by Julia Occhiograsso

It was 1989. We were out by the railroad tracks near D and Wilson Streets serving our morning soup line. At the time there was an encampment of street people about 100 yards from where we served, just behind the old Salvation Army location. This encampment had just been moved from a nearby vacant lot. Similar to their former set up, the homeless had placed mattresses and their meager belongings down on the land like an outdoor dormitory, laid out in neat rows with beds made and belongings stowed neatly nearby.

As we had witnessed at their former location, the individuals worked together to keep their little spot clean and tidy.

One morning we arrived at the serving line and noticed a caravan of bulldozers and government vehicles. Their mission was evident. Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale, myself, and a couple of volunteers had little time to strategize a plan. The bulldozers were beginning to move. We were compelled to do something. We sat on the ground in...
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We were arrested that morning. The encampment was destroyed. We spent a couple of days in the city jail. Newspaper articles were written.

Now, close to twenty-five years later the approach is still the same. We see it all the time. Clean-up vehicles come in backed by police. They dump shopping carts and confiscate meager belongings.

Recently we were told by security at the A Street Casual Labor office that the authorities came to them and warned them to not permit us to give out bag lunches from their parking lot. More and more we are seeing what we call the ugly landscape strategies. Chain link fencing with barbed wire along the back walls of freeway on-ramps. Ragged large rocks cemented in place, in locations where street people typically might rest or have a place to lay their head. Parks in our areas have been closed or designated as Children’s Parks as a strategy to forbid street people from finding a place in the shade.

We are approaching the chronic, inter-generational issues of poverty and homelessness in the same way. We are pathologically convinced that punitive policies will somehow persuade street people to depart, to leave, to disappear. The “problem” will be resolved.

The most frequent complaint I have heard from service providers regarding street people, is that they are unwilling to access the help that is available, which often translates into the assumption that people want to be homeless, that they are indeed happy on the street.

There is enough data regarding the underlying causes of homelessness. People need housing. People need health and social services. People struggle with addictions and emotional and physical disabilities.

The Catholic Worker believes in the practice of hospitality. In a small way we share space in our Hospitality Houses with people who were formerly homeless. It was never intended to cure homelessness, but rather serve as a model for what could be possible.

While we have had many positive experiences with this practice, we have also been given some clear insight into the deeper underlying issues that contribute to chronic homelessness.

Opening our hearts, minds and homes to folks who struggle with the norms of the culture is a challenging and risky task. Often our best efforts are met with seeming failure. We have repeatedly witnessed people making choices that derail or sabotage their possibilities for a more stable existence. I have often pondered this question and while never feeling quite satisfied with answers, it is clear that people who make these choices still deserve our mercy and compassion. While we may need to set limits on the services we can provide, our hearts should be even more softened toward their suffering. How sad for them that they are stuck in a cycle of self-destruction.

Carrying forth with empathy, we will develop models that take into consideration the sacredness of each person. We will want to uphold the worth and dignity of the chronically homeless, perhaps until they develop a sense of it for themselves.

The Housing First model has commenced in different cities and seems to do just this. These programs place the priority on providing permanent housing for clients without any prerequisites. They do not have to be completely reformed to earn a spot in permanent housing. Once a person is set up in housing, services are provided to address the struggles that perpetuated their years of being on the street.

Ironically, this model is played up as an economic win for cities. It ends up being cost-effective and compassionate to provide permanent housing. It is less expensive than the costs incurred by jail, hospitals, and emergency services for the shelterless. More importantly, it demonstrates what is possible with a willingness to risk trying new approaches to healing social sufferings.

While there are challenges in responding effectively to the issues of the chronically homeless, I am convinced with deeper understanding and open hearts we can do much better than continual street sweeps and strategies that push the marginalized further out of sight and mind. Instead of placing undue burdens on individuals already carrying heavy hardships we could be incorporating in our redevelopment plans viable options for permanent housing. Then, instead of clearing the personal belongings of the homeless, we will clear a new space where the outcast can feel like they belong.

### Empty Bowl Event:

The March 21, 2015 Empty Bowl Benefit raised $25,670 for our minis-try feeding the poor and homeless. Thanks to all who participated.