

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

February 13, 2015

Column #16



ONE STARFISH SAFE *PARKING* NOT *CAMPING*

By Wanda Sue Parrott

During the 2015 Point-in-Time Homeless Census on Jan. 28, counting houseless people living in vehicles was a challenge. These clip art photos (left to right) look like vehicles I spotted on side streets in Seaside. One or two adults lived in a van, along with two or three dogs. Windows had coverings to hide possessions in the vehicles and hand-painted art adorned doors and sides. Old campers and vans were parked at different spots each night, since there is no One Starfish Safe Parking Program in Seaside.

Seaside neighborhoods seem more tolerant than other areas on the Monterey Peninsula. For instance, on Jan. 23, 2015, a letter in the *Cedar Street Times* from Holly Golightly of Pacific Grove bemoaned the fact PG condones safe parking for the homeless. Since Holly Golightly is the name of a character played by Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, I invited an advocate for senior women without adequate housing to answer the anonymous new arrival from Santa Cruz's concerns.

A Letter Addressing Fears About One Starfish Safe Parking

After reading Holly Golightly's letter (1/23/15) on parking for the homeless, I was confused as to who Holly thought posed the greatest danger to public safety: the police chief or the homeless. It was obvious Holly didn't want a police chief around and Holly wants things Holly's way (whatever way that is). Holly was disappointed that Pacific Grove is even considering helping the homeless. Furthermore, Holly was disgusted with Santa Cruz, saying it didn't have good civic-mindedness; and as far as San Francisco went, that city was nothing more than a suffering, crime-ridden area.

So, with all this negativity, I decided to do some research and found there are elderly people in PG on the brink of losing housing due to rising costs, medical bills and/or disappearing jobs. These people, who have worked hard all their lives, don't need safe parking yet, but, unfortunately, some will soon need a safe place to park at night and support services offered by the program at issue while locating alternate housing and income.

Those in their "golden" years who are edging near to losing housing and having to sleep in their cars, or are already doing so, will certainly feel safer if they know that services exist to help them re-establish normal housing arrangements instead of having to face living in their cars indefinitely.

Many of these people have contributed to their communities and donated their time to making things better for all; the fact they lost their jobs and are reduced to living on social

security shouldn't sink them below the respect and protection of their neighbors. Some who have already lost the battle with rising costs and dwindling resources, and are already living in their cars, don't want anyone to know they are homeless.

The Safe Parking program's stated goals are to help homeless people transition out of living in their cars into regular housing. Holly, how is this dangerous? Becoming ill, disabled, unemployed and/or old should not be punishable offenses; these people are not criminals and, as members of our community, deserve to be safe.

When I checked on One Starfish Safe Parking, I saw a remarkable program which not only gives people a safe church lot to park in at night, but a combination of additional services including material needs (access to sponsored gatherings which offer hot meals, clothing, sleeping bags, fuel, etc.) and critical services provided by a social worker to help the homeless find work, housing, and hope.

The program wants to connect people with resources they need to live independently and, as such, it can benefit other members of our community (e.g., homeowners who rent to vetted program participants gain assistance in paying their own mortgages). How can reducing the number of homeless people in our community be dangerous? Saying that "as Santa Cruz goes, so goes Pacific Grove" is far-fetched. I know she's wrong about the One Starfish Program down to "essentially, the homeless may camp overnight."

Do you sleep seated upright in a car at night when you go camping? How about sleeping in the back seat of a Ford Escort. Is that your idea of "camping"? Camping is a recreational activity wherein campers relax, unwind, and enjoy nature. I'm puzzled by Holly's almost-jealous perception of homelessness and her decision to equate it with sought-after leisure activities. Personally, I don't know of anyone who plans to sleep sitting in their car when they go camping, but then, I suspect Holly and I move in different circles.

One Starfish Safe Parking lots are just parking lots, not campsites. "Safe Parking" means a limited number of select participants are granted temporary permission to arrive after a set time at night, sleep in their cars, and leave prior to a set time in the morning. Participants are screened, required to have auto insurance, meet regularly with program staff, and comply with all program goals.

We're not talking about rowdy groups of anonymous people "camping" in neighborhood parking lots while warming their hands over refuse burning in metal drums. We're talking about scared, tired people who lost their battles to keep their jobs, housing, youth, health and/or spouses. One Starfish is hosting homeless families with children at one site; these families aren't on a camping vacation.

The success of the One Starfish Safe Parking Program depends in large part upon its commitment to working with law enforcement in making guidelines and establishing boundaries for all to follow. It's a wonderful program that stresses reconnecting people pushed to the fringes of their communities with resources, employment and relationships needed to get them out of their cars and into housing.

Holly, can we at least agree it's inappropriate to use the plight of the homeless as a stick with which to beat the Chief of Police?

Respectfully, Mary Pickford, Monterey

####

Photos of VW vans from Google Free Image search; no copyright infringement intended.
Contact Wanda Sue Parrott at *Books for Beds* by leaving a message with The Yodel Poet at 831-899-5887 or e-mail amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com.