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Shelter Helps the Homeless Set a New Course

By RANDY KRAFT



In another place and time, Vera Wooden might have been a gypsy. Passionate and proud, her dreadlocks are always adorned with silk scarves and she wears colorful clothes. She has been a drifter most of her life, but never thinks of herself as homeless. "I slept at friends, or the park or the beach. That's the way my life was."

At age 50, she has finally accepted the help she needs, largely because of Friendship Shelter, Inc. The shelter is the only adult homeless facility in South County, tucked away on a midtown street with an ocean-view dining patio. A perfect place to start over.

"Late at night, when the town goes quiet, I hear the ocean. Seagulls are my alarm clock."

Wooden also found a job and a support system, connecting with county mental health services where she came to grips with her homelessness. "They asked me for my address, and when I didn't have one, they said I was homeless. That was a shock," she said. They also diagnosed her as bipolar, or manic-depressive, and steered her to medication that is helping her navigate daily life more effectively.

Wooden is one of hundreds of success stories that are the result of the agency's two-decade effort by both professionals and volunteers to help the homeless to help themselves. While the City Council's task force on the homeless considers options to reduce or eliminate the impact of the 50 to 60 chronically indigent that populate the downtown, Friendship Shelter aims to support those who can best be helped. The organization hopes to work with the task force, as it works with other agencies that offer support to the homeless, such as the Resource Center.

"It is always a good thing to bring the issue to the forefront, although I hate to see it politicized," said the shelter's executive director, Carol Rhoads. "These people need services, not scorn."

Vera left her New York City home at age 16. Her father, an Episcopal minister, taught the virtue of helping others. Her three siblings all followed the straight path, but Vera was a party girl. "We were the kids that got into the downtown clubs for free because we brought atmosphere with us."

She has never owned a home or car. She travels by foot or on bicycle. She made meager wages as a nanny, dog-walker or house-sitter. "I used to sit on the fire escape and watch the saga of people's lives. I learned early on that what I am is not anything I've bought."

From the New York nightlife to the California music scene, a lot of her friends died of AIDS or drugs. "I'm so grateful to be disease-free, and not have any kids or husbands, no one who might have suffered for my life."

Twelve years ago, because she feared dying in a horrific way, Wooden went into a recovery program and proudly celebrates sobriety. "My eyes were suddenly open. I was hiking in the valley and my only fear was rattlesnakes or coyotes, not the demons."

"Despite everything, Vera maintains control of the decisions of her life, and her dignity," said Rhoads. "We cannot rob people of that."

These days, Wooden concocts perfumes as exotic as she is, and she's hoping to secure housing through state support services.

Having a job is one of several stringent requirements at Friendship Shelter, where 29 adults without homes and without means can stay for 60-days. This is not a shelter for vagrants, nor a detox center; rather a safe haven where those down on their luck can learn the skills needed to stabilize their lives. They enjoy comfortable environs, recently refurbished by volunteers and residents, with breakfast and a bag lunch to take to work, and they return home to dinner prepared by volunteers or a guest chef.

In return, residents must prove their mettle first by calling three times to secure a space off the waitlist. They must test clean of drugs or alcohol and, if in recovery, attend support groups. Within two weeks they must have a job, and they are required to deposit 80 percent of their paycheck into a savings account.

Beyond room and board, they get assistance to clear up their credit rating and legal issues, often a major obstacle to finding permanent housing. They also learn anger and relationship management skills.

“We try to create an environment that inspires people who want to change,” said Mark Miller, development director.

Once on track, residents can apply to the organization’s extended-stay program, located in San Clemente. For up to one year, 24 formerly homeless live in six apartments in two buildings, where they can save money and continue to build life-skills while they work. They maintain their apartments and help with grounds maintenance for a monthly rent of just \$375, which allows them to save money while there.

John Barth, the program’s resident manager, was himself homeless for a time. A southern California native with a degree in economics from UCLA, he was a successful insurance manager, but succumbed to a drug addiction.

“One day I had a good job and owned a home, the next day I was broke and living on the streets.”

Barth was homeless for two years before coming to Friendship Shelter. Now he sets an example for others to rebuild their lives, one day at a time. He says it was hard to leave the shelter and learn again to take care of himself.

“Sixty days is real quick. You need structure and time to learn to be independent.”

Barth supervises residences and the facility, for which he receives a stipend and an apartment. He says it’s a job he has no reason to leave. “I have a 2-year old niece now, and if it weren’t for FSI, I wouldn’t even know her.”

In the next year, the shelter hopes to implement a program to further support residents. The organization has secured a grant to help graduates stay on track, avoid substance abuse relapse, and secure affordable housing, as well as career counseling. They seek private funding as well to kick-start the effort.

“You can go through Friendship Shelter and Henderson House and do everything right, but if stuck in a minimum wage job, the odds are still against you,” Rhoads said.



Jaymes Gard, now 21, was at Henderson House for 365 days to the day, he says proudly. “If a person is down and out enough to have to go to a shelter, then 60 days is not enough to go out on your own.”

His is a good example of a life turned-around through determination and the kindness of strangers.

At 16, Gard, who grew up in San Clemente, dropped out of school and left home to live on the streets, where he says he fell in with the wrong people and made the wrong choices. His mother, a substance abuser and homeless, was largely absent.

“I looked at my mom and saw the future, and thought about what way I wanted to go, so I went to the shelter.”

While at Friendship Shelter, he found a job at the Penguin Café, where he continues to serve, and also works as an overnight shift supervisor at the shelter.

“These people took a chance on me, and now they’re friends. I don’t want to let them down.”

With a disarming grin and humility rare in one so young, Gard now lives on his own and takes pride in his life. “I never really had a chance to think about my future when I was younger, but even if I had, I would never have thought it would turn out so well.”

At the annual FSI “Dinners across Laguna” fundraiser, graduates share their stories and impress sponsors with the hope they found there. “We have worked hard to create a community that supports success,” Rhoads said.