

HOMELESS IN PARADISE
October 31 - November 6, 2019

IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 3



DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN ‘LADIES GO LAST’ WAS UNWRITTEN LAW?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

*“We are letting go of our rumpled past. . .
and accepting the Willingness to be Well.”*

Sue Ellen Stringer of Seaside, aka Butterfly,
on rising above mental challenges.

LISTENING to poetry recited by its author is, to me, like hearing a butterfly sing.

If you’re a victim of the “ladies go last” syndrome, you’d have enjoyed the Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program for Women after-dinner poet’s voice last Sunday at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Monterey Peninsula.

Twenty women dined on barbecued chicken with mashed potatoes, vegetables, salad and pumpkin pie. They included 14 homeless I-HELP guests, their representatives, and UU hostesses.

My participation began at 5 p.m. by welcoming women hauling sleeping mats and duffel bags from the bus. Next, Camille Hatton, UUCMP’s music director, led a group song, followed by potluck on black-and-orange striped Halloween tablecloths. . . Halloweeny, cute, nothing lavish.

Early I-HELP For Women Banquets

I recalled early I-HELP for Women dinners at UUCMP. On Thanksgiving weekend 2015, our first dinner was turkey, replete with linen, silver, candles and china to elegantly treat the downtrodden women to an indoor uplift.

While a thriving I-HELP for Men had been operating nightly for nearly a quarter century, “ladies go last” seemed to be an unwritten law. Since I-HELP for Women had taken 23 years to arrive, and was finally given a boost by a grant from the Fund for Homeless Women (a field fund of the Community Foundation for Monterey County), each of the six I-HELP guests received her own pajamas, personal toiletries and toothbrush.

Beds in the church dorm-like sanctuary were inflatable mattresses as roomy and high as traditional twin beds with pillows and coverlets.

A month later, the beautifully decorated Christmas-dinner tables for the I-HELP women remained almost empty. Colorful knitted gift caps handmade by UU volunteer Carol Collin went undistributed. So few guests came that we hostesses got gift hats. Mine is merlot red.

Flat mats had replaced the fancy air beds, as women flopped, curled in fetal positions, on the floor and didn’t even eat.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The mattresses all went flat,” someone confided. “Truth is, they didn’t like the no-drinking, no smoking, no sex rules.”

By March 19, 2016, I-HELP for Women deflated due to “lack of participation” by homeless women.

Fortunately, the program which offers food and shelter 7 nights per week at around 30 local houses of worship is restructured and averages 11 women per night.

I-HELP for Women was a 3rd-year matching-funds grant recipient in the 2019 Community Foundation’s Monterey County Gives (MCGives) annual fundraiser kickoff that closed October 25. The year-end MCGives campaign runs from November 7-December 31. Details at <https://www.cfmco.org/impact/monterey-county-gives/>

Success Over Stigma

Last Sunday’s surprise after-dinner address was announced by Lee Hulquist, liaison between I-HELP and UUCMP. Sue Ellen Stringer began, “My childhood name as a Campfire Girl was Apadenska, which means Butterfly. . .”

She said, “Statistics say that one in four people will be affected by mental illness in their lifetime.”

Sue Ellen said that she was diagnosed with Depression as a teen, and has successfully lived with mental challenge throughout her adult life. Despite being Bi-Polar, Sue Ellen earned A.A. and B.A. degrees, then continued her education and became a social worker.

Now retired, she is active with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and volunteers with the Interim, Inc. S.O.S. Program.

Like her symbolic name, this butterfly poet has soared. “I have recovered because of the love of family, therapists and peers, and my willingness to love and forgive myself,” she said. “S.O.S. means Success Over Stigma. S.O.S. does presentations. . . We tell our personal stories about how we recover from episodes of mental illness, such as depression, schizophrenia and bi-polarity, and how we continue to succeed in our lives.”

Sue Ellen said she believes in the first Unitarian Universalist principle, the Inherent Worth and Dignity of Everyone, and that she abides by these points she learned at a Whites for Racial Equity workshop:

- *I must allow myself to be seen if I am to feel connected to others.*
- *I know that fear and shame create distance from self and others.*
- *I commit to reducing my fear and shame so that I have enough courage to embrace my own vulnerability and to treat others with respect.*

Sue Ellen encourages those who might suffer from similar mental challenges to visit Interim's Drop In Center at 608 Pearl St., Monterey, open daily to everyone 18 and older, to fix themselves peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and participate in various creative "Our Voices" projects from noon to 4 p.m.

One of the projects Sue Ellen leads is Butterfly Card Reading, which she describes as "like tarot card reading, except the cards are different butterflies."

Poetry is another Our Voices project.

She switched to her butterfly voice and Apadenska sang to the circle of women who came first that night:

A Circle of Support
By Sue Ellen Stringer

*A circle of friendly strangers becomes a circle of friends
Who may hear different voices or who come from down under blankets of depression
And/or up top fluffy clouds of mania, a circle of support with a space for each of us.
A circular space for inner healing. A circle for healing ourselves first.
A circle of safety for women and men.
Threads of our life stories intermingle, touch and interweave,
A fabric of support. A crazy quilt of rich detail honoring torn and tattered pain;
All colors and shapes of experience; the soft comforters of silent listening.
We are letting go of our rumpled past. Courageously taking charge of our lives,
And accepting the Willingness to be Well.
May we honor and respect always each other's place
In this circle of support.*

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NAMI sponsors a no-cost Family-to-Family educational course for families and caregivers of those living with mental health challenges. Pre-registration is required.

Contact 831-422-6264 or 831-200-5563, info@namimonterey.org or visit www.namimonterey.org.

For I-HELP information contact www.ihelpmontereybay.org and ihelpmontereybay@gmail.org.

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This column appears in the weekly edition of Cedar Street Times at www.cedarstreettimes.com.

Photo: Butterfly courtesy of Clip Art
Contact Wanda Sue Parrott at 831-899-5887
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