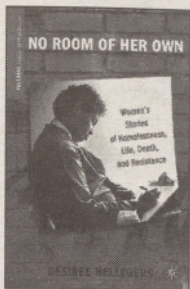


Homeless women speak out, sharing tales of grief and joy



No Room of Her Own: Women's Stories of Homelessness, Life, Death, and Resistance by Desiree Hellegers

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In 1985, Desiree Hellegers went to work at the Compass Center in Seattle's Pioneer Square. There she encountered an astonishing and diverse array of women whose lives had been shattered. Poverty, unemployment, underemployment, poor education, imprisonment, prostitution, childhood abuse, spousal abuse, addictions, loss of family and friends, and physical and mental illness had entangled and stunted these lives. Deep abiding troubles were amplified by homelessness.

In her cogent introduction to "No Room of Her Own," Hellegers declares that "anyone who's experienced homelessness can attest to the fact that homelessness can, and does, cause mental illness and drive people to drink. Lose your housing in the United States and you run the risk of losing both your mind and your life."

In spite of the indignities to which these women were subjected and the hardships they endured, all had a rich history and a compelling story. Many were willing to speak openly of the ravaged road they had trod.

Hellegers is now an associate professor at Washington State University, Vancouver. Capturing the eloquence and genuine desire of each woman, she has brought together stories from 15 women, some of the many she's interviewed over the years.

Most of these women had suffered horrific physical and psychological violence at the hands of family members, so-called friends, acquaintances and total strangers. Granted, there are many instances here of reckless choices and self-inflicted pain, as in the case of one woman who succumbs repeatedly to an impulse to cut herself. However, positive concrete choices for economic ciphers are excruciatingly limited — especially for those all alone and entrapped within a turbulent spiral of psychic turmoil and destitution. One woman utters, "We have a system that looks at

homeless people as being trash."

For a homeless man, the streets are fraught with uncertainty. A woman fending for herself on urban byways is even more endangered by the potential for harassment, molestation and assault. Immersed in a welter of palpable threats, women are caught in a fearsome nightmare world. One woman who lost her housing after becoming unemployed due to illness says: "When I was homeless, I was afraid all the time. ... I wasn't scared as a middle-class woman walking down the sidewalk, but walking down the same sidewalk as a homeless woman at the same time of day, I was scared. It's not the same place; it's not the same world. You're surrounded by different forces; you're subject — you're susceptible — to different risks."

Many stories in the book depict brutal beatings and sexual violations as routine. These alarming episodes can make for difficult reading. A woman named Flower — whom Hellegers describes as "one of the most gentle, soft-spoken women I have met in my life" — speaks about a man from whom she wants to dissociate: "He likes beating on me. He likes to fight too much. I'm getting too old for that. Plus I'm not all that well to take all them punches and stuff."

Flower has had strokes, undergone brain surgery and struggled with depression. She talks of a homeless woman friend who was murdered: "So that really affected me tremendously. I've been in them jungles before, and you know that could have been me. So it was very devastating. Just for her to die like that — so tragic, so violent. That was too much." Yet in spite of the onus she carries, Flower says, "I try to remain a happy person."

In various ways each woman describes a profound determination to carry on, to improve, to make things better for herself and others in her situation, to find peace and happiness. An invigorating thread that

weaves throughout these stories is the redemptive power of kindness and shared community. The empowerment experienced in peaceful communal spaces such as Mary's Place, a drop-in center for homeless women and their children in Belltown, is a truly healing and spiritually restorative place. Affirming and recognizing the personhood and worth of indigent women can mend broken lives. Isolation and discouragement are overcome by comradeship and solidarity.

A woman states: "There is trauma in homelessness. Because you have no one. Your family is not with you. Your mom is not with you. Your sister is not with you. Nobody's with you. It's just yourself." She started going to Mary's Place and things started to get better. "I'm grateful for Mary's Place. I don't know how many times they've saved my life."

Hellegers has stood with Women in Black, who gather to remember those people on the streets who have died by murder, illness or exposure. This group gives strength and affirmation to a community too often ignored by the broader municipality. Some of the women in the book have stood up publicly as members of WHEEL (Women's Housing Equality and Enhancement League) and expressed their anger at the inequities that proliferate in society and cried passionately for justice.

Simply put, "No Room of Her Own" is a stunning achievement. It illuminates the daily travails and burdens borne by homeless people — and homeless women in particular. It pays tribute to the strength, resilience and vibrant humanity of those brutalized by the streets and societal indifference. In one woman's words: "Well, I'm not invisible. I know I came here as someone and somebody, and I'm still someone and somebody, regardless of what society thinks of me or any other person that's homeless. We have rights too. We deserve a home."

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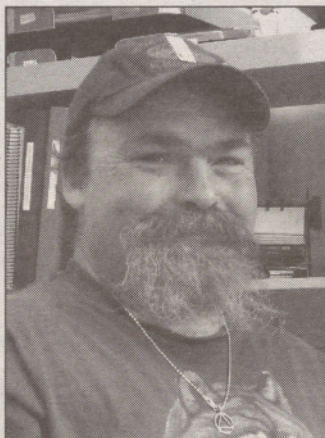
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— Ted Jack, SR vendor