers who work the area of Skid Row. We will continue to provide training on all the important issues in dealing with the troubled and troublesome population on Skid Row. Do we need more money for housing, supportive services, and mental health care? Of course we do. Yet, until such resources are available to make a difference, it is the job of the police department to make the Skid Row area safe for the most vulnerable members of our community, and give them the opportunity to recover from their addictions in a supportive environment.

Chief William Bratton has the courage to push forward the Safer Cities Initiative and the courage to take on the problems of Skid Row, despite the constant criticism from people like the ACLU. Chief Bratton's increase of narcotics officers and foot-beat officers in Skid Row is making the community safer than ever. Your LAPD officers are making a difference every day and night walking the walk, protecting the weak, mentally ill, and less fortunate. When I "walk the walk" with my officers on Skid Row, I like to remind them of the quote from President Teddy Roosevelt, "It's not the critic who counts." The reality is.... LAPD Central Officers are the ones that count, and make a difference to the community on Skid Row every day.

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