

Fullerton's Bad Weather Shelter

by Rusty Kennedy

Friday night my wife Anita dragged me along to the Fullerton Armory to set-up serve and clean-up for the homeless individuals who use this last chance shelter for all. It had been a long week and this didn't seem like our usual date night activity.

The National Guard decided they needed the Armory at the last minute, as happens, so we were moved to the gym at Independence Park. Unfortunately, there are no showers there, but otherwise it is a perfect facility, with the swimmers coming and going across the breezeway. It was the first time I had been back to Independence Park since I used to go to National Junior Basketball games there when my son Nico played.

Mercy House Does a Great Service

We showed up just before 5pm and some really nice Mercy House employees welcomed us and gave us some simple instructions; first one, don't touch your mouth or eyes with your hands. We were joined on this evening volunteer detail by about 10 other volunteers. Anita shared that last time she volunteered there were just three.

Soon we were laying out sleeping mats in blocks of 12 butted up to each other. The mats were about an inch thick with some nylon type fabric covering them, maybe 6 foot by 3 foot, a bit small for my 6'6" frame.

Then we set up some tables and chairs for registration of those who are not already registered with Mercy House ID cards, some tables for food, coffee and punch, some for sign-in.

Various tasks were assigned, someone to ask the men and women to line-up; some to serve coffee and punch; some to serve chili, rolls, and salad; some to work at the door. We had plenty of volunteers.

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Hobie was the Mercy House lead staff member on this evening shift, I called him the music man. He had a little speaker on his phone that shared his music with all. He was a bundle of energy, walking all around talking with everyone, smiling, joking, solving problems, setting an atmosphere that was welcoming and homey.

He later shared his story of alcohol and drug addiction leading to a motorcycle accident that almost cost him his leg; scary scars remind him of those troubled years. Clean and sober for 12 years, Hobie told me he could relate to the homeless that gathered for shelter that night in Fullerton's Independence Park Gym.

The Last Resort for Shelter

Around 6pm about 150 or so folks started to find their way over to Independence Park; I think a bus brought some. They waited in lines and found themselves a little mat on the floor, side-by-side with others in the same predicament. Most came immediately over to our station where we gave them punch or coffee and sugar, Sweet-n-Low, and packets of creamer. Some were loading up their coffee with 6 or 7 packets of sugar and creamer, Lattes they joked. Some just kept coming back for more; one guy told me he was just dehydrated. Most looked Anita and me in the face and thanked us, graciously for this small gift. None were disrespectful; all waited patiently for their turn.

There was some confusion about the family that was donating all of the food for the night, and no way to contact them. When they arrived shortly before 7pm in

perfect time to serve dinner, we were all pleased. Notable exceptions were the Mercy House staff who had ordered a meal delivered in case the volunteers did not show.

Human Beings Were Served

About 5% of our guests were disabled and volunteers served up and took their plates to their mats where they waited. Then the women who comprised about 30% of the group were served and last the men. They all lined up and were called forward 2 at a time to get their meal. They were orderly, hungry, polite and grateful. They were black and white, Latino and Asian, of all faiths and backgrounds. They were one family in their desperate straights whether brought on by addiction, mental illness, accidents, bad luck, or other misfortune.

Some might have done bad things in their lives, we couldn't tell. We just saw human beings who needed and appreciated these modest gestures of generosity.

Multi-Service Shelters for These People Are All Shot Down

Having worked in the aftermath of the killing of Kelly Thomas, a mentally ill homeless man, in a confrontation with Fullerton Police, to find shelter for this group of people, I was struck by our failure to cite even one multi-service shelter.

Such a shelter would triage these homeless folks, connecting some with various services that can help them put their lives back together, others with simply a safe place to spend the night. The incredible generosity of Fullertonians like Barbara Johnson of the Congregational Church who founded Fullerton

Interfaith Emergency Services, (Pathways of Hope today), have sought to humanize these individuals and care for them.

But the voices of fear have repeatedly won out over the voices of love. The multi-service shelter planned for Fullerton on State College was shot down by good people driven by their fear of what proximity to this group of homeless people might mean to their families. Again in Santa Ana a similar site was axed after neighbors rallied in the hundreds vilifying the homeless who might use such a shelter. And in Anaheim on the border of Fullerton a site has been languishing while jurisdictions argue over who can pull the plug on such a shelter and who has control, while neighbors all testify with the same exact words, "we don't have anything against the homeless, we support the shelter idea, it just wouldn't be appropriate here"; add any reason that triggers fear.

I hope we can do better tomorrow than we as a county did today, but I am grateful to have met the amazing folks at the County of Orange who seek long-term solutions, terrific folks from Mercy House who do a professional job, the amazing volunteers who give from the heart, and the human beings who I served this night in December.

If you would like to volunteer at the Cold Weather Shelter in Fullerton, or explore other ways you can help, visit the Mercy House website at www.mercy-house.net or call Lauren Celaya at 714-836-7188 x128

Rusty Kennedy is the CEO of the non-profit OC Human Relations which believes all people should live free from discrimination and violence. www.ochumanrelations.org