

## HOMELESS IN PARADISE

January 3-10, 2020

### IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 11



#### HOW ARE HUMAN STARFISH SAVED? ONE BY ONE, OF COURSE!

By Wanda Sue Parrott

*a child and grown man  
walking on a sandy beach  
found starfish dying  
the child hurled a fish  
back into the briny waves  
it revived at sea  
why bother--dad asked--  
high waves rain them onto sand  
thousands more will die  
true--the child replied--  
lots of starfish will perish  
but we saved this one*

**CELEBRATING** New Year starts with this good news!

If you assumed the One Starfish Safe Parking Program was in jeopardy because it wasn't on the 2019 McGives fundraising list, relax. Tia and Michael Fechter simply missed the filing deadline.

Last week's column promised Program Director Michael Fechter's response to conjectures and innuendoes I received about One Starfish.

For instance, my follow-up revealed slight errors I'd reported, like the rumor that a Guest had a propane "stove" in her vehicle; apparently the device was only a "heater." Also, my reference to a monthly "contract" between One Starfish and a Guest should have said a "parking permit."

Of greater concern were rumors of possible shady intruders in a One Starfish parking lot.

Michael Fechter responded in depth about One Starfish, which "runs secure parking lots with professional counselors that help folks living out of the vehicles throughout eight sites in the County."

## **How One Starfish Got Its Name**

According to Michael, One Starfish was started by his wife, Dr. Tia (Sukin) Fechter, seven years ago out of concern for many homeless women living, afraid and alone, from their cars.

I remember how Tia persuaded city councils about merits of allowing women to park overnight in their cars in church parking lots by reciting the one-starfish tale depicted in the caption of this photo. The Fechters have been helping find housing for metaphorical starfish, one person at a time, ever since.

Michael says, "Financed at first by Tia, the organization quickly received public support from the Fund for Homeless Women and other concerned people." Tia was a Jefferson Award Winner in 2018 for her One Starfish program.

"Despite the occasional rumor from a handful of citizens, not only is all good with the program, but things have in many ways never been better," Michael adds. "This year in addition to providing the usual gamut of services to Guests that include counseling, hotel stays when needed, gas cards, car repairs, food and assistance in accessing health care, we have also provided dental assistance and started a volunteer advocate program to give Guests another round of support in getting back into housing as quickly as possible."

## **Fechter On Funding**

Finances are "solid but without excess," Michael says.

Year after year, Tia and Michael have been the largest private financial supporters of the organization. "Tia donates her time and her money to see that good things happen every day for the elderly homeless and homeless working poor," according to Michael, who says several grants were smaller for the coming year than in past years, and individual donations are lower than in some other years, but they are "addressing these concerns immediately."

He says, "Our tendency is to spend funds as needed to the highest possible level during any given year. Folks who are homeless are in need NOW, so if we have the funds to assist them with cost they cannot cover for auto repair, health aid, or even bits of money to move to areas of the country with less expensive housing costs, then we allocate those funds right away. It's just the right thing to do."

He adds, "We do need more private donations, we do need more grant monies, and we do need more public funding. So yes, although we are financially solvent, we do ask that individuals contribute as they can."

The Fechters welcome advisers who "might help us get grants, local, state or federal funding. . . and have room for anyone that wants to help the working poor and older women improve their quality of life."

They offer a 14-point program to help other cities and states establish safe parking programs like One Starfish.

## **America's Tragic 2020 Situation**

Michael says, "Things are especially hard for our elderly female Guests, most of whom live on social security payments of approximately \$700 per month, or women who live with school age children in their vehicles. . . One Starfish continues to get approximately 30 percent of Guests housed within the year, 75 percent see their incomes increase, and almost 100 percent see gains in their health through One Starfish employees and volunteers.

"There's no way to explain how hard it is to spend weeks, months even years sleeping reclined in a two-door car. It is bitterly cold. And it will depress even the heartiest soul. No person growing up ever thinks they will grow up to be homeless. Especially when they are old. Especially when they are an active, productive working member of society."

Michael adds that almost 80 percent of the One Starfish Guests living in vehicles in the largest location (Marina) are employed fulltime, but can't afford the high cost of housing, especially if they have medical or educational debt.

Pressure on Monterey County from a land developer who wants to put in \$1 million+ building sites near the Marina location forces One Starfish's upcoming move to Seaside's Bethel Missionary Baptist Church. Michael says, "This lot does not have room for RVs and there are numerous RVs at our Marina site. . . We are looking at solutions and are happy to work with any business or organization that could house a few overnight RVs."

### **Rumors Revisited**

Michael says, "Until we see 100 percent of us housed, we'll continue with One Starfish.

"But I won't lie; we need more help to get there. . . .

"Why help the homeless? It's just the right thing to do!"

Last week's column hinted of law enforcement being alerted to suspected One Starfish site intruders, but Michael Fechter says, "It is well documented that in the seven years of the program, no police call has ever been made to a One Starfish lot concerning a dilemma or misbehavior of a Guest."

To donate or help, contact: [onestarfishsafeparking.org](http://onestarfishsafeparking.org)

To reach Michael call 843-276-7655 or email [fireballsports@gmail.com](mailto:fireballsports@gmail.com)

The Junsay Apartments Opening in Marina is rescheduled for next week's column.

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This column appears in the weekly edition of the Cedar Street Times at [www.cedarstreettimes.com](http://www.cedarstreettimes.com) .

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haiku quartet by Wanda Sue Parrott

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