

**Homeless in Paradise**  
**January 31 - February 6, 2020**

**IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 15**



*Father Michael Reid*  
*Recipient of the first*  
*Earth Angel Award*  
*(photo by Bob Coble)*

**WHAT HAPPENS WHEN EARTH ANGELS' WINGS START TO DROOP?**

**By Wanda Sue Parrott**

**QUESTIONING** whether angels really exist isn't the issue of this column.

If you'd been at the Homeless Outreach meeting at the First Presbyterian Church of Monterey on Monday, you'd know they do!

Why?

Because waning interest in monthly meetings led Fr. Michael Reid, Kathy Whilden and Marian Penn, founders of the Friends of Homeless Women (outreach arm of the Fund for Homeless Women) to call for a special Homeless Outreach forum last Monday at the First Presbyterian Church of Monterey to explore why interest in homeless women's programs, especially volunteerism, is waning, and decide what to do next, if anything.

Since most attendees were volunteers, aka earth angels in my book, the question was:

**Why Are Their Wings Drooping?**

In non-poetic terms, turnout for and interest in the programs to help homeless women, founded with heartfelt enthusiasm and sincerity almost six years ago, has dwindled lately. Why? And what, if anything, can be

done to rekindle the fire of commitment that first inspired volunteers to want to help homeless women of the Monterey Peninsula?

Getting to the bottom of the mystery seemed to lie largely with volunteers from Gathering for Women who faithfully attended Friends' meetings for more than five years. Fact is, the conception for the Gathering for Women occurred at a Friends of Homeless Women meeting in St. Mary's by the Sea Episcopal Church in Pacific Grove and first materialized at San Carlos Cathedral with a small group of volunteers who served lunch to 18 guests.

Today, Gathering for Woman is a separate non-profit that's open Mon.-Fri. at 147 Eldorado St., Monterey. GFW has a paid staff of 8 and well-trained volunteers who collectively have served hundreds of women on the premises for two years.

Not only had attendance at the monthly Friends of Homeless Women meetings declined, so had participation in the monthly Homeless Outreach meetings at the First Presbyterian Church of Monterey. So, Fr. Michael Reid, Marian Penn, and Kathy Whilden sent out an SOS to find out why.

Did people turn out? Indeed, they did!

### **The Fish Bowl Circle Approach**

By 1 p.m. last Monday, every seat was filled and more chairs were set up for the "Fish Bowl Circle" chaired by Mary Eileen Kiniry, RN, a founder of the Gathering for Women, who said, "The idea of a professional volunteer corps had been my idea."

Mary Eileen said this form of discussion is based on the Native American "talking stick" approach. Ten chairs of the inner circle are filled by volunteers, each of whom has a 3-minute time slot in which to share ideas about the current conditions in the homeless women's community, how she feels as a volunteer, and what might be done regarding waning interest in volunteerism at the Gathering for Women specifically or all volunteerism in general.

Everyone listened until all ten speakers had finished. Then, those in the greater outer circle of between 35-40 women and two men made brief comments.

Next, a new group of ten filled the Fish Bowl circle and the process was repeated.

This approach reminds me of the traffic roundabout concept in which conversation instead of cars keep up a surprisingly smooth continuous flow. Several comments are excerpted here:

### **Out Of The Mouths Of Angel Fish**

*Women:*

Mary Eileen Kiniry: "I feel we have indigestion in our culture. Let's slow down, so we can digest it."

"I think I'm weighted down by what is happening in our nation."

"I don't want volunteers to become disheartened and depressed."

"I'm hoping we (GFW) can regain some of the momentum and commitment and enthusiasm we had."

"I felt a disconnect between the volunteers and the staff."

"When a group goes from grass roots to (legal) non-profit organization, it limits some of the things we used to do."

"The average age, it seems, for women wanting housing is 58."

"This housing situation sometimes seems hopeless. I know that our nation is better than this."

“The housing problem is hard, and full of rules, so I have returned to a grassroots form of volunteerism where ‘everything goes’ and it is full of joy. If there is just a constant downer, people (volunteers) quit.”

“Each woman has her own story. When they’re involved in creative activities, it opens them up.”

“We have to have that personal relationship so they (clients) feel like whole persons. I think that is a little bit of what we (GFW) have lost because we have had to follow the rules of the organization.”

“Sometimes we have to bend the rules (of the organization) to make them (clients) feel valued.”

“This (homelessness) is a poverty job. We have manufactured shortages. I will go and talk to politicians!”

Barbara Mitchell, Executive Director, Interim, Inc.: “Housing them is not hard. It is keeping them housed that is difficult. A lot of people we’ve deleted lose their housing because they have difficulty maintaining their lifestyles to keep their houses.”

“Yes, at government level there is a lack of compassion, but that isn’t me!!”

“Average time a volunteer is with an organization is three years.”

“There needs to be education that any one of us could be homeless.”

“I experience a lot of joy at Gathering for Women!”

*Men:*

Phil Butler: “Where are the guys, and what could they be doing? A guy like me is a threat to homeless women!”

Father Michael Reid: “My heart is joyful because I’m reflecting on how far we have all come. I’m leaving this room joyful and my heart is full. Because of your love, your hope and your joy, it (the fire of commitment) is still alive. And I feel it!”

### **What’s Coming Next?**

Father Michael Reid, Kathy Whilden, Marian Penn and Mary Eileen Kiniry will announce future programs that may include another Fish Bowl Forum and a Navigator University to bring in new volunteers.

If earning your earth angel wings appeals to you, mark your calendar for April 2 and watch for future news right here.

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This column appears in the weekly Cedar Street Times, hometown newspaper for Pacific Grove and the Monterey Peninsula, online at [www.cedarstreettimes.com](http://www.cedarstreettimes.com).

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