

GUEST CONTRIBUTORS

A VILLAGE OF HOPE

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A remarkable experiment is evolving in an unlikely location: a converted junkyard on the margins of Fresno, California. A group of homeless people there have come together at their own initiative to build a mutually supportive, self-governing community and, in the process, try to reclaim control of their lives.

The village consists of 45+ individuals living in 26 neatly arranged tents, with basic toilet facilities, on a fenced-in ex-junkyard owned by Poverello House, a local organization which serves meals to homeless people. In one sense, it is simply a band-aid replacement to a problematic shantytown that emerged last winter across the street. The shantytown began innocently enough but, by December, was plagued by violence, drugs, prostitution, open fires and filth.

The police and Poverello House decided to tear down the shantytown and to simultaneously create an alternative facility for those willing to obey the law. To stay in the new tent city, you would have to observe a few simple rules: No alcohol, drugs, crime, violence or abusiveness while on the grounds. It was conceived as a temporary fix to a terrible problem.

Now comes the remarkable part. At the same time the police and Poverello House were planning their emergency facility, an eclectic group of homeless people had, coincidentally, called their own meeting. They, too, were fed up with the filth and crime of the shantytown. But they also had more profound issues in mind.

Their biggest problem, it was agreed, wasn't so much homelessness as hopelessness. As one group member put it: "Crack cocaine, heroin and alcohol aren't the worst drugs on the street. The worst drug on the street is a pervasive sense of hopelessness that just doesn't go away." The group set a goal: to create a mutually supportive community within Fresno's homeless population.

It soon became clear that the planned tent city offered a timely opportunity to pursue their vision. A plan was developed that would establish the new residence as a self-reliant, self-governing community. Three initial rules of conduct were established: Take care of yourself. Take care of each other. Take care of the place. To distance themselves from the "tent city" stereotype, residents decided to call their home "The Michael McGarvin, Jr. Village

of Hope" in honor of the late son of the founder of Poverello House.

Everyone in the VOH is expected to do a job. There is a security force and clean-up crews and a rotating governing board. Everyone who can is expected to attend weekly community meetings.

The group understands it is part of a larger community. Activities like neighborhood cleanups have been organized. In an elegant gesture, members recently contributed some of the money they'd earned recycling cans and bottles to a local charity.

All is hardly perfect. Most of the difficult problems aren't unlike those in any close-knit group: How do you balance the needs of individuals with those of the collective? How is everyone encouraged to carry their fair share of the load? Who do you decide to bring into the community? What are the grounds for expulsion? These decisions have special meaning for people living such precarious existences.

The community is struggling to define what it wants to be. Through surveys, we know that residents are a heterogeneous group. At one extreme are people "down on their luck"-- perhaps having being laid off from a job, developed a costly medical condition, missed a child support payment, or an apartment payment. At the other extreme are "lifers" (e.g. the chronically mentally ill, serious substance abusers) who are unlikely to ever get off the streets for more than sporadic periods. Between these extremes are those who just might, with the right external support and services, be able to rise above their present condition.

Questions abound: Given limited space and resources, should residents be required to demonstrate progress toward finding jobs and/or stable housing? Should there be absolute limits--say 90 days or one year--on stays? And, if so, what will happen to the lifers? In a new experiment, residents will be required to come up with an individual development plan for the next six months. The effects of this requirement will be closely monitored. With winter coming, Poverello House is currently replacing the tents with more durable and weather-resistant structures. Even this, however, raises questions: Will more comfortable quarters discourage residents from moving forward?

Regardless of what the future holds, good things are happening now. In the first nine months, 27 residents have moved on to more permanent housing. There have been A/A meetings, support groups, self-esteem classes, and bible studies for those so inclined. At the very least, residents now have 40+ peers who know their name; and a forum where they can be heard. This is no small matter in a street culture so often engulfed in isolation, self-preservation and mistrust.

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**GLOBAL HOUSING FOUNDATION
Annual Board and Members Luncheon**

GHF held its Annual Board and Members Luncheon on 29 October 2004 at the UN Delegates Dining Room. Seventy invitees from the UN and affiliated organizations participated in an exchange of information on progress in the provision of affordable and decent housing as a major element in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda.

Particular emphasis was given to the prototypical housing underway in Nicaragua by Lic. Raul Vega B. Director, Nicaragua Urban Renewal Department (INVUR) and H.E. Sr. Sevilla Somoza of Nicaragua expressed his thanks to GHF (at the microphone in the adjacent photo). The role of the private sector real estate industry in these efforts was addressed by Mr. Rene Frank, Chair, GHF, (center) and Mr. Tim Wilkens of American Homes, Napa, California (right) presented prospects for engaging the home-building industries in a worldwide Builders Global Housing Fund to support the work of the Global Housing Foundation.



GHF Board and Members Luncheon at the U.N., October 29, 2004.



With the UN building in the background, a monthly meeting of several members of the Human Settlements Committee.

-End-

Correct answers to "Urban Quiz".
False - 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12
True - 2, 4, 8, 10, 11