

Chapter 10: Student Homeless Alliance and the Push for Emergency Beds on Campus



Historical Background:

In the early 1990s, Scott Wagers, an undergraduate SJSU Sociology student, started going under the freeway overpasses, to meet and talk with the people who were houseless in San José. These conversations led Scott to create the *Student Homeless Alliance* (SHA), which brought together students and people without homes together to advocate for immediate emergency housing. As part of this effort, SHA held a “tent city” protest at San José City Hall in 1992, which ended in 12 arrests, with three of them being SHA students. This protest led to a meeting with Mayor Susan Hammer, which led to creation of the Little Orchard Shelter. In addition, SHA took over four abandoned houses owned by the water district along the Guadalupe River, which led to the Water District giving two houses to SHA for \$1 a year until the Guadalupe river flooded in 1995. In 1993, SHA led protests against the Redevelopment Agency, which led to several meetings with Frank Taylor (then head of the RDA), and then to the construction of Pension Esperanza, the last single-resident occupancy (SRO) ever built in San José.ⁱ

In the mid 1990s, Scott left San José to work on a master’s degree of divinity at Yale, but upon completing his degree, he returned in 1997, where he started the Community Homeless Alliance Ministry (CHAM) based out of the First Christian Church, which is right across the street from San José State on 5th Street. Then, in the early 2000s, a group of students who had learned about the social action of the *Student Homeless Alliance* decided to re-start SHA.

In the early 2000s, SHA worked closely with CHAM. In 2001, SHA students participated in taking over unoccupied housing units right across the street from First Christian Church, forcing the City to respond. These actions led to the City coming up with a plan to house one hundred people in units throughout San José. In the mid 2000s, SHA started “Poverty Under the Stars”, an annual sleepout in early November to draw attention to the fact that Silicon Valley was the homeless capital of Northern California. SHA was not very active for a few years, but re-emerged in 2014 when “The Jungle”, one of the largest homeless encampments in the nation, and just six blocks from campus, was shut down by the City. SHA had been advocating for “No Sweeps” and the creation of legal encampments, but on that December day when the sweeps began, SHA students literally left classes, and walked out into the rain to help people move their belongings to other places, including other encampments.ⁱⁱ

In 2017, SHA shifted its focus to students who were experiencing homelessness. The first response of SHA students was to advocate for legal encampments on campus. SHA believed that campus encampments should be available for students, professors, and community members. Just that year, an SJSU faculty member had made news for living in her car, since she could not afford rent in San José. SHA students visited Seattle and their legal encampments, and returned with many good ideas. At that time, the thinking was that there were about 400 SJSU students experiencing homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ

4,350 people in San José are "houseless"

400 SJSU students are homeless

70% of houseless have jobs but can't afford housing

132 homeless died on the streets of San José in 2016

DO YOU WANT TO END HOMELESSNESS IN SAN JOSE?

STUDENT HOMELESS ALLIANCE (SHA)

SHA's goal is to work towards stopping the homeless sweeps and creating legal encampments. As part of this campaign, SHA is working toward legal encampments at SJSU to shelter students, professors, and others who can't afford housing.

SHA's Contact us to learn how to get involved! shasinfo@gmail.com

Follow us on:
 Facebook: SJSU SHA
 Twitter: sjsu_sha
 Instagram: sjsu_sha

In 2018, a California State University (CSU) Chancellor's report was released that showed that 13.2% of SJSU students had experienced homelessness in the past year, which meant that there were 4,000 Spartans who were houseless. With this information, the SHA students changed their demands.

The Events:

By late 2018 and into early 2019, SHA's demand had become three-fold: \$2,500 emergency grants, safe parking for students in the 7th Street Garage, and an emergency campus housing program with a minimum of 12 beds.

President Papazian Support SHA's Demands
SJSU Homeless Students Need More Help!

CALL HER:
 (408) 924-1177

EMAIL HER:
sjsupres@sjsu.edu

Tell President Papazian We Need:

1. \$2,500 Emergency Grants
2. Safe Parking in 7th Street Garage
3. Emergency Housing with minimum 12 beds for 60 days

For More Info, Contact the Student Homeless Alliance (SHA): shasinfo@gmail.com

To encourage the campus President, Mary Papazian, to agree to SHA’s demands, the students held rallies and marches. SHA students also did creative events, like “Cookie for a Call”, which is similar to “tabling”, but adds an additional dimension to it, which is that the people the students are talking to are asked to make a call right there to the target’s office asking them to support the campaign demands. If they make a call, the students gave them a cookie. SHA used the above flier in their “Cookie for a Call” event, getting other students to make over 100 telephone calls to the President’s office. In addition, SHA members asked students walking by their table, which was set up in a centrally located space on campus, to write down their housing insecurity stories anonymously on a post-it note, and then these post-it notes were placed on a board to the side of the table which could be viewed by other students and campus members walking by. Additionally, these post-it notes were transcribed into a document, and then were sent to the President.

After several months of SHA holding events, the President agreed to meet with the SHA students in early March, 2019. Several students—including Alejandro Mayorga, Mayra Bernabe, and Saline Chandler, all of who are in the below image—met with President Papazian, and presented SHA’s three demands, but the President refused to agree to any of them. However, in the meeting, President Papazian did promise “to house every Spartan” that needed emergency housing.^{iv}

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Homeless alliance: NO DEAL

Group says SJSU turns down demands, Papazian commits to housing every student

BY KUNAL MEHTA, STAFF WRITER

The Student Homeless Alliance walked away from Tuesday's meeting with San Jose State President Mary Papazian empty-handed.

After convening at sociology professor and alliance advisor Scott Myers' upstairs office, the group reaffirmed its position on the three demands to bring forth to Papazian.

None of the group's demands, which included parking spaces in the 7th Street Garage, 12 beds in the dorms available to homeless students for 60 days and a one-time \$2,500 emergency grant, were met.

"I am disappointed to report that they have rejected our demands," Student Homeless Alliance president Mayra Bernabe said. "However, they have committed to house every student."

Though more than 1,000 students signed the alliance's petition to Papazian, only 14 people participated in the Monday news conference, according to SJSU media relations specialist Robin McElhattan.

“We had a really good discussion, some good ideas came out and we're really hoping we can connect students in need with SJSU Cares.”

Mary Papazian
SJSU President

During Tuesday's meeting, university officials committed to leading housing for every student.

"We expressed, inside with the students, a commitment to finding a safe solution for every student in need," Papazian said. "That's our commitment."

Vice president of student affairs Patrick Day, who also attended the

1) Student Homeless Alliance President Mayra Bernabe at Tower Hall with fellow members Saline Chandler (right) and Alejandro Mayorga (left).
2) SJSU President Mary Papazian steps out of meeting with the alliance at Tower Hall.

ANALYSIS BY KUNAL MEHTA, SPARTAN DAILY

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The SHA students were clearly disappointed, but they took this new commitment from the President and started encouraging all Spartans who needed emergency housing to contact SJSU Cares, which is the office on campus that deals with the basic needs of the students. In early fall of 2019, the media reported that 100 students had asked for housing, but that SJSU had provided only six students with housing. With this information, the students held a rally at the Tommie Smith and John Carlos statues that was attended by about 100 students. The press conference received a lot of media attention, and soon after, the President’s office called SHA, and said they would like to meet with the students to discuss their concerns. SHA students met every two weeks for the next several months, and by the end of December, an agreement was reached. It included a 12 emergency bed campus pilot program, a centralized space in Clark Hall where students can talk privately about their housing and other basic need issues, a marketing and

communication plan to let all SJSU students know about the 12 emergency bed program and other SJSU Cares resources, and the creation of an Advisory Board that is composed of members from SHA and the Bill Wilson Center (an ally of SHA). In January of 2020, the SHA-SJSU Agreement was announced in front of the media, with President Papazian sitting next to the President of SHA, Briena Brown.^v



Resources:

Spartan Daily, “Student Homeless Alliance Demands Resources from SJSU”, March 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0UagZ63pE0> (accessed September 11, 2021)

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ⁱ Conversation with Pastor Scott Wagers, September 11, 2021; Gallucci “Students Strike Out Against Student Homelessness”, April 3, 1992, <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8263&context=spartandaily> (accessed September 11, 2021).

ⁱⁱ Abel, “SJSU Alumnus Aims to Curb Gang Violence”, November 7, 2009, <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1307&context=spartandaily> accessed September 11, 2021); NBC Bay Area, “San Jose State Students Sleep Out Under Stars in Solidarity With Homeless”, November 13, 2016, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/San-Jose-State-Students-Sleep-Out-Under-Stars-in-Solidarity-With-Homeless-347494141.html (accessed January 27, 2018); Pan, “San Jose Shuts Down ‘The Jungle,’ One of Nation’s Largest Homeless Encampments”, December 9, 2014, <http://peninsulapress.com/2014/12/09/san-jose-homeless-encampment-shut-down> (accessed September 11, 2021).

ⁱⁱⁱ KPIX CBS SF Bay Area, “Homeless San Jose State Professor Forced To Live In Her Car”, August 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8FeXvn-8zY> (accessed September 11, 2021).

^{iv} KPIX CBS SF Bay Area, “Activist Rally On Behalf Of Homeless Students At San Jose State”, March 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X11YFLz-EM> (accessed September 11, 2021); Homeless SJSU Students Ask School For Place Where They Can Park And Sleep”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vqiTW4iWts> (accessed September 11, 2021).

^v KPIX CBS SF Bay Area, “San Jose State Accused Of Not Doing Enough For Homeless Students”, October 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eufd-eRw4sM>; SJSU Newsroom, “Press Conference: Comprehensive Housing Solutions for SJSU Students, Faculty and Staff”, January 27, 2020,

<https://blogs.sjsu.edu/newsroom/2020/press-conference-comprehensive-housing-solutions-for-sjsu-students-faculty-and-staff> (accessed September 11, 2021).