

Health advocate fights frostbite and frustration among homeless

By Teresa A. Parsons

Elizabeth Quinlan doesn't look like someone who would go around town picking up homeless people.

But rather than wait for the telephone to ring, the slight, pretty 24 year old does just that.

Quinlan's neat, antiseptic title is "health-care advocate for the homeless." But her work is actually as gritty and unpredictable as winter on the city streets, which threatens the homeless with frostbite, pneumonia and despair.

Quinlan seeks out the people everyone notices, but most ignore — the shabby, staggering, stubble-faced men who linger in places other people hurry through. Making her rounds, from downtown parks to Monroe Avenue parking lots, she approaches them to find out how they feel, if they're warm enough, whether they have a place to sleep and enough to eat.

She's not completely on her own. When the police find someone sleeping in the park, they may call Quinlan to find a place for the person to stay or to arrange a medical evaluation. When someone comes to a

homeless shelter disoriented, sick and loaded with lice, Quinlan knows where to find treatment and how to wade through the paperwork.

Many of her referrals come from hospitals, particularly St. Mary's, Genesee and Strong Memorial. Staff members at all three hospitals generally call her when they're ready to release someone who has nowhere to go, or when one of her "regulars" comes in.

Homeless men are not easy to help. They tend to be unwashed, unattractive and suspicious of even the most well-intentioned interest in their physical well-being. Many are mentally or emotionally handicapped, inconsistent and unreliable. Although they may appreciate help, they don't feel obliged to change their behavior for the person who offers it.

It can be dangerous work as well, especially for someone of Quinlan's size. "Most of the time, when I go out, I go alone ... I've found myself wishing I was a little more husky," she said, conceding that in her initial zeal she took foolish risks at times. "I realize I have to be a little more careful, but this is what I'm called to do. I don't feel

alone out there. I know I'm not alone."

Quinlan is drawn to serve the homeless because she has seen beneath the crusty armor of dirt and hostility they accumulate through years of hardship.

"It's a special population. Their lives are so broken. In their poverty and desperation and destitution there's the real presence of Christ," she said. "It's a real joy to have people who enrich your life in that way."

Though hers might stand out as a radical lifestyle in many church communities, Quinlan is very much at home as part of Corpus Christi Parish's broad neighborhood outreach. She began working for the food and shelter program in July, only a month after earning a graduate degree in community health from the University of Rochester.

Corpus Christi's food and shelter program was actually a major influence in Quinlan's career-choice. She and her family became parishioners at about the same time that Sister Marjory Henninger, associate at the parish, was organizing the program in response to publicity about the crisis in housing during the winter of 1982/83.

"I was always interested in working with the poor," Quinlan said, crediting the influence of her parents, her mother in particular. "She was a radical in the sense that she always made us aware that there are needs in the world ... not to be content with what we had ... that to do nothing is wrong," Quinlan said.

After graduating from Our Lady of Mercy High School, Quinlan earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Rochester. She also worked at Entry to Care, a alcoholic detoxification facility run by the Salvation Army, and spent a summer on a mobile health clinic team in the Southern Tier.

By volunteering at the shelter, Quinlan learned that the most urgent need homeless people have, next to food and shelter, is health care.

For her thesis, Quinlan interviewed homeless persons and staff in hospitals, shelters and soup kitchens. She tried to determine their problems and frustrations as well as the most critical health needs of the homeless.

She learned that homeless people are confounded by the complexity of obtaining care at hospitals and clinics, and are stoically tolerant of their aches and pains. As a result, they neglect their medical problems as long as possible. Frequently, by the time they are finally forced to seek help, they have a whole range of physical and mental problems. If they are already weak when winter comes, the cold weather can literally knock them off their feet.

Quinlan also learned that although hospital staff members generally want to help, they are frustrated by trying to treat homeless people. Over and over again, the same people come in with the same problems because they don't follow instructions.

"They (hospital staff) might perceive people as non-compliant, when it's really just that the treatment is impossible for the situation," Quinlan said. "I understand their frustration. Sometimes they just give up on people."

Leg problems are one example. Because they are constantly standing and walking, homeless people have poor circulation in their feet and legs. In extreme cases, the skin begins to break down, and painful ulcers develop. If left untreated, a person could eventually lose the affected limb.



Elizabeth Quinlan

The treatment for this condition is relatively simple — soak the legs and elevate them. But it's nearly impossible for someone who's homeless to follow those instructions.

The same difficulties occur with prescribed medication. "Time is funny on the street — you lose all sense of it," Quinlan explained. "Then you might not be able to find any water to take your pills when you're supposed to."

Such observations determined one of her immediate goals — to provide on-site medical care at homeless shelters. She hopes by January to have assembled a volunteer medical team that will treat people in two shelters every week.

Another desperate need she has cited is a place where homeless people can recuperate from illnesses or surgery without being forced out on the street. "I see so many people who get out of the hospital and have no place to go," Quinlan said. "It's almost impossible to recover if you're walking around all day."

The toughest part of Quinlan's job is limiting herself to what is humanly possible. "It's hard to let go," she explained. "If they walk out of the place they're staying, you want to keep following them, to pursue them and take care of them. When they don't stay, you blame yourself for not keeping them there."

But after five months, she's also realized that she can't control all the influences that might cause them to leave. To make the best use of her expertise, she has to try to limit herself to health concerns.

"If they aren't ready to try, until they are ready for it, you can't do anything," she said.

She's also learned to recognize and appreciate what she calls "the small victories."

One such victory was gaining the trust of a 50-year-old man who has no friends or family.

Needing surgery and suffering from tuberculosis, he was taken to one hospital and then, unknown to Quinlan, transferred to another. When she finally tracked him down, he was lying in bed — all pale and weak-looking.

"I knew you'd find me," he said.

Parish finds friendlier site for proposed homeless shelter



This house at 100-102 North Union Street in Rochester was purchased last week by Corpus Christi Parish. Parishioners plan to open it as a year-round shelter for homeless men by next spring and eventually host a health care outreach to homeless people and other neighborhood residents there.

Corpus Christi Parish's neighborhood outreach programs have found a home at last.

With the blessings of their new neighbors, church representatives closed Tuesday, December 10, on the purchase of a house at 100-102 North Union Street. By next spring they hope to open a transitional shelter that would serve as many as six or seven homeless men. Eventually, organizers hope to locate the parish's food distribution and nightly supper programs as well as Elizabeth Quinlan's medical outreach there.

Last August, Corpus Christi parishioners attempted to purchase two houses and several vacant lots north of East Main Street at 283-285 Lyndhurst Street. They were opposed by Marketview Heights residents, including State Assemblyman David Gantt and County Legislator Ron Thomas, who

objected to the proposed uses of the property and to the church's lack of consultation with neighbors.

The sale of the Lyndhurst Street property was also held up by conflicting requirements by the city's planning commission and real estate division.

Rather than becoming embroiled in a legal and political battle, organizers of Corpus Christi's programs sought to find another site.

This time, parishioners consulted with the owners of surrounding properties earlier in the process and have been rewarded so far by positive responses.

Corpus Christi Parish has sheltered six men in the church basement for the past three winters and since 1980 has served an evening meal to as many as 14 people daily.

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Contestable ("Ms. Phyl") is currently appearing weekends with Alan Jones in the Cabaret Lounge in the "Just Around the Corner" restaurant. She has performed in the past with such celebrities as Rich Little and Bill Cosby.

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