

# Homeless minister sustained by a vision

By Teresa A. Parsons  
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — Christmas will find the Rev. Elijah Stevens at St. Bridget's Overnight Shelter.

Like the small family that first celebrated Jesus' birth, Stevens is homeless. But don't waste time feeling sorry for him; he'd rather you helped with his mission. Alone in a strange city, he has found friends and a vision to guide him through what could have been a time of despair.

"This year, I will be sharing my Christmas with people who have no family," Stevens said. "But we will be a family because all homeless people are a family."

A non-denominational minister who just a year ago was helping run a Greenwich Village outreach program for street people, Stevens, 35, found himself on the cold streets of Rochester after a failed attempt to reconcile with family members.

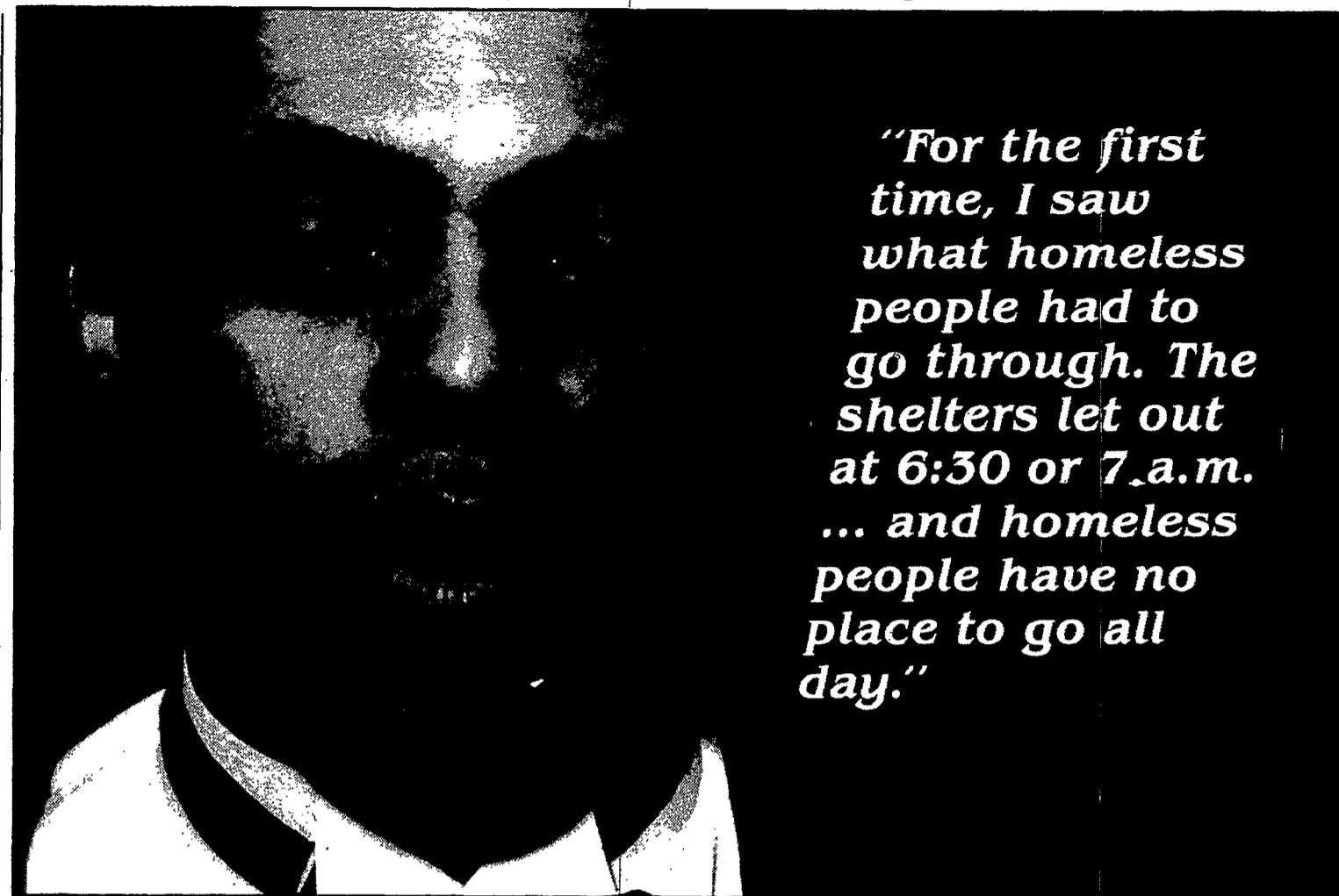
His first day on the street was a revelation, recasting his life's direction. "For the first time, I saw what homeless people had to go through. The shelters let out at 6:30 or 7 a.m. ... and homeless people have no place to go all day," he explained. "By the second day, I couldn't believe it. I determined I wasn't going to sit by and do nothing about it, so I started driving around in my old van looking at buildings for sale or rent.

"I believed I could find a building, find a landlord, say God has sent me, and without a penny in my pocket, I believed I could get this place," he added. "I never doubted it."

Thanksgiving was the worst. With the downtown fast-food restaurants and malls closed for the holiday, Stevens tried to escape the cold in a bus shelter, then — along with several other refugees — huddled from the weather in his van.

"What an eye-opener!" he recalled. "We were freezing cold and had no place to go. I don't think I ever felt so strongly that there was something I had to accomplish."

Finally, at noon, the group headed for Louise Washington's Post Avenue house,



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Babette G. Augustin-Staff photographer

where they hoped to find shelter and a Thanksgiving meal. For Stevens, the encounter with Washington produced much more.

"I introduced myself to her by asking, 'Are you a praying woman?'" he said. "She said 'Yes,' and so I said 'Well here's something to pray over.'"

Washington said she began opening her home to the homeless in 1981. Last summer, she began serving a Sunday meal to 25 people in need. The numbers quickly grew to 50, then more than 100. Help came from members of her church, but Washington said she and her husband have footed most of the cost themselves.

Having run out of room in her home and yard, Washington and the Rev. Samuel Gray located a Genesee Street building to which they planned to move the Sunday meal. Moved by Stevens' plea, they decided to open the building to homeless people two days a week from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., beginning Dec. 19.

With enough funding and support, they hope before long to expand operations to seven days a week.

"It's not just a center for people to hang out, but our objective is to work ourselves out of a job," Stevens said, explaining that he hopes eventually to provide education, counseling, clothing and help with social services at the Genesee Street site.

If the center succeeds, Stevens will have accomplished in one month what other local advocates for homeless people have sought for years — daytime shelter.

Having met and lived among people who walk 10 or 15 miles a day or even try to get

arrested to keep warm in the winter months, Stevens had felt the urgent need for shelter. "The circumstances that have caused me to live, eat and sleep with the homeless ... gave me the drive and determination to identify with their suffering," he said. "If you've been a leader and you see a way out, you're going to lead."

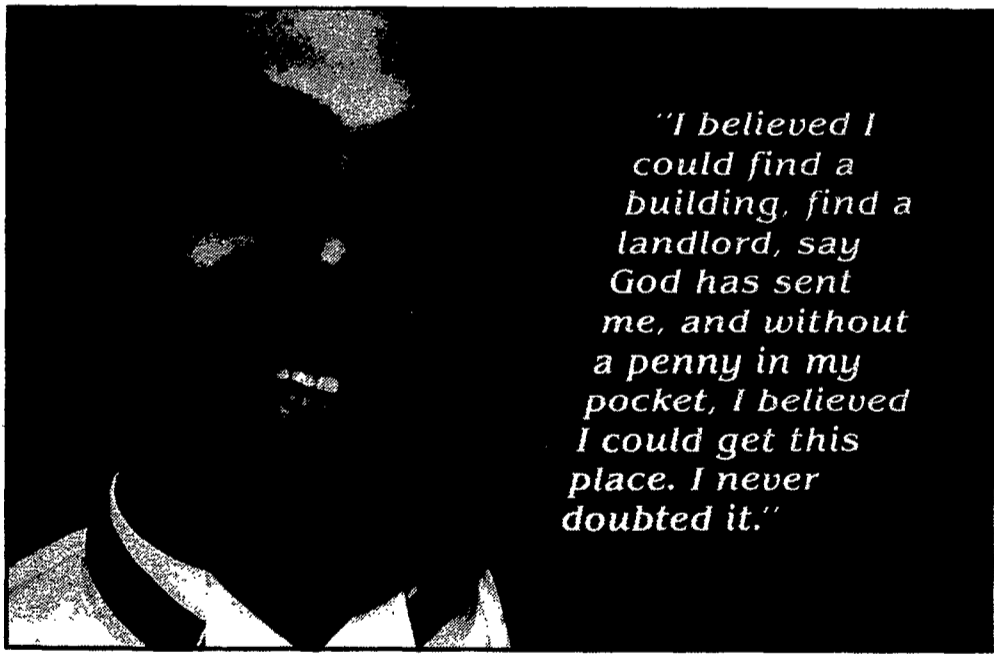
Born in Harlem, Stevens was the second of five children raised to be leaders by a "beautiful Christian mother." Shortly after the family moved to Wilkes Barre, Pa., Stevens' father died.

In the meantime, doctors had discovered Stevens had cancer, which he fought for 10 years and finally defeated at age 16.

Although he spent at least a few grim holidays in hospitals, Stevens' most vivid Christmas memories are of the year he got a drum set, and of trying to figure out "who exactly was Santa Claus and was he kissing my mother."

After attending a three-year Bible col-

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Stop by for free cookies and egg nog all day long.  
PIZZA PARTY at 9:00 p.m.

In keeping true with our normal Sunday hours, we will not be open Christmas Eve Sunday.

From everyone at Logos, warmest holiday blessings.