

Dinner-dance to benefit Santa Ana renters facing eviction

By Jesus Mena
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SANTA ANA — Margie Denbeck did not realize she would be dealing with people's pain and suffering when she became a receptionist at the Orange County Legal Aid Society office.

But some 50 families facing evacuation from condemned dwellings have appealed to that office for help in the past couple of months and hard luck stories have become Denbeck's stock and trade.

"Because I'm the receptionist and I speak Spanish, I am the first one to hear their stories when they call asking for help," Denbeck said. "They tell me the city has ordered them to move out but they have no money and nowhere to go. Some of them are so poor they barely have enough to eat."

Denbeck, a Puerto Rican raised in the slums of New York City, used to not get involved. But her attitude changed two months ago when a young woman facing eviction came into the office.

The woman, an undocumented alien, was holding carrying two toddlers, she said. Legal Aid Society statutes mandate that only legal residents can receive aid and the woman was turned away.

"When they told her she did not qualify, she started crying," Denbeck said. "She said it all looked so hopeless. She had been abandoned by her husband and now she had no home for her children. She said she was going home to turn on the gas on her stove. That way she and her children would go to sleep and never wake up to face a hungry and homeless world."

Denbeck said she talked the woman out of her suicidal plan but the incident so disturbed her that she decided to help. Denbeck organized a coalition of community and social groups to plan a fund-raising dinner and dance Sept. 21 at St. Joseph's Church, 608 E. Civic Center Drive, Santa Ana. The coalition includes the Orange County Human Relations Commission, the Fair Housing Council, the Community Development Council, the George Washington Community



Center of Anaheim and the Catholic Social Services.

"I know that the money we will raise could not possibly help all of the families who are being evicted," Denbeck said. "There are just too many people being affected. But at least it will be a start."

Santa Ana's aggressive code-enforcement program has displaced more than 100 families since it was initiated April 1. The three-year program calls for a canvassing of 30,000 units in the central third of the city. The City Council on three occasions has refused to provide relocation assistance to displaced tenants.

Orange County Human Relations Commissioner Jean Forbath said few resources exist for the displaced. The county's social services organizations do not have the resources to help with all those facing eviction.

"It's great that someone is trying to do something to help now that the city of Santa Ana has refused to assume its responsibilities," Forbath said. "The money will be a drop in the bucket but maybe it will get other people involved."

The Legal Aid Society is one of the few organizations which can provide some aid. Lawyers there advise renters of condemned dwellings to withhold rent since

landlords do not have a right to lease substandard units. The tenants are thus able to use that money to help finance their move.

But that money is not enough for tenants like Francisco Herrera, 82, and his wife Gregoria, 77.

Inspectors informed the Herreras Tuesday they would have to vacate the \$200-a-month, two-room unit they rent on East Sixth Street by Oct. 19. The building was cited for faulty wiring, overcrowding and illegal conversion of a single family unit into a duplex.

Herrera said he worked in the auto industry in Michigan before he moved to Santa Ana 24 years ago. He did farmwork until he retired seven years ago.

The Herreras live off their combined \$650 monthly Social Security stipends and have no savings.

"Not paying any more rent here will help, but we need a lot more to move out of here," Herrera said. "Every place we've looked at rents for \$500 or more."

Herrera said he is hopeful the fund-raiser will provide enough money to help him and his wife move.

"I've worked all my life so we could have a roof over our heads," Herrera said, leaning on his cane. "Unless we get some help, we may have to learn how to live out in the streets. It sounds so sad to say that, but it just may come to that."