

## HOMELESS ARE THE BRAVE

by William Newton

Homeless. Having no residence, no refuge, no place where one's domestic affections can be centered. No shelter.

Today in America there are more homeless people than at any time in our history. Myriads of unknown faces seeking food and shelter daily. Facing a perilous existence in a world that is beyond poor. The world of total destitution. Completely poverty stricken.

The homeless are the forsaken and abandoned of a "Great American Society" in the midst of an "Age of the Entrepreneur." They are wandering in clothing worn threadbare, covering bodies thin from many missed meals; shelterless and sleepless nights; surviving in a society that has not cared and is not caring enough.

"Who are the homeless? What are they?" These are the questions this writer heard from a Health and Welfare Food Stamp Eligibility Worker. Incredible! But for the uninformed and perhaps up to now, the uncaring person, certainly an answer is due for the following questions: "What has caused homelessness in America?" "What can be done to help the homeless in America?" "How many pre-homeless in America will be homeless by the end of 1986?"

In beginning to answer the Eligibility Worker's questions, one must state that the homeless are the "poorest" of all poverty peoples. They are not low income. They are "No Income." The homeless are troubled people, vulnerable people, victims of unscrupulous landlords, abusive families, rapacious employers, callous bureaucrats, and some are victimized by themselves. The despair of destitution: The homeless are isolated and alienated from mainstream society. Current statistics demonstrate that the unsheltered homeless have a life expectancy of twenty to thirty years less than the normal mainstream American lives.

The homeless are those who are surviving anyplace. From 2.6 million to three million strong. They are in doorways, dumpsters, deathtrap camps, "in the bush", under bridges, on beaches, in cars, tents, lean-tos, cardboard boxes, and maybe if there is room, emergency shelters.

The number of homeless now in America exceeds the number of homeless in the 1930s during the "Great Depression." Right now, in 1985, we read in the January issue of U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT that this year alone, two and a half million people will lose their homes.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) acknowledges the fact that twenty percent of the homeless are family groups. That twenty-two percent are mentally ill and aimless. The remaining figures belong to the single men and women who are unemployed, unemployable, disabled, and who have slipped through the "Social Safety Net," hitting head on with "reality" that there are simply not enough houses and jobs to go around. Especially to the country's lowest class, and that this class, as it were, may "eat cake" made from their meager commodity grants.

The homeless are people like Ruth, a forty-seven year old homeless woman who asserts (as quoted in the March 1985 issue of THE PROGRESSIVE), "An automobile has more natural right than a person, and is more protected. For fifty dollars a month, a car can get a heated space. A car also has a right to sit on the curb, whereas a poor person cannot sit on a park bench without a legal address." What are the homeless? In the January, 1985,

issue of McCALL'S magazine, a twelve year old boy answers: "The homeless are not just schizophrenics, drunks, drug addicts, criminals, derelicts or bag ladies. They're human beings!"

Humans without homes. Since President Reagan took office in 1981, housing construction subsidies have dropped by seventy-eight percent each year. One of the results of this and other factors is that low income housing is disappearing and homelessness is simply "an inability to pay the rent." Says Robert Hayes, attorney for The National Coalition for the Homeless, "The most honest explanation of homelessness is an economic one. Supply and demand." And Mario Cuomo, Governor of New York, further says, "Homelessness today is overwhelmingly caused by poverty, not pathology. Our main conclusion is that homelessness is by its nature a crisis of housing."

The Reagan administration has ended most programs for low income housing construction and rehabilitation. Furthermore, HUD is systematically diminishing the existing and irreplaceable stock of 1.3 million public housing units by subjecting them to demolition, abandonment, sale, and reconversion. A process helped along by the lack of adequate operating, maintenance and modernization funds.

Rents being paid by families in subsidized housing have been raised from twenty-five percent to thirty percent of their income. An increase that is transferring six billion dollars from the pockets of the poor to the government in the years from 1981 to 1986. For many families on the margin, that seemingly small increase can result in voluntary departure or forced eviction for nonpayment of rent.

Each year thousands of low rent housing units are being lost, and at present there is no effort being made to remedy the situation. Says one writer, "Urban renewal has destroyed central city 'Single Room Occupancy' (SRO) hotels, apartments and rooming houses. Condominium conversions and gentrification, encouraged by tax policies that aid real estate developers and those who own rather than rent... push out the poor."

Ten percent of all low income families will lose their housing this year. Two-point-five million more human beings in our nation will join the ranks of the homeless, which will bring the total of homeless people in this nation to roughly five million by the end of 1986.

Five million human beings, left homeless amidst luxurious apartment houses, posh high rise office buildings and restaurants where enough food is thrown away daily to solve the hunger problem that gnaws continually at the stomachs and souls of the impoverished.

I believe, after having served the homeless, being homeless and seeking to implement more shelters for the homeless, that the homeless are the brave. Surely, if there is any shred of the fibre of courage that built this country, any indomitable will that has kept America strong, or any true demonstration of the tenacity of the human spirit, then these qualities can be seen in the homeless facing their future with nothing and yet continuing with dignity against all odds of survival in the "Land of the Free."

May the cold heart of every hurt merchant of greed be laced with fear for having so much when so many have nothing. NOTHING!

William Newton, who is called "Mitch", is a former clergyman and currently a volunteer with Clatsop Community Action in Astoria. He is coordinator of a community shelter project that is developing shelters for the homeless on the Oregon coast and a rescue mission in Astoria.

come inside. Pushing to get more space availability is a priority. Many people become so overwhelmed by the problem that inertia takes hold. Or we set our sights so high that we can never reach our goals and become discouraged. Let's be real about what we can do. Long range solutions do not grow in a void; they are born of the short range solutions. Begin simply — open up church basements and school gyms, solicit blankets, food and warm clothing, simple beginnings. Then as quickly as we begin, we must move forward. Beginnings are only beginnings.

The homeless have the right to and the need for the same things as you and I. Bigger and better shelters are not the solutions. Housing, dignity, a decent living standard, the basic necessities of life should be treated as rights and not as things bestowed at the whim of politicians or an often callous society.

A sad reality is that most politicians care only about the issues and concerns that get them reelected. We must create a political climate that makes it suicidal for elected officials to ignore the homeless and destitute. When presented with the problem of homelessness, most local officials have responded by trying to ignore it or by denying that the problem exists or by attempting to trivialize it.

The federal response under the Reagan administration has not been any better.

The Department of Defense has stolen from the homeless more than seven million dollars earmarked for shelter renovation to use on its own projects.

The U.S. Department of HUD has published a fraudulent report that tried to diminish the problem; and as was done with the hungry, they have tried to make the homeless disappear.

One effort has been the placing of covers over steam grates used by the homeless near the State Department in an obvious attempt to drive them and the issue out of sight and out of mind.

It is clear that we cannot depend on the good intentions of elected officials to provide shelter. We must not wait for the whim of churches or the fancy of institutions or civic groups to return to the homeless what is basic to survival. The homeless demand shelter and not excuses. They demand here and now that basic overnight emergency shelter be recognized politically, philosophically and programmatically as an absolute human right.

We must be bold and aggressive with our demands and be willing to pay a price, because true change never comes without a price attached. We must understand that our work is a matter of life and death and attack that wall of ignorance and indifference with the urgency that the crisis demands.

And finally, we should remember that the bottom line is this — as long as one human being is left to the nightmare of homelessness, our own humanity is lost. As long as one person lives without dignity, our own dignity is diminished. As long as people continue to die on our streets alone and nameless, like my John Doe, the human family will continue to be wrenched apart.

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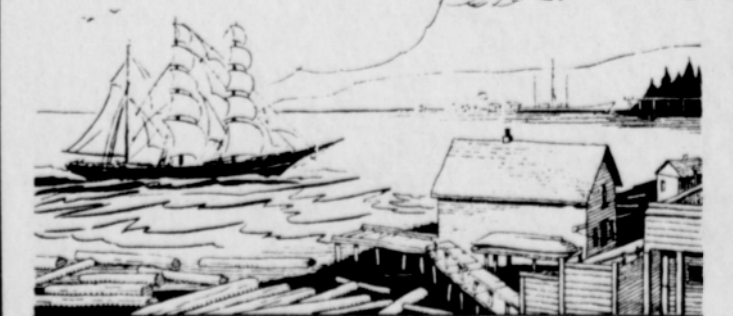


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