

Helping Hands

by Jessica Bernhard

When you get there, you feel like you must be the only ones - the only group to ever venture out on a cold winter night with soup sloshing in the back of a van, clothes piled up higher than the rear window. But you're not the first; plenty have come before you. That is how they know what city streets to expect you on. That is why they stay up until the early hours of the morning in hopes of finding your paper bags and the whisper of "midnight run." Sometimes you venture out of the van in uncertainty. Will the danger of the city streets bring in the darkness or the success of your trip? One thing is always sure. They will be there. Sometimes they are waiting for you, their eyes and stomachs starving with hunger, their bodies longing for heat. Other times, they approach you slowly, or not at all. The only sign of their presence, a soft cardboard shelter-box.

The cities' homeless are the recipients of these late night excursions. They are the same people we, at other times, take for granted. The people lying on the side of the road, or loitering for change. We try to ignore the bearded man who lives in a cardboard box, or the pregnant woman dragging on her last cigarette. It is easy for us to feel superior to these people who survive without a home and/or a job.

When given the experience to go on a midnight run, however, the people in the street become far more than a mere statistic in the commissioner's files or an obstacle on the way to Bendels. You realize that these people are truly similar to yourself. They go through the same dilemmas and heartaches you do. They like to joke around, have a

serious conversation, and are very excited when a coat they needed for warmth happens to come in their size. Not all homeless people are the irresponsible alcoholics, the drug dealers, or mentally ill. So, the question is, what prompts people to become homeless and how can we save or help those that are able to achieve a "normal" life?

While teens don't currently represent a large population of New York City's homeless, the Department of Youth Programs feels that there are teen-related problems that are not being adequately addressed in homes or schools. They have established a 24 hour youth hotline devoted to helping runaway, abused, or youth with school or other problems. Manned by young people, the purpose of the hotline is to provide a course of action until a problem can be concluded. "Young people are trained so that they can help their peers," offered Commissioner Cammarata, who heads the Department of Youth Programs. "We're trying to create lifelines for these kids with more than thirty cooperating facilities who deal with teen problems every day," he continued. Additionally, there is a drop in center in the Bronx. These efforts are probably very important as a means of averting a larger problem before it occurs as an adult.

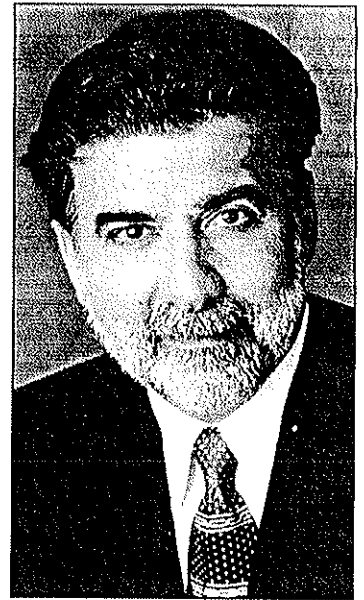
According to New York City's Homeless Services Commissioner, Martin Oesterreich, "there are two groups of homeless people. One is a group of about seven thousand single male adults. This group," Mr. Oesterreich informed *TeenSpeak*, "typically has a history of substance abuse and/or mental illness. The other is a group of

homeless families, in which the majority of the people have had housing problems, have left unsatisfactory conditions, or have had family conflicts."

The homeless turn to one of the 144 shelters in the New York City shelter system, as the "absolute right to shelter" is upheld by law. The group of single adults are aided by trained staff who help assess the underlying issues concerning their need for shelter and they also help to acquire professional help for those men with substance problems. Treatment programs and training for employment are integral to these shelters. For most family situations, the shelters are typically used as a more transitional refuge where families reside until they get themselves back on track.

According to Oesterreich, the recovery of a "normal" life is tough to measure. The best measure of success, he claims, is that the number of homeless people residing in New York City has dropped from 11,000 to 7,000. "We aim for success," Mr. Oesterreich said, however, he also admitted that success may take several tries for someone to turn their life around. "Homelessness," he contended, "changes with the times. During the crack epidemic, there was an increase of those who were living on the streets."

Whatever the frequency, Commissioners Oesterreich, Cammarata and Monges agree that one child or one adult on the streets is too many. "Kids, especially need someone to advocate for them," Assistant Commissioner Monges said. Monges' concern is borne out as a mother of two. She recognizes how hard it is to raise children in today's world. She stresses the importance of having a Drop in



Dr. Jerry Cammarata

Center. "It's a place where kids can come for help in solving problems as minute as a dispute about doing poorly on a test in school to issues as severe as domestic violence." All of the commissioners concur that the most important thing is to keep kids at home and involved in good, productive relationships with their parents.

The plight of the homeless is being addressed in places like New York City where single adults and families can find a haven off of the streets and can get help to improve the quality of their lives. So why is it that many still remain on the streets? It may have to do with the reported bad conditions in some shelters, and on the other hand it may have to do with the will of the homeless people themselves. However, if we learn anything from seeing someone who is homeless and needs help, it should be that these people are really the same as the rest of us. They, too, are striving to do their best in a world of competition and temptation.