



Homelessness 'is hard living'

With her cardboard sign soliciting help, Gayle Grant is among women at Noel House 'trying to make ends meet'

SEATTLE

BY LINDA THOMAS

Couples, many with half-full wine glasses, stepped out of a Hummer limousine at a nightclub in Belltown – one of Seattle's trendiest neighborhoods. They stood in line for a few moments one Saturday night. Then a door opened. Music and laughter blasted out of the building, echoing in the cold night's air.

Around the corner on the same block, another door opened. Women with backpacks, blankets, and garbage bags walked inside. The atmosphere was subdued.

Unlike those at nearby parties in Belltown, the homeless women at Noel House on Second Avenue were more interested in survival than celebration.



Gayle Grant, 44, has been living on Seattle's streets for five months. Even though she sees "the worst of everything" on the streets, her faith keeps her going.

Photo: Linda Thomas

"I'm cold. All I need in the world is a cup of hot coffee," one

woman said as she held the mug with both hands.

Noel House Programs, supported by the Archdiocesan Housing Authority, run the largest women-only homeless shelters in the state. Five shelters in the Seattle area serve 180 women each night. Along with the basic survival needs – hot meals, shower facilities, and a safe place to sleep – the shelters provide mental health and chemical dependency counseling.

The main Noel House shelter in Belltown has room for 40 women. Gayle Grant has called a bed in the shelter “home” since July of this year. The rest of her family lives in Oregon. She has three brothers and two children who she said “want nothing” to do with her.

Grant, 44, is a positive, pleasant person. She has only a few possessions – a couple of books, a change of clothing, and a Mickey Mouse blanket. She doesn’t think she could hold down a job because she has diabetes and medical disabilities. Even so, she does try to earn a few dollars each day by panhandling.

Sometimes you’ll find her at Fourth and Union downtown. She holds a cardboard sign that reads: Trying to make ends meet. Will you please help with what you can? That’s not asking for too much is it?

“A little bit of sarcasm with that,” Grant admits with a smile. “That’s part of my personality too. It’s me and it’s the truth.”

She’s witnessed a slice of humanity as she stood on the corner asking for help.

Occasionally people give her a few dollars or food. Once a tourist from Japan asked if he could stand by her while a friend took a picture. Sometimes people spit on her or throw trash in her direction.

“You see the worst of everything,” she said. “It’s hard living.”

Thousands of people have a story that’s similar to Grant’s.

Each year volunteers count the homeless population in Seattle and surrounding suburbs in King County. In 2006 they counted 7,900 people. Of those, almost 2,000 were living on the streets. 2,500 were in emergency shelters, and about 3,500 were in transitional housing programs.

Bill Hallerman, director of special ministries for the Archdiocesan Housing Authority, participates in the homeless count every year. He surveys areas south of St. James Cathedral, under the ramps to I-5, and on the grassy area below Harborview Medical Center.

“I keep hoping I’ll find fewer people each year,” Hallerman said. “I know we are successfully moving people from homeless shelters into permanent housing with our many programs.” For every person who moves into a transitional housing program, it seems there is someone new to take his or her place.

“The number hasn’t gone down over the years. It just slowly goes up and up and up,” he added.

Hallerman said society has become too accustomed to seeing homeless people.

Homelessness has been an issue for about 30 years in America, while other countries do not have large numbers of people living on the streets, he said.

“Even the poorest of the poor in other countries at least have a tin roof over their heads and dignity,” said Hallerman, who lived in Venezuela and helped poor people in the slums for many years.

Homelessness is not an easy problem to solve.

A majority of street homeless people are coping with mental health issues, alcohol or drug addictions, physical abuse, or chronic disabilities. The high cost of housing in King County is another challenge for those trying to end homelessness.

“When it’s for an opera house or a stadium or a viaduct the community comes together and says we want this. We need a

similar commitment by all levels of government and private business and citizens to end homelessness,” he explained. “We can do this.”

Hallerman’s vision is for a city where everyone has a home. That’s what Gayle Grant wants too.

The place she dreams of is a manufactured home like the one she’s seen in The Little Nickel’s classified ads.

“Maybe I’ll have a house next Christmas,” she said. “Until then I have the good Lord and I have hope. Don’t feel any pity for me.”

Homelessness by the numbers*

20,222

Number of people in Washington reported homeless

14,998

Homeless people who were in emergency shelters

5,224

Number of homeless people who were living outside or other places not meant for human habitation

3,147

Families with children who were counted among the state’s homeless

16

Percentage of homeless people considered “chronically homeless”

The state of Washington began implementing a 10-year plan to eliminate homelessness by 2015. The minimum goal of the plan is reduction of the homeless population statewide and in each county by 50 percent by July 1, 2015.

*Statistics from January 2006 provided by the Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development.

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