

NIGHTMARE *on civic center drive*

On a warm Saturday at August's end, some 50 OC lawyers came eye to eye with the faces of a group of people that, until late, had become so easy to ignore — the Santa Ana Civic Center's homeless population. The lawyers were drawn to the Civic Center by a plea for volunteers from the newly constituted OCBA's Homeless Issues Task Force to provide pro bono legal services and other assistance to the homeless who were soon to be evicted from their present home. The City of Santa Ana set September 3, 1992, as the date it would begin vigorously enforcing its anti-camping ordinance, which makes it illegal to put up a tent, sleep on a bedroll, or otherwise encamp on public property in the City of Santa Ana.

Action of this type was inevitable. As one of the several attorneys who helped defend the homeless in a prior sweep by the Santa Ana Police Department, I, too, watched in amazement as the homeless population at the Civic Center continued to swell. Some argued the Civic Center had become a "free zone" for homelessness. Others argued that the homeless themselves were becoming victims of unredressed violent crimes. Still others complained that the homeless problems were interfering with the administration of justice at the courts.

All are potentially valid points. The issue, however, was what to do. The City of Santa Ana, like many cities before it, elected to adopt an anti-camping ordinance. Whatever one thinks of the merits of this approach, the grim reality set in for everyone concerned. Soon, hundreds of homeless at the Civic Center were going to be breaking the law and they would be prosecuted in due course.

Facing this problem head on, the OCBA leadership, including President Thomas Malcolm, and Homeless Task Force co-chairs, Maurice Evans and Edmond Connor, coor-

**SCARY
TIMES FOR
CIVIC
CENTER'S
HOMELESS**



dinated with City officials and homeless advocates to lessen the impact of the anti-camping ordinance.

Since June, the OCBA, in conjunction with a host of community volunteers, has achieved the following well-publicized results:

- A \$10,000 OCBA donation, and an additional \$2,500 from members of the OCBA Homeless Task Force, has been used to provide temporary shelter for about 105 previously homeless persons living at the Civic Center.

- 25 volunteer attorneys processed 43 applications for Social Security benefits for the disabled homeless.

- Volunteers helped the homeless locate relatives and OCBA funds provided for approximately 40 bus tickets to various destinations across the country.

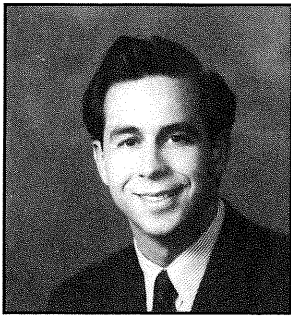
- Private donations, including \$1,600 from Morrison & Foerster, have been used to buy dozens of bedrolls and other necessities for the homeless.

As Chair of the OCBA's Pro Bono Committee, I was gratified to see so many of our members willing to give up a summer Saturday afternoon to assist in filling out lengthy, complicated Social Security disability forms which, in some cases, took as long as two hours each to complete. Problems with translation, incomplete information, missing identification, etc. all led to the complexity of this voluntary assignment.

But as important, if not more important, than helping these people with access to benefits that they might otherwise not receive, was the opportunity to actually meet the people we "see" daily at the Civic Center, yet ignore, because to focus on these people in their current state often is depressing and overwhelming.

What exists behind this faceless sea of human tragedy is a group of diverse individuals as different from each other

FACES OF THE HOMELESS



BY
WILLIAM GRENNER

as they are from each of us. Their shared thread — the state of being homeless — is the only real link between a group of men, women, young and old, who suffer the daily humility of having no place to go.

As became apparent to almost all of those who volunteered that Saturday, the same problems that face all of us have exacerbated the conditions affecting the homeless: a sour economy, an overburdened healthcare system, a deteriorating public education system, lack of affordable housing, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, broken homes, gang-related crime, and, yes, the "L" word — just plain laziness. Sure, some of the homeless at the Civic Center are lazy and should look for work, and if they are receiving General Relief Assistance through the County, they are required to show proof of their efforts to obtain employment. Yet, the hypothesis that most of these people can help themselves, if they really wanted to, is inaccurate and misguided.

The purpose of this article is not to preach any particular philosophy, but rather to put you in touch with people that the OCBA, and all of society, needs to know. The following are profiles of homeless people I encountered at the Civic Center recently. No real names are used, as the people I spoke with zealously guarded their privacy. As one man said, during the recent publicity blitz, "my privacy is all I have left to control. How would you like it if someone poked a camera and floodlight in your bedroom at night, like they did in my tent, and asked you to come out and talk about your problems. We are people, you know, not freaks."

KATE — She is 22 years old, blond hair, blue eyes, 6 months pregnant with twins, a prostitute, and an occasional crack user. She has already given birth to two other sets of twins and, most recently, a baby boy, Emmanuel. All are now adopted.

Before you judge Kate, read on. She was born in Santa Ana as one of ten children. Her father engaged in incest with her before she was five, and molested her brothers as well (one of whom just died of AIDS this year). Her mother was a drug-abusing alcoholic (she was found dead in Mexico several months ago). Kate has five half-sisters by the same father, two are heroin addicts.

Kate reported her father's physical and sexual abuse to her school teachers at 6 years old. Her family was split apart, and she was taken and placed in the County's Albert Sitton Home. Despite being in and out of foster homes and juvenile hall, she managed to complete 11th grade at Santa Ana High School.

Kate has been on the streets since at least age 16. She was abandoned by her step-mother on a trip to the welfare office. She was told, "I just can't carry you any more." Since then, she has lived in Seattle, Chicago, Miami, New York City, and Mexico City. She married once. Her husband, from whom she is now trying to divorce, is in prison. Kate previously reported him for molesting and abusing her own child before its adoption. He is bisexual, has AIDS, and was her former pimp. Kate has not tested HIV positive.

Kate has lived in the Civic Center for more than a year. While there, she was raped twice and stabbed once. She speaks fluent Spanish in addition to English. She wants to get clean, go back to school, and get a job. She wants help.

Status: Kate is being fed and sheltered at a motel paid for, in part, by Share Our Selves, and is on a waiting list for Heritage House, a 6-month residential program for drug-abusing mothers.

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MITCH — He is a white male, 69 years old, and has been homeless for 5 years. He is 6 feet tall and currently weighs 110 lbs., down from his normal weight of 180 lbs. He wears a John Deere hat and has a day or two growth over his drawn cheeks. He claims never to have taken drugs or abused alcohol and says that his only vice is "a smoke now and then."

Mitch worked his entire life. He is a veteran of two wars. He had a wife of 40 years and a home in Long Beach. His wife died of cancer seven years ago forcing Mitch to sell the house and use his retirement savings to pay medical bills. Mitch has no children and no other family. His \$661 in Social Security barely covered the rent on a room that he later lost after a six-month hospital and nursing home stay due to a life-threatening bout with colitis. Mitch's attempts to find roommates have all failed because the roommates would inevitably hound him for cash to help support their drinking and drug habits.

Mitch has been living at the Civic Center for the last 6 months and told me that he only needs a single room, anywhere, with some privacy. He said, "I'm a quiet man who pretty much likes to be left alone." He has, however, spent the last several months trying to convince Kate (see above) to enter a drug rehabilitation program.

Status: Unknown

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GINO — He is a 34-year old black man. With the exception of a slight paunch, he is well-built and is fond of not wearing a shirt. He is outspoken, articulate, and has a drug problem.

Gino was born to an affluent family in the fashionable area of Northwest

Washington, D.C. He attended private schools and has traveled throughout Europe, South America, and Africa. Gino wanted no part of his family's property management business, he left D.C. and has been a nomad for several years. His family has written him off.

He claims to have never been convicted of so much as a misdemeanor. He admits, however, to having a violent edge, but says "it never got me in any trouble."

Gino has lived at the Civic Center a couple of years. He thinks the anti-camping ordinance is a good idea because his neighborhood has "gone to hell" recently. He told me, "Just look at them, there ain't no one who's got this here" (he points to his carefully maintained and locked auto detailing equipment which he uses daily on cars at the Civic Center).

Gino tells me that he preferred the "old uncrowded Civic Center," where "he could stretch out under a tree in the afternoon and not worry about being stabbed at night."

Status: Gino has agreed to enter a 3-month program for drug users. He wants to start his own auto detail business. Prior to starting his business, however, Gino wants to walk Death Valley and become famous. "You know, promotional stuff," he says.

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LEWIS — He is a bearded black male, 49 years old, who is slight with the exception of an enormous protruding stomach and swollen ankles. Lewis' physical condition is the result of a severe congenital heart defect which causes bloating and extreme respiratory distress.

Lewis attempted to apply for SSI disability benefits approximately a year ago; however, he found the paperwork too difficult to complete and abandoned his

application. On the day that we were assisting the homeless in completing the SSI application, Lewis was too ill to walk the short distance across the street to the Bar Association office, and so I took his application next to where his tent used to be. Chris Mears, an attorney volunteer, had previously assisted Lewis in dismantling his tent; yet, despite his assistance, Lewis was winded and tired.

Lewis, who has an extremely good memory, explained that he is an honorably discharged Vietnam veteran who served in combat. He graduated from high school and has no other formal education. Upon returning to the states after the war, Lewis held a number of jobs, including heavy truck maintenance and worked off and on as a general mechanic. His drug addiction, which began in Vietnam, continued upon his return, and he lost several jobs. Until his most recent illness, Lewis worked as a traveling carnival worker setting up the rides and maintaining the equipment. He was paid "under the table," so he is not entitled for many public benefits that would otherwise be available for someone who had proof of paid employment.

In September of 1991, Lewis' health took a turn for the worse. He was admitted to the Veteran's Hospital in Long Beach. His heart condition has continued to worsen, and he requires constant medication to keep it in check. However, when Lewis gets his general relief check, he often spends the meager funds on drugs to support his habit instead of on necessary medication.

Lewis' friends at the Civic Center have tried to persuade him to return to the V.A. Hospital in Long Beach, but he continues to resist. By the end of the day on Saturday, we called the paramedics to assist Lewis who was going into respiratory arrest. The paramedics arrived and intubated his chest and took him to Western Medical Center. Three days later, I found Lewis back at the Civic Center with gauze wrapped around his arm, his hospital band still on, sitting outside where his tent used to be.

Status: As of September 10, 1992, Lewis is still living tentless at the Civic Center.

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These profiles were included in this article to give our membership some idea of the stories behind the bodies that we are trying to assist in one way or another.

As you can see, there is no one solution that can be fastened to fit these complex problems and different histories. As lawyers, however, there is much we can do to assist these people: we can provide them with the public benefits to which they are entitled; we can help resolve a "failure to appear" where the fine has escalated beyond their reach; and we can attempt to walk them through the system which has often dismissed them as hopeless. But, more importantly, to the extent that any of these people want help, we can push them in the right direction and be, if nothing else, another face to talk to.

William Grenner is with the law firm of Morrison & Foerster in Irvine.

