

## HOMELESS IN PARADISE

January 17-23, 2020

### IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 13



*welcoming strangers  
jaime voltaire and his mom  
kept an open door  
no one went houseless  
in their little seaside home  
guests slept on the floor  
both of them are gone  
but their legacy lives on--  
homeless never more*

*(Photo of Elfaga Ramos and son courtesy of  
Jaime Olin Voltaire; haiku by Wanda Sue Parrott)*

## WHO'S GOING TO SCRATCH YOUR HOMETOWN'S HOMELESS ITCH?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

**ITCHING?** If yes, scratch it to relieve your discomfort! Right?

Wrong.

According to a neighbor named Bruce, "When a mosquito keeps buzzing around to bite you and you finally lose patience, what do you do? You swat it."

Homelessness and unaffordable housing have become such a social itch that California Governor Gavin Newsom swatted hard this week by touring the state, reporting that everywhere he goes, elected officials tell him "Homelessness is the No.1 Crisis in California."

The housing crisis has been no secret for years to people like those Elfaga Ramos helped while she and her son Jaime Olin Voltaire lived in Seaside (as related in this column on November 3, 2017). Jaime, the only American-born son of a Mexican mother who helped undocumented immigrants enter the U.S., said:

"People were always welcome in our home. My mother saved children from prisons and raised them as her own. We housed immigrants and complete strangers off the streets. So much was given to them."

The house was so crowded, he often felt his mother had neither time nor space for him.

Similar descriptions of unaffordable, overcrowded living spaces were given by representatives of Community Organized for Relational Power in Action (COPA) at a special meeting of Seaside City Council on January 9. Public input was gathered to support a tenants' rights ordinance to establish a rental registry, mandatory mediation, and Rental Review Board through which the city will offer landlord/tenant mediation to resolve disputes. Council voted 5-0 in favor of further pursuit of such ordinance.

## **Introducing COPA**

COPA, a regional non-profit organization spanning Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties, consists of 28 member institutions (churches, synagogues, public schools, labor organizations and non-profits) that work together in civil society for the common good.

Back in 2000 the Central Coast Interfaith Sponsors announced it would invest \$250,000 in training lay leaders for public life. In 2003, 1,500 lay leaders assembled to celebrate the founding of COPA on June 8 in Sherwood Hall, Salinas.

COPA's mission is to develop leadership skills in ordinary people so they can engage effectively in public life; to build power to negotiate with public and private sector leaders; to work for the common good by transforming the economic, social, political and cultural pressures on our families and neighborhoods.

At the special city council meeting in Seaside last week, for instance, a lay leader discussed in Spanish why Seaside should create the proposed renters-landlords relations program: to eliminate slumlords like the one who, when black mold was reported to him, whitewashed the mold rather than remediate the health hazard. A translator converted the message to English.

At its 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Convention in 2018, COPA cited Affordable Housing as its top issue.

A COPA Delegates Assembly is slated for Sat., January 25, 2020, 10 a.m. – 1 p.m., Moss Landing Marine Lab, 8272 Moss Landing Rd., Moss Landing. For details or to register contact [copaiaf.org/delegates\\_assembly](http://copaiaf.org/delegates_assembly) or call Rosa Vitela at 831-728-3210. For further information, visit [www.copa.nationbuilder.com](http://www.copa.nationbuilder.com).

### **Do Local Volunteers Have The “7-Year Itch?”**

Back in 2013, following Timothy Barrett's historic symposium on Hunger & Homelessness in Paradise at Monterey Peninsula College, passion ran so high the Fund for Homeless Women was formed by Rev. Michael Reid, Kathy Whilden, and Marian Penn.

Its outreach arm, Friends of Homeless Women, began meeting monthly at St. Mary's by the Sea Episcopal Church in Pacific Grove to full houses of women wishing to help their estimated 500-700 less-fortunate sisters who were homeless on the Monterey Peninsula. Where are they now?

The Gathering for Women, now an independent non-profit located at 147 Eldorado St, Monterey, evolved from those meetings at which everyone was a volunteer. Today the GFW has eight paid employees and a diminishing staff of volunteers that still performs much of the work.

Has the proverbial “seven-year itch” affected the community of volunteers? Age, attrition and waning interest seem to have created a shrinking corps of volunteers. Why?

According to Kathy Whilden, Fund for Homeless Women wants to hear about issues and ideas to revitalize our community. “We want to know what is really happening in the homeless community by listening to the people who work directly with the homeless community.

“Our community has become weary with the homeless issues. We are looking for viable new ideas and ways to re-energize the professional volunteer corps; Musical chair frustrations—Harm reduction without viable housing options; Elders trying to help elders with their own increasing challenges & frailties.”

The public is urged to attend the Homeless Outreach Meeting at which the topic will be discussed. Monday, January 27, 2020, 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m., at First Presbyterian Church, 501 El Dorado St, Monterey.

## What's In Store?

Governor Gavin Newsom's new Homeless Task Force will work with local governments to provide local low-cost housing. To kick off the campaign to solve homelessness, the governor is authorizing distribution of \$1 billion. Seaside is already ahead of Gov. Newsom's schedule!

- It established the first Homeless Commission on the Monterey Peninsula. The commission meets the last Thursday of every month at Seaside City Hall.
- It approved location of the Olympia Shelter on county-owned property at 1292 Olympia Ave., using HEAP funding, to provide overnight shelter to around 35 women and children. The project is a work in progress.
- It approved \$50,000 specifically for the cleanup of homeless camp sites on public property that is deemed dangerous and/or a health hazard. This is an active operation.

Unfortunately for private property owners on whose premises the homeless embed themselves, then urinate, defecate, bed down, shoot up and toss trash, no easy legal resolution yet exists, although it's understood that unresolved homeless issues can force landlords out of business and/or into despair—like that sense of unconfirmed hopelessness rumored to have driven Jaime Voltaire to join his late mother.

According to Facebook, he resolved his inner itch by swatting it. The blow was fatal.

Jaime was 45.

Vaya con dios!

###

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

Contact Wanda Sue Parrott, 831-899-5887, [amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com](mailto:amykitchenerfdn@hotmail.com)

Copyright 2020 by Wanda Sue Parrott