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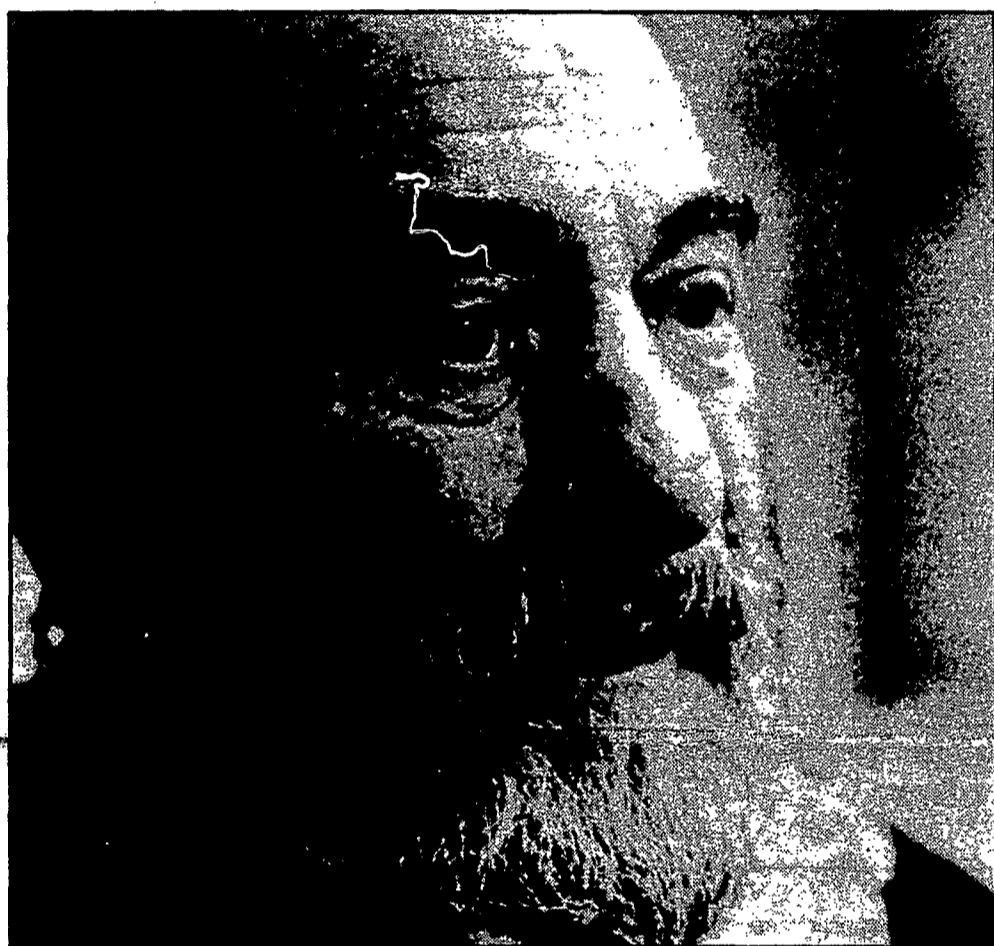
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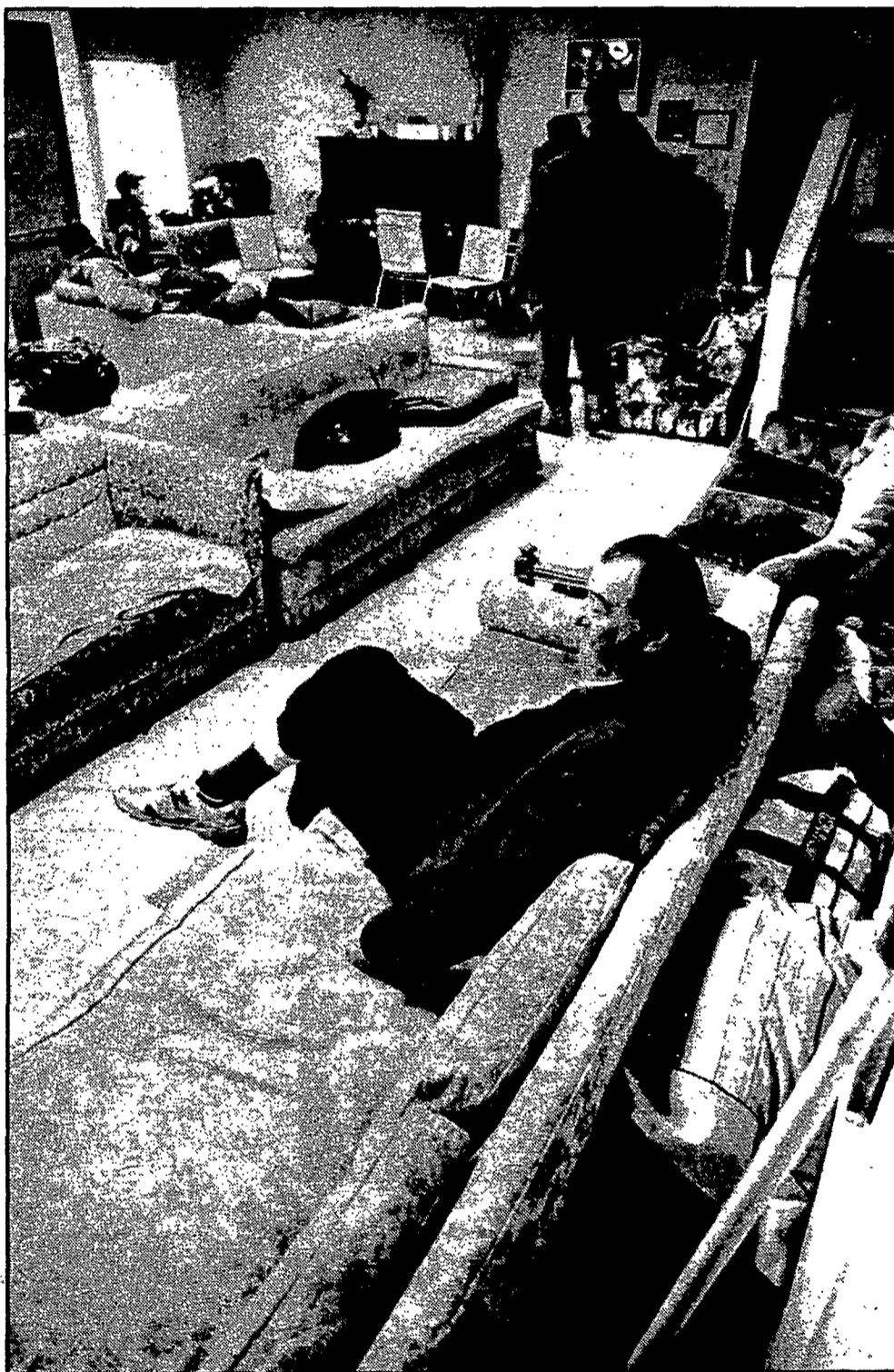
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ROCHESTER'S HOMELESS



Herman DiSpirito, 69, (above and far right) rests amid the maze of sofas at the House of Mercy, Rochester. Ernest Morgan (right) says he has stayed at the house for about a month.



Shelters confront growing population

One evening in mid-January, Alec Sutherland decided to try an experiment.

Pretending to be a homeless man who had just arrived in Rochester, he called Life Line. He claimed to have no money and no form of identification.

Life Line supplied him with the names and phone numbers of five homeless shelters.

Two of the places told Sutherland they had no room. The other three, he said, would not accept him because he had no identification.

"I had to have identification with all of them," he added.

Finally, he spoke with a worker at a Catholic social service agency — he asked that the agency not be named, to protect the worker.

"In a very hushed tone," Sutherland reported, "he said, 'Go down to the House of Mercy.' I asked him where that was, and he said, 'I can't tell you that.'"

The reason for the hushed tone — indeed, the reason that Sutherland, a Rochester resident, felt moved to try his experiment — was that the House of Mercy was in the midst of a dispute with City of Rochester officials over housing the homeless — a dispute that has drawn public attention to homelessness in Monroe County in general to an extent that has not been seen since the late 1980s.

The House of Mercy, owned by the Sisters of Mercy and operated by Sister Grace Miller, had been illegally housing homeless people — generally 25 to 30, but sometimes as many as 60 a night.

House of Mercy defenders claimed that many of the people coming there had tried other facilities, and could not find shelter. In addition, many homeless people had been referred to the House of Mercy by other agencies, and had even been brought there by city police.

But city officials claimed the Rochester community had enough beds to house the homeless,

and that the House of Mercy was not only housing them illegally, but that conditions there were dangerous. In fact, city housing authorities staged a surprise inspection of the facility Dec. 9, and found a number of health and safety violations.

A Jan. 24 deadline was set for the House of Mercy to stop housing homeless people.

On Jan. 22, however, Rochester Mayor William Johnson, Sister Ann Miller, president of the Rochester Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and the house's director, Sister Grace Miller — who is not related to Sister Ann Miller — signed an agreement that would allow the House of Mercy to shelter a limited number of homeless people. As part of the agreement, the house was to be brought up to code.

Sutherland had undertaken his experiment before the agreement was reached, and at a time when it looked as if the House of Mercy would no

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Story by Lee Strong • Photographs by Matthew Scott