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When I stepped into the position of Executive Director at Northwest Youth Services I did so with the clearly stated objective of bringing my full self into the role. As a gay Black man from the South, that has meant using my platform to address inequity and discrimination impacting the lives of the young people we serve.

For this reason, I would like to address a recent conflict within our community.

Northwest Youth Services is an organization that works alongside young people experiencing houselessness to heal their trauma and address disadvantages that they experience due to the interlocking systems of oppression. We employ a healing model, viewing the young people utilizing our services as individuals with agency on their own path to healing. We embrace the whole person: their story, their mental health, their physical health, their employment goals, their educational goals.

As part of the healing process, Northwest Youth Services has taken steps towards the creation of a new home where young people, ages 13-17, can safely sleep and access essential services. We recognize the importance of meeting basic needs in people's ability to address larger goals. That's our vision - the creation of a calming environment where young people can release a little of the stress that keeps them in crisis mode, so that they can finally have a shot at moving forward.

Unsurprisingly, this vision has been met with fear and fearmongering. Statements from concerned community members range from: "You can't stay here, this is a safe neighborhood" to "these houses are too nice, you should purchase a home in the low-income neighborhoods."

I want to start by saying that I understand that fear. Change can be uncomfortable and threatening. I imagine they may fear that a new home that serves youth who are in crisis would take something away from them: their safety, their house value, the routines that they've become accustomed to. Their fear makes sense, it was created by the same system that created the crisis of homelessness.

The United States is a nation founded by and for wealthy white men. These men believed that they had a divine right to freedom and prosperity, and then established the structural means to protect that wealth and power. This design has led us to where we are now, a nation with a dwindling middle class, slipping education ranking, and one of the largest homeless populations in the world.

For this reason, I don't write this letter to shame anyone for their fear, but to invite you to challenge it. Audre Lorde says, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Fear limits our creativity and stifles our options.

What if instead we chose empathy and relationship? What if we leaned into the discomfort with the understanding that anything transformative is going to be uncomfortable? What if we vulnerably talked about power and privilege? What if we transformed our differences into "tools" that could reform the status quo?

Northwest Youth Services is thrilled to be able to offer the young people in our community a warm and safe home, nestled in a neighborhood, where they can begin to heal in our care. We look forward to working in partnership with our new neighbors to ensure this house is a home.

That's healing. That's belonging. That's liberation.

Keep on keepin' on,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "JMCG", is written over a light blue circular stamp.

Jason McGill
Executive Director