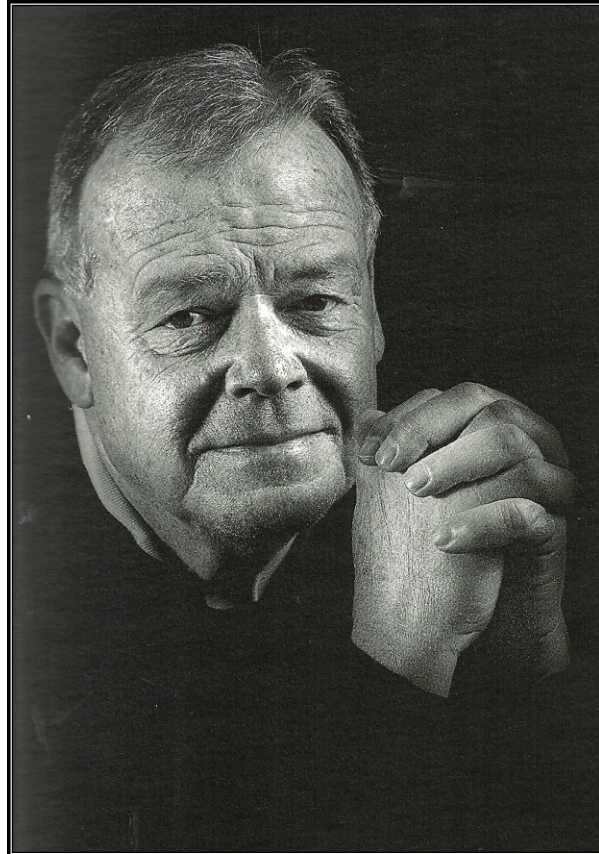


HOMELESS IN PARADISE

February 8-14, 2019

PENINSULA PULCHRITUDE - Part 6



A LESSON IN RISK-TAKING FROM GOD IN THE GUTTER

By Wanda Sue Parrott

FOLLOWING advent of this series, several readers contacted me about helping homeless women in need. If I'm correct, this woman's response indicates readers should be warned about risks:

"You put my mother in touch with (name withheld) . . . It was supposed to be overnight. She stayed three weeks. . . My mother paid for her car and her dog. . . It doesn't end up well for people when they are scammed!"

Whatever you give and/or whomever you befriend, based on what you read here, is at your own risk. How much risk is involved? My journey might help you reach your own conclusion.

Co-Existing With Homelessness

Juggling coexistence with homeless people and what is now called the Latinx population, was my childhood way of life during World War Two. If there weren't homeless men on our white-washed-red-tile-rooftop block in Alhambra, there were many of them around Lincoln Park, East L.A. barrio peopled by gangs, men in zoot suits, and "Liver Lips" women with big hair that concealed shivs (knives).

I never heard of homeless women among them, but occasionally, a drunk Spanish-speaking male reached the Alhambra border and passed out in an old shack behind our neighborhood grocery store.

Rumor was the Pachucos would kill us if we entered their turf, so I never crossed that border.

All That Glitters Is Not Silver

My fear changed to revulsion in 1959 when I was a showroom model with a cocktail-dress designer in the fashion industry section of Los Angeles near skid row.

The sun illuminated a shiny silver-dollar shaped circle on the sidewalk as I was walking from the bus station to work. Instead of finding a precious coin, I lifted a fresh gob of spittle that dripped like egg white through my fingers.

I couldn't look at homeless men for twenty years, until the federal Lanterman Act, which gave mentally ill persons the right to choose their own care, let women who'd been released from mental care facilities onto the streets of Los Angeles.

That first-time flock of homeless women spread through Southern California like today's Canadian Honkers fill Dennis the Menace Park.

It was the early 1980s and you couldn't not see them, because they were suddenly everywhere.

Today, although there are between 500 and 1,000 homeless women estimated to live on the Monterey Peninsula, they're harder to spot than the first openly homeless bag ladies.

God In The Gutter

Back in the eighties, a filthy, bent man was ransacking trash outside McDonald's where I stopped to wait for my evening bus. I'd tried not to see him, but one night he flipped a sack from the trash, inhaled limp fries, washed them down with melting ice from a throwaway cup, then found a half-smoked cigarette butt, which he straightened out, dusted off and lit like a rich man smoking an after-dinner cigar.

Why, he's territorial, and on schedule, just like me. This is dinnertime in his home. He is far more skilled in survival than I am! Wow!

He looked at me, smiled and his face lit up as a Sunday school hymn filled my mind: *How great Thou art!* I never saw him again, yet God in the Gutter still influences me to seek beauty in ugliness, put trust before fear, and exercise caution in helping others at my own risk.

I-HELP

I don't bring homeless people home. I do meet them on common ground. Since 2014, I've helped serve meals to between 18 and 25 homeless men of Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program (I-HELP) once a month on Sunday night at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Monterey Peninsula, which also supports I-HELP for Women.

I-HELP is part of Outreach Unlimited, a 501(c)(3) non-profit through which temporarily homeless individuals are provided a warm dinner and place to sleep on floor mats at 30 local houses of worship and other community partners. An average of 11 homeless women participated in the January I-HELP Program.

Meet my friend Reed Bennett, whose "A Heartwarming Story" is in the January 2019 edition of I-HELP NEWS:

I was born at Fort Ord and grew up in Pacific Grove and Seaside. I graduated from Pacific Grove High in 1970 and Monterey Peninsula College in 1972. Then I attended the University of Wyoming, where I earned degrees in History and Music. After that I lived in San Diego, working for many years in the auto industry and retail.

“I moved back to the Monterey Peninsula in 2006. In the spring of 2012, while vacationing in Wyoming, I was critically injured in a car accident, and hospitalized for more than three months. Upon returning to Monterey, I found out that I lost both my job and my housing. Now homeless, I heard about the I-HELP program from the Salvation Army.

“In October 2012, I entered I-HELP where I stayed for three years. A long time to be sure, but it took me that long to put my life back together. Little by little, with tremendous help from friends, I was able to start my own driving business and obtain housing.

“I left the I-HELP program in September 2015 and moved into my own place. Blessings have come to me on a regular basis. In the summer of 2017, I was approached by friends to apply to be a driver for I-HELP. For over a year now I have been driving for both the men’s and women’s programs on a part-time basis, still continuing my personal driving business.

“I am eternally grateful to I-HELP for helping me as a resident for three years, and now as an employee. I have made so many friends at the congregations that serve I-HELP; I use my time off to visit them, helping them set up and serve the meals. I view this as ‘paying it forward’ after all the blessings I have received.

Thank you, I-HELP! - Reed Bennett”

Contact www.ihelpmontereybay.org, email wehelpihelp@gmail.com, or call 831-393-5154.

To discuss the risk-taking aspect of helping the homeless, attend the Homelessness on the Bay Town Hall, Wed., Feb.13, 6 p.m., Oldemeyer Center, 986 Hilby Ave., Seaside, 831-521-0577.

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CREDIT: Photo: Reed Bennett, formerly homeless resident in I-HELP for MEN now drives the bus that delivers both I-HELP men and women to their mutual destinations every night. He is pictured here in 2014, in the “Inherent Worth and Dignity—Living Portraits” book produced by photographer Bob Sadler, whose exhibit of portraits of homeless men of the Monterey Peninsula toured several states. Photo courtesy of Bob Sadler.

Reed’s story is reprinted courtesy of I-HELP.

This column appears on page 8 of Cedar Street Times, Pacific Grove’s Hometown Newspaper, online at www.cedarstreettimes.com. Contact Wanda Sue Parrott, amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com, 831-899-5887

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