

# Homeless Flock to Warming Center

BY JIM KNOWLES • SAN LEANDRO TIMES • 01-05-17

*Cast Away* with Tom Hanks is playing on the screen. It's the scene where Hanks opens up the FedEx packages that washed up on the deserted island. He opens one box and pulls out a fancy dress, holds it up, and tosses it aside.

The audience lets out a laugh. That dress wouldn't be very helpful to Hanks trying to survive on that island.

The audience knows something about surviving and being cast away. They're all homeless. Around 40 people come to the warming center on nights when it's open at First United Methodist Church on Bancroft Avenue.

"We supply the mats, sleeping bags and blankets, and they put their names on them for when they come back," said Denise Ross, as she checked in guests Tuesday night, knowing everybody by name.

Ross works for Building Futures, which runs the warming center – along with the Interfaith Homeless Network (a group of churches in San Leandro) and the City of San Leandro. The center is open in the winter on nights when it's raining, when the temperature drops below 38 degrees, and on every Wednesday night no matter what the weather.



*Colette Gonsalves has dinner at the Warming Shelter, where homeless people can stay for the night when it's cold or raining.*

"I love it," Ross said. "I know everyone here. I know when something's wrong."

Everybody gets a hot meal when they come in, cooked by volunteers, and a light breakfast the following morning. It's a friendly atmosphere in the church's gym as volunteers Nancy Pretto, and Barbara and Dimas Rescendez served dinner.

Colette Gonsalves sat down to dinner but she wasn't staying for the night. The 71-year-old sleeps in her car. "I used to sleep here, but I can't anymore. I can't get up from the floor because of my arthritis," Gonsalves said.

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Gonsalves said he gets Social Security but it's not enough to afford a place around here. She's on a list for a Building Futures' program that subsidizes rent to get people out of homelessness. Gonsalves says she's waiting for the paperwork to come from Kaiser to verify her disability, a brain aneurysm. Gonsalves has been homeless for two years, and appreciates getting a meal. "I don't always have money to eat," she says.

Dimas Rescendez and his wife Barbara are volunteering for their second year, serving dinner. He says he recognizes people from the April Showers program that provides a shower and clean clothes to the homeless twice a month, run by the Interfaith Homeless Network.

"It's a small task we do but it helps out our brothers and sisters," Rescendez said as he served dinner. "It's tough out there. Our guests are very grateful. It's a blessing for us to be able to do this."

Now in its third year, the warming shelter is seeing more people in their 60s and 70s than before, said Denise Ross who has spent years working in housing. She believes it's the expensive housing that's causing more homelessness.

"I think it's the housing market," she said. "Today they want two-and-a-half times the rent to move in. There's no way somebody living on Social Security can afford that."

And once people are homeless for a while, it becomes a rut that's hard to pull out of.

"When you live on the street for so long a mental health issue kicks in," Ross said. "You don't like confinement. You don't like being confined by walls."

Lucia Lee ate dinner with her husband before settling down for the night in the gym. Sometimes the couple go to a shelter in Hayward, but they like this one the best. A lot of nights they sleep in a car.

Lee is 72 and her husband is 76, both retired and living on Social Security. She said a big part of their Social Security check is taken out to go to Medicare, so they have a hard time trying to afford a place to live.

They had a small apartment in Stockton, but Lee said it was a place with drugs and crime so they left. Now, when the shelter isn't open, they sleep in their son's car, who is also homeless.

"This is a nice place," Lee said. "The people are nice. We hope we can find a place but it's expensive here. It's expensive in Oakland too. We get Social Security but it's not enough."

The warming center welcomes clean clothes for the guests – new socks, gloves, sweats, rain jackets, etc. Donations can be dropped off at the Building Futures office at 1395 Bancroft Avenue during business hours.