

When the homeless guy is your hard-working pal

By Lisa Suhay
Ventura County Star

Thursday, December 20, 2007

In seasons past, when I gave to charities, something that's hard to afford this year, I pictured the people waiting outside my local market asking for food and the homeless sleeping hunched in building nooks, not people like me with kids, a job and an education.

My world rocked recently when I learned someone I know was about to be standing on the street. The friend didn't call for money, just my time to help the family make phone calls to agencies and Realtors. The person has children, a degree and a long-term good job. Like many of us, this single-income family went paycheck to paycheck, just a couple of medical emergencies and an inflated car payment from the curb and didn't know it until it was too late.

A lawyer advised the family to file bankruptcy but didn't warn them this would mean their landlord filing for immediate possession of their house.

Bankruptcy and eviction mean that nobody will rent to you unless you pay nearly triple the security deposit, plus the first month's rent, which nobody in that position can even dream of managing. Their families are not in a position to help, and the church can only do so much. Charities and our food banks are seeing fewer donations.

I am sick over seeing this happen to a decent, hard-working person who has always struggled to make a better life.

Every agency I called dismissed the problem by offering a list of shelters.

You do not put people with jobs and hope into shelters as a first option.

If you want to break people who are in crisis, just tell them that is Plan A. Then tell them this is all their own fault. That's what people told me to tell my friend.

I don't think now is the time for that and frankly it's not going to stoke their spiritual fires to tie that knot at the end of their rope and hang on. The reality is that society is not equipped to help this new, invisible, fragile Pendulum Class that swings back and forth between solvent and destitute so easily.

If we cannot help a person with an education who is working hard to survive, we are going to become Atlantis as citizens drown in debt and poverty.

All we have to offer is a shelter until spring. Housing authorities uttered identical responses: "Our application period is closed. I can't tell you when we'll be taking more apps. Just tell the person to keep reading the papers and in the spring we'll put out a notice."

In Norfolk this year, the Redevelopment and Housing Authority took in more than 5,000 applications for rental and housing assistance, and of them, more than 2,000 are still in need. My friend applied and qualified for Section 8 rental and housing assistance last March and was told the agency would call if anything became available. No one ever called, and now the family must reapply and wait, possibly in a shelter, just to get back on the list to not be called.

This isn't about one person but a community and how we look upon those we seek to help through charitable giving and year-round programmed assistance.

It is also about attitude. I wasn't even the person in crisis, and by the end of the week I was depressed, demoralized and gun shy about picking up the phone to call the clearly overworked people who man the agencies' phones.

The conclusion I have come to is that it's up to us to do what we can for individuals who cross our paths. There are many ways to give.

If you are there at an agency to help, then give just a few respectful, kind, encouraging words. At least those words can leave people with their dignity so that tomorrow, when they move into a shelter after a lifetime of hard work, they have something left to fall back on.

— Lisa Suhay lives in Norfolk, Va., and is the author of eight children's books. She wrote this for The Virginian-Pilot.