Melting the Masks on Capitol Hill: A WCSC Intern’s Story

By Andrea Lengacher
Contributing Writer

I often walk to Union Station after work to grab a drink or just to stretch my legs. Union Station is a microcosm of Capitol Hill in so many ways. Its sociopolitical space draws varying classes of people together to catch the Metro, grab some food, shop in the stores, hail a cab or catch a train.

One afternoon in Union Station, I leaned against a base of a column with a radio, trying to jolt my tired body with a steady rhythm on the pavement as I run to keep rigid schedules. I love observing the homeless person nestled in a corner by the base of a column with a radio, or saxophonist playing out his soul, or the tourist, jostled by a businessperson while stopping to gaze, or the immigrant workers smoking, soaking up the sun and musing.

That afternoon I watched their masks dissolve with the rain that poured over their faces. When a gust of rain blew through the station, a homeless man muttered unintelligibly and aimlessly stretched from his lawn chair. He gathered his radio and shifted to a drier spot, then contently returned to his mumbling and musing.

LATINO SANITATION WORKERS

I struck up a conversation with a lawyer who worked for the State Department in nuclear affairs. While the rain drummed around us, we shared our ideas about religion and government, attempting to understand our different working worlds in one rain shower on one afternoon.

I relished the moment of stillness and quiet in the moving station. I relished the opportunity to interact with the masks I passed on my daily walks. I wanted the peacefulness to spread throughout Capitol Hill. Still, sadly I knew that once the sun came out, out would come the masks.

That afternoon I watched their masks dissolve with the rain that poured over their faces. In many ways it felt like a healing rain had fallen. When a gust of rain blew through the station, a homeless man muttered unintelligibly and aimlessly stretched from his lawn chair. He gathered his radio and shifted to a drier spot, then contently returned to his mumbling and musing.

Latino sanitation workers lounged by the door, chattering their staccato Spanish and enjoying the cool breeze of the rain. Ironically, their carts were full of dry towels.

I couldn’t believe the transformation of Capitol Hill. Most Capitol Hill passersby walk with a mask of apathy and isolation, content to sidestep other isolationists in their path. That afternoon I watched their masks dissolve with the rain that poured over their faces. Incredulously, I watched businesspeople dash for the haven of the station’s overhang, soaked through their three-piece suits, briefcases dripping, professionalism completely washed away.

Polished women detached from their cell phones long enough to take off heels and run with abandon across the pavement like little girls again. When a gust of rain blew through the station, a homeless man muttered unintelligibly and aimlessly stretched from his lawn chair. He gathered his radio and shifted to a drier spot, then contently returned to his mumbling and musing.

I struck up a conversation with a lawyer who worked for the State Department in nuclear affairs. While the rain drummed around us, we shared our ideas about religion and government, attempting to understand our different working worlds in one rain shower on one afternoon.

I relished the moment of stillness and quiet in the moving station. I relished the opportunity to interact with the masks I passed on my daily walks. I wanted the peacefulness to spread throughout Capitol Hill. Still, sadly I knew that once the sun came out, out would come the masks.

Annie Lengacher has served Washington Community Scholars’ Center intern. This piece was a journal entry written earlier during the fall semester.