

The Philadelphia Inquirer

OPINION



The author at the 15th Street SEPTA station in Philadelphia. Riding the El every day to and from school, she witnesses the human suffering all around us, and many people deal it with by ignoring it and moving on. Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

OP-ED

We Philly teens are numb to drug use, homelessness

By Raegan Farlow

Recently, I ran to the El train station on 15th Street after being caught in the cold rain after school, feeling relieved as I stepped onto the train platform. When the train finally came, I made my way through the heavy crowd of other students and midafternoon travelers to the inside of the car and found a seat, relieved to rest after a long day of classes.

But the train didn't leave the station. I could hear some of the students around me talking about what was going on, and someone mentioned there was a man in the next car who was unresponsive. One student walked over to investigate; she soon came back but said little about it. Just acted like it was no big deal.

Then an announcement came over the train saying we all had to exit as a result of a medical

emergency. As I shuffled out of the car along with the large crowd, I caught a glimpse of the man in the next car over, lying on the floor with a needle sticking out of his arm. The crowd started whispering, "I think he OD'd," and, "Is he dead?"

I texted my friends to tell them what happened. The conversation lasted about two seconds before we went to talk about something else. I don't know what happened to the man after I left, but all I can

remember is the paramedics surrounding him while people urgently left the train station.

As for me, I walked in the heavy rain to the 21 bus stop on 16th and Walnut and got on the crowded bus to go home.

When I got there, my outfit drenched in rain, I walked up the stairs to talk to my mother in her bedroom. I told her about the man on the train, and she asked me how

→ SEE TEENS ON E3

OP-ED

Our safety net penalizes people with disabilities who try to be responsible

By J.W. Haven

I have a disability, and I began receiving disability benefits when I turned 18. My medical issues first qualified me for federal support through the Supplemental Security Income program when I was a sick, homeless youth in Philadelphia. SSI has helped me cover my rent, groceries, and essential medical care. As of January, I receive \$943

a month — the maximum amount a single SSI recipient can get. I still require this cash assistance today, although I hope my condition will improve enough that I can eventually leave the program and find consistent work.

However, in 2020, I faced a significant setback when I was hit by a car while riding my bicycle.

The driver fled the scene, leaving me with serious injuries and mounting medical bills. Finally, after two years, I was awarded a net settlement of around \$7,000 from the Pennsylvania Financial Responsibility Assigned Claims Plan, a fund set up to pay benefits to people injured in motor vehicle accidents in Pennsylvania. I was

looking forward to using this compensation to pay my medical bills and improve my life. But my excitement quickly turned to worry: What if this money disqualified me from my SSI benefits?

In addition to strict income rules, SSI requires that I hold no more than \$2,000 in assets. While there

→ SEE DISABILITY ON E3

OP-ED

Feeling lonely? Come sit with me, the minister of loneliness

By Irina Varina

Each fall for the last two years, I packed a small table, two chairs, office supplies, a plant, a rotary phone, a lamp, a family photo, cigarettes, candy, a whiskey decanter, and a great big sign onto a dolly and set up a Ministry of Loneliness office on a busy sidewalk. I did this in Philly, took the project to New York (and once, due to

a flat tire, to Trenton), spending one to 10 days in each place. And I will be setting up the Ministry of Loneliness again this spring on Bryn Mawr's college campus for two weeks.

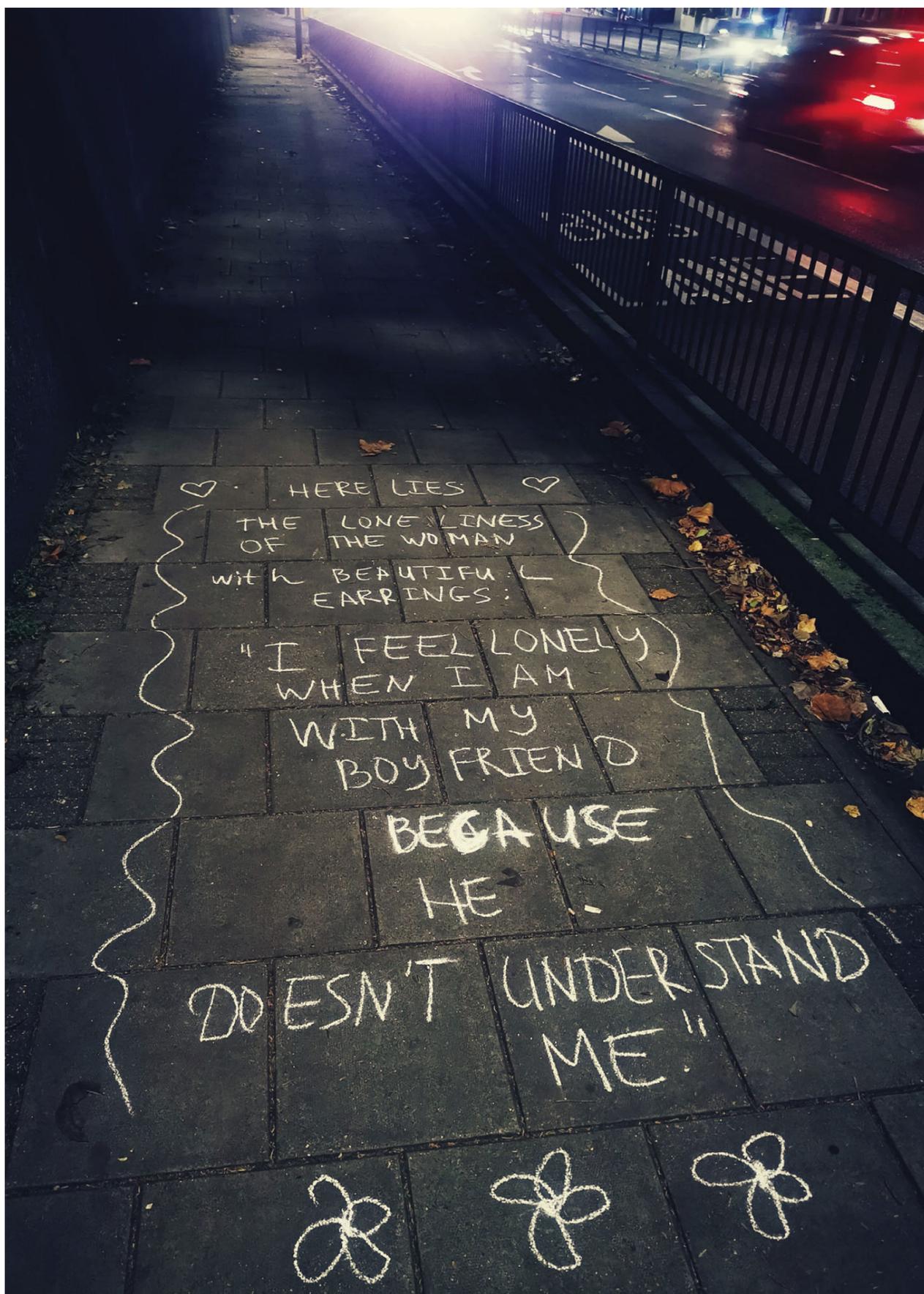
I wear a too-big-for-me suit and a mustache and sit behind a table working (I do actually write the entire time unless someone comes over) with an empty chair in front of

me and a sign that says: "Ministry of Loneliness. Today's hours: 7:00-9:00PM. To file a claim about feeling lonely (about anything), step by the table. Walk-ins welcome."

I am the minister of loneliness. I was inspired to create this street art project by the establishment in 2018 of an actual Ministry for Loneliness in the U.K., a government

position designed to address feelings of isolation in communities across the country. When I heard about it in 2021, I thought, *Ha, how intriguing, a bureaucratic institution for a feeling!* As an actress and a filmmaker, I first created a short web series called *Ministry of Loneliness*, which evolved, in 2022, into

→ SEE LONELINESS ON E2



One of the “claims” from Irina Varina’s Ministry of Loneliness project, submitted by someone in Philadelphia, which Varina wrote on the pavement during a trip to London. Irina Varina

Loneliness

→ CONTINUED FROM E1
the current live ministry.

Since then, my friends have sent me multiple articles that said the U.S. surgeon general had declared loneliness a public health crisis that affected half of U.S. adults even before the COVID-19 pandemic, and lacking connection can be as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

I didn’t start this street bureau to fix anything or anyone; that’s up to the surgeon general. I’m here to follow, as always, my own curiosities.

These are some of the things I noticed.

So many people get it right away

As a performance artist, I never know how passersby will react to my “great idea” for an interactive street performance. With the ministry, I am continuously surprised by how many people just roll with it from the get-go and, dare I say, take it seriously. Even when I am, lovingly, called “that crazy woman with a mustache,” I receive the real and most touching confessions from total strangers (and some friends).

Once, when I was dollyng the ministry to a spot in front of a Sprouts grocery store at Broad and Washington in Philly, a pretty young woman came out of Target, took one look at my moving sign, and calmly asked, “Could I file a claim?” As if it was the most normal thing in the world.

A side note from the minister, who, as a bureaucrat at heart, would like to share some statistics: One “loneliness claim filing” takes about 15 minutes. On a given day, the minister might see anywhere from one to seven people.

Sometimes we can say more in writing

There is no talking at the Ministry of Loneliness; instead, we write to each other by passing a folder back and forth. It creates a private bubble around two people, sitting there in silence on a noisy street. I sense that a lot of my guests wouldn’t speak out loud about some of the loneliness-es they share in writing. At least not right away. But an ease seems to come with writing. Maybe it’s a feeling of sharing your thoughts with a diary.

One of the most haunting moments occurred for me when a teenage girl wrote, “I am lonely because I am queer and all my friends are straight,” as the said friends stood two feet away from her.

It’s public, and you will be seen

I also love how public the ministry is. It tickles me to take something so many consider to be private or even shameful (feeling lonely) out into public spaces. I admire the courage it takes to be seen sitting by the “Ministry of Loneliness” sign.

My favorite story is of a young

man in a cool tracksuit and a \$1,000 watch (his words) on his arm. He really wanted to be there (he came back two days later), but was so nervous to be seen as lonely at the same time. When a total stranger — a woman carrying her groceries — passed by my table, he leaped from his chair to yell, “I am not lonely!” She turned around and, without batting an eye, responded, “Yeah, me neither.”

It’s not about romance

When I first started the project, I was worried people would only feel invited to share about their love struggles.

I was proven wrong. Yes, they do mention breakups and romance, but also friendships, family, moving to a new city, feeling generally alienated from others, health, existential loneliness, work loneliness, queer isolation, world issues, and, as one person wrote, “just stuff.”

One of the revelations for me has been how many people stop by the table to file a loneliness claim who seem really “put together” — well-dressed, conventionally attractive, cheery. Someone I wouldn’t classify as lonely because, you know, well-dressed people are not lonely,

obviously?

Even if no one comes over, my project is complete

A person (myself) sitting in public with an empty chair in front of them and a sign “Ministry of Loneliness” has always been its own complete vision of this art project to me.

Sometimes people just look at the sign for a bit. Sometimes they take a picture. Once, a woman leaned over to say, “Thank you.”

I’ve been asked many times what I do with all the loneliness claims guests file with me. The truth is that, very late at night, I chalk anonymous bits from the claims on the streets of Philly.

Sometimes I do it after each “working” day, sometimes at the end of the week. I choose a place that is public, often in Center City. I think of this “ritual” as both sharing one’s loneliness with others to hold it in community/communion and laying some pain of it to rest, to the ground.

Once, I took the loneliness claims filed in Philly on my trip to London and scribbled them on London pavements. I love to imagine the loneliness of one city traveling to another continent.

If I were to visit the minister myself, I’d write that I’m lonely for the parts of myself I once rejected or exiled, as we do, at certain ages of my life, for valid reasons at the time. Like when you lock a side of yourself deemed too free or too “loud” in a closet and lose the key, so as to feel safe or be loved. I guess, I’d write, I am lonely for feeling whole.

To my own surprise, what I remember most from doing this project is how brave, tender, and emotionally intelligent people are, from all walks of life. Not how isolated we are, but how much capacity we have for expressing ourselves, feeling, and being seen.

Irina Varina is an actress and filmmaker splitting her time between Philly and New York City.



The author as the minister of loneliness on Broad Street, ready to accept passersby’s “claims” about what makes them lonely. Alice Wang

“What I remember most from doing this project is how brave, tender, and emotionally intelligent people are, from all walks of life.”