

# MANN A *in the wilderness*

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## NO PLACE TO REST FOR THE BURDENED



by Julia Occhiogrosso

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.



**Above:** James Gay III Park at Owens and B Street has been closed since July 13, 2013 following two stabbings. The large park is 3-blocks from the Catholic Worker, offers many shade trees, and was a site where we brought cold water during the hot afternoons and we met other small groups giving out cold water there during the hot summer months.

**Left:** On A Street, Las Vegas Rapid Response Teams have placed large rocks on the side of the road to prevent loitering in the shade, note homeless on sidewalk in full sun on the other side of the road. It is now impossible to walk on the East side of A Street and the West sidewalk also ends further North.

**Below:** Signs posted outside the locked park gates, on A Street and in multiple locations.



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 *(continued on back, first column)*

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front of the bulldozers in an attempt to interrupt their plan to clear the homeless encampment.

Heaped beside me was a pile of belongings. Torn clothes, mismatched shoes, a trashed blanket, a stuffed animal, a tattered Bible. I pulled the Bible from the rubble. Turning to Matthew 25:44, we raised our voices above the clamor of the crowd and read, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, when did we see you homeless, a stranger, thirsty, sick or imprisoned?"

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

*"Today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. . . I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor!"*

– Pope Francis, Nov. 26, 2013

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.

### **SOUP LINE CLOSED:**

**July 29 to August 8, 2015**

**Saturday, Sept. 19, 2015**

**Nov. 26, 27 and 28, 2015**

**Thirtieth Annual Christmas  
Breakfast for the Homeless:**

**Friday, Dec. 25, 2015**

**(Hosted by Knights of  
Columbus members)**

### **WE NEED VOLUNTEERS**

**July 9 and Sept. 3 for Christ the  
King Hot Dog Party at Soup Line**

### **PLEASE JOIN US:**

**Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:**  
Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

**Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:**  
Breakfast served to 150-200 poor & homeless people.

**Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.:**  
Hospitality Day, we invite 20 homeless men home for showers, to wash clothes and for a great lunch.

**Thursday, 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.:**  
Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Courthouse, 333 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

**Thursday, 10:30 a.m.:**  
50 lunches taken to the homeless.

**Third Saturday of the month:**  
Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

### **Empty Bowl Event:**

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