

Feature

Volunteers envision long-term solutions

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As about two dozen men lined up for dinner at St. Bridget's Parish shelter the night of Dec. 18, volunteer Albert Bounds talked about how reluctant he was to seek help over a year ago.

"I had 20,000 other things in my face," he said, recalling how his substance-abusing friends almost dissuaded him from going to the shelter when he found himself out of a job and his apartment last fall. "Come on, you can drink some wine," he remembered other people on the street telling him. "Come on, you can do some drugs."

"My pride was hurt," Bounds said, detailing how he lost a maintenance job at a nursing home due to his excessive drinking. Given his low self esteem at the time, he was in no mood to ask for help from someone else. But he managed to take that first step to St. Bridget's.

"I came over here with the strength of God, I think, because I didn't want to come," Bounds said. After staying at the shelter for two months, Bounds was back on his feet, holding a part-time job and living in his own apartment. He had been helped through the shelter's public assistance referral program, in which social workers discuss with shelter guests how to obtain aid for their situations.

"I believe that we should be putting ourselves out of business," said Linda C. Rosier, St. Bridget's community outreach worker. The energetic and outgoing shelter director pointed to the experiences of Bounds and other former shelter residents no longer on the streets as sprouts of hope in the often bleak landscape of homelessness.

Rosier doesn't allow any of the shelter's guests to simply take up space. With the assistance of volunteers and social workers, she attempts to get her guests into programs for help. Assistance ranges from literacy and drug and/or alcohol rehabilitation programs to employment training courses.

Rosier estimated that 30 percent of the guests she has assisted since coming to the shelter six years ago have found permanent housing. One of the guests she helped was Bounds, who wanted to show his appreciation by volunteering at the shelter this year.

"I'd like to give something back to St. Bridget's because of what they've given to me," he said.

Bounds' gratefulness is shared by Alonzo Dukes Jones, who spent a month at St. Bridget's last winter. He pulled himself together when he hit bottom with a cocaine addiction. After losing his bartending job and his apartment due to circumstances related to his addiction, Jones heard of St. Bridget's through a friend. He decided to stay there while he looked for a treatment program.

"This place here ... gave me the structure I needed, the potential, really, to go in and get myself help," he said, noting that Rosier informed him on the availability of treatment programs.

Jones has stayed away from drugs since graduating from a program at the John L. Norris Alcoholism Treatment Center on South Avenue last fall. He currently volunteers at the shelter seven nights a week to help others find their way through times of homelessness, unemployment and poverty.

The success stories of Jones and Bounds point to a potentially bright future for the area's homeless. Such successes are overshadowed, however, by an unstable economy that is changing the face of Monroe County's homeless.

Rosier pointed out that more people are homeless or on the verge of homelessness than ever before because of recent layoffs at several large companies in the Rochester area.

For example, she said, more single parents are turning to St. Bridget's for food and clothing than ever before. Such assistance keeps people off the streets and in their apartments, but many such families live paycheck to paycheck because the breadwinner lacks the technical skills necessary to hold down a good-paying job. More than likely, he or she holds a job that merely covers the rent and utility bills.

The key to better employment opportunities is to gain better skills, Rosier noted. "I believe education is the thing that is going to turn homelessness around," she said.

In the next decade, the public needs to be educated about the causes of homelessness so the problem can be resolved, said Lillian Piersante, director of Corpus Christi's Dimitri House.

Piersante admitted to being discouraged



Collage by Babette G. Augustin

by what she views as the federal government's excessive military spending, which she said takes money away from the nation's poor. Nonetheless, she added that the average person seems to care more about the homeless than ever before.

"The hope that I feel is that more and more people feel more sensitive to the poor issue," she said, noting that her more than 250 volunteers often exhibit an interest above and beyond merely sheltering the homeless. "They're coming out and trying to figure out what they can do."

Piersante wants to move the homeless issue out of the shelters and into the legislative and civic arenas. For too long, she said, churches have applied Band-Aids to the wounds of homelessness instead of finding out what inflicted the injuries in the first place.

"I see myself in getting the staff and community people out as advocates," she said. "I think we've been quiet too long."

Piersante would also like to make known her contention that many homeless and impoverished people are kept down by the welfare system. For example, she said, various government programs provide just enough income to keep people living day-to-day but not enough to enable them to break the cycle of poverty.

She also stressed that mental illness afflicts many of her clients who are unable to maintain a decent home. "I bet that five or six (out of every seven guests) are really in need of some type of psychiatric help," she said, noting that it is difficult to get mentally ill people in a treatment program unless they have exhibited violent

behavior. Such people are in the minority, she said, and receive treatment usually after being arrested.

Despite her frustration with the problem of homelessness, Piersante sees positive signs in the growing popularity of drug and alcohol treatment programs for people who suffer such addictions. She noted that many clients of Dimitri House have successfully completed a transitional program whereby they live in community with each other as part of their recovery from addiction.

Richard S. Sadowski, director of Blessed Sacrament's Parish shelter, shared Rosier's and Piersante's sentiments about the blessings of long-term programs for the homeless and poor, but was concerned about how recent state and federal budget cuts would affect social welfare programs.

"We're making strides in certain areas — (but) how long will they continue?" Sadowski wondered. To illustrate his point, he stated that currently, social workers are available at Blessed Sacrament four nights a week. In the wake of recent budget cuts, however, they might have to cut their visits down to two nights per week. Such a move means it is less likely a homeless person or dinner guest will have access to information he or she needs to break out of poverty.

Interestingly, Sadowski pointed out that the three parish shelters may have become victims of their own successes. Each shelter has reported an increase in the number of people eating nightly dinners or staying overnight, a phenomenon that may have resulted from the word getting out on

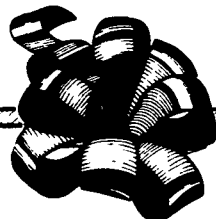
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