

Oneonta Mayor Column – 09-05-23

We, the Fortunate Few, Have a Job To Do.

My wife and love of my life, Betsy and I will be celebrating 30 years of marriage in about a month's time. I have been blessed with a wonderful life.

However, I was not always so lucky. Several decades ago, I was struggling to navigate the worst summer of my life.

The circumstances of my pending divorce had me couch-surfing and without a home. I was day-to-day, unsure of where I was sleeping - feeling grateful always, but also disempowered. I was perpetually a guest and feeling occasionally like an intruder.

The experience held a lesson.

Eventually the divorce went through. I rented an apartment on Gilbert Street for me and my son. Life went on. And here I am, Mayor of the City of Oneonta.

(You just never know.)

I deeply appreciate that I have a home and a family, and a purpose and opportunity.

And I'm keenly aware that my few months of uncertain inconvenience were just a blip on my life's radar. Yet it felt like it would last forever, and I would never get back on track.

That feeling, to the billionth power, might provide a hint of the dispiriting reality for a discouragingly large number of Oneonta residents.

Easy access to mind-numbing, highly addictive drugs have made mental health issues worse for many. Without hope, without purpose, and without a roof, their increasing presence on Main Street, in our parks, and our neighborhoods has caught the attention of our community.

The proverb is instructive.

"There but for the grace of God go I."

We start with that, as we address the current crisis, clear-eyed and determined, but with appropriate levels of empathy for those who walk a path we are lucky not to share.

This evening, at our regularly scheduled meeting of Common Council, I will be presenting a 5-point plan to provide a new direction forward for the unsheltered among us - and for our community.

The first of those points calls for the education and engagement of the community in response and awareness, so that together, we can provide the Oneonta Police Department and a network of service providers with helpful information and a wider lens as they endeavor to enhance the quality of life in our neighborhoods and among the population that has impacted it.

Our second action demands the identification and enlistment of new partners to provide the case management and wrap-around services required by growing numbers of neighbors beset by drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness.

The third and fourth charges are related, but daunting separate tasks.

We must determine a venue – outside of the City of Oneonta – in which those who are in such need as we've referenced, are provided with a safe and supportive environment removed from the easy temptation that has derailed so many and allows a level of individually tailored support and direction that will provide a real chance to lead a better, healthier life.

Determining those services that can be relocated or replicated, and finding the necessary funding and staffing is the other half of that challenge.

Lastly, we need to readjust our thinking about how our community presents itself. Are we providing opportunities for a life in the shadows? Making Oneonta a less attractive place for some requires making it safer and more welcoming to a greater number of others.

Impossible? No. Difficult? Yes.

But we will work with dozens of dedicated providers, our institutions, our caring neighbors, our government partners, and with you. Together, we will create the change that's needed.

We are the fortunate few, and we have a job to do.