

Remember Those Who've Lost the Most During COVID-19

Earlier this month we celebrated Independence Day. It's a day devoted to freedom. We light fireworks, a symbol of a battle we fought to overcome oppression, to secure liberty and to maintain our dignity.

Freedom. It's such a beautiful word and I love talking about it. Here at the Los Angeles Dream Center, we hear time and time again of people experiencing freedom in miraculous ways. Freedom from addiction, freedom from abuse, freedom from homelessness.

Our current situation, in the grip of a pandemic, leads us to believe that some of our freedom is lost. And for some more than others.

Many that made progress before the virus came our way—climbing out of poverty, overcoming destructive lifestyles—are feeling defeated again. In the first three months of our COVID-19 relief efforts, starting back in March, I've heard firsthand too many stories of our community losing jobs, loved ones and homes, and it broke my heart to see people ultimately, losing hope.

This crisis has been taking people's livelihoods, well-being and security away, causing many to resort to life-threatening coping mechanisms such as drugs and alcohol, and forcing people out of their homes rendering them not just homeless, but hopeless.

This is not freedom. When you're free, you do not worry, you do not self-destruct, you do not have everything stripped from you. When you're free, you are optimistic, and you have peace. You are a blessing and a beacon of light to those around you when you're free.

When you consider the inconveniences we all face because of our new reality, remember that for many, it has taken a harder and more painful toll. So many are paying a steeper price in this lockdown than I've had to.

Don't forget about these people. Stepping up for them may look a little different this year, but it can be done.

At the Dream Center, we provide a place for real freedom, not just externally, but internally. We all would agree that a bed, shower, food and clothing are all basic essentials that every human being should have access to. But if you saw the relief of those who desperately come here—having been living in a van or under an overpass—running water and clean sheets is like winning the lottery to them. That was the case for Thania, a single mother who came to us seeking refuge.

Her mother was out of the picture by the time she was just 3 months old. She started down a slippery slope of heavy drinking and drug use by the time she was 18, and then ended up in an abusive relationship. Pregnant, and with the father of her child in jail just two days before her son was born, she still struggled with drug abuse. She lost her apartment and soon she and her son were sleeping in parks.

But now, after a couple years of great mentorship and people cheering her on her journey to a new and better life, she tells us she finally feels free. And she's no longer just trying to survive. She dreams of owning her own home and business one day soon as well.

Freedom isn't simply about the freedom to do something, as we're so accustomed to believe as Americans. Often, an even more valuable freedom is the freedom from something. As we reflect on the blessings we enjoy here in America, and the loss we feel when many of them are taken away for a time during this pandemic, do whatever you can to lend a helping hand to those who've lost the most over the past few months.

You could be the reason why someone like Thania gets a second chance at life. You could be the vessel for a broken and lost soul to find healing and purpose.

You could be a part of a very different type of freedom this year. Even while your freedom to do certain things has been put on pause, you can be part of someone's story in their freedom from their past and their misfortune.

Freedom happens when people are given the assurance that their future is sustainable and full of promise. Each of us can be a voice and a vessel for our community to experience freedom, the kind that will be cherished and celebrated for a lifetime. We all have a right to freedom, but it is a choice of action to ensure that right is given to the ones who need it the most. {eoa}

Matthew Barnett *is the co-founder of the Los Angeles Dream Center and senior pastor of Angelus Temple. The Los Angeles Dream Center is a faith-based non-profit dedicated to transforming the lives of individuals and families in Los Angeles through residential and outreach programs.*