

January 21, 1984

By David Goodman

*Author's note: Names given for the men interviewed here are fictitious. The people, their stories and their lives are real.*

Carlos zippered up his jacket and blew into his hands. His frosty breath mixed with the steady wisp of smoke rising from the cigarette butt he clutched between his fingers. It had been one of the first biting cold days of the winter, and he hadn't had time to outfit himself more warmly. It was 6 p.m., and another long, futile day of job hunting had come to a close. Huddling with the other people in Lafayette Square waiting for his escort to the Cambridge shelter, he looked forward to a hot meal and the chance to relax indoors for the evening.

"I lost my job as a security guard when I had a seizure and they found out I was epileptic. So I couldn't pay rent, and I got no place to go. That's pretty bad in the winter," he explained. "I feel lonesome just bein' out on the street. I want to get a job. Some people tell me, 'You have epilepsy, you can't work.' But that's my life, I like to work."

People sitting around nodded their agreement. Carlos stopped to sip some tea. We sat in a small, green room with three round tables. Dinner had just been cleared from the tables at Shelter, Inc., which, until the opening of the Faith Lutheran Shelter one month ago, (see accompanying article) was the only shelter for homeless people in the city of Cambridge.

Carlos is a trim, good-looking Puerto Rican man. He was eager to share his story. "In my country, we're used to working. You earn your own money." A smile came

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to his face as he recalled the work he used to do where he grew up. "Some friends and the guys at work offer me money and tell me I can stay with them. But I don't want to do that. They have family and kids. I'm 25 years old and I don't want to have someone else helping me out," he continued. "Everybody has their pride. I don't want to ask for help."

Work emerges repeatedly as a theme in conversations with most people at the shelter. They are looking for work, or have just gotten a job. A number of people have jobs, but have lost their homes due to such circumstances as evictions, fires, condominium conversions and broken relationships. The number of people who are chronically homeless and unemployed are a minority of those who pass through Shelter.

The reasons for homelessness are many; the homeless people's plights are the same. Mike lived and worked in Connecticut, but was recently divorced and had to move out of his home. He soon after lost his job. "It's definitely harder this time of year," he reflected. "The holidays make it that much harder to be away from people you care about. This is the first time I've been in a place like this. It makes me realize that a certain part of my life is over."

Along with being homeless comes a social

stigma that many people at the shelter have been branded with. "People fear me or what I represent," suggested Mike. "Homeless people are presented in a negative context. But I'm not really different. This is just a temporary situation."

"Before working at Shelter, I thought of homeless people as bag ladies and old bums in the subway," recalled Susan Karwoski, one of the staff people at the Cambridge shelter. "But after working there a while I saw that it could happen to anybody. If you don't have family nearby, if you don't have money, you can easily lost your home. It's just people who have hit on hard times."

"It's hard, it's very hard," said Arthur, shaking his head slowly. He is a small, strikingly dignified African man. His neat white shirt and grey trousers suggest a more comfortable past: he was employed as an engineer until recently. Arthur, like many homeless people, is a fiercely proud person. He is deeply offended by statements such as those made by President Reagan and his advisors that people seeking free food and shelter are just trying to save money. "It took a lot of decision making and I did a lot of soul-searching before I could come here," he said. "But I'm not discouraged. I'll go sweep floors or wash dishes if I have to, because an individual has to make life

work for himself."

People are quick to come up with band-aid remedies for the problem of homelessness, but are much more reluctant to address the causes. Urban economists tell us that is good practice to attract businesses and wealthy people to an area. But what is the real cost of such a strategy?

Former Boston Mayor Kevin White implemented his plan of making Boston a center for finance, business and high-tech industry. This included restructuring the downtown area to house the newly arriving young professionals. "They called it 'urban renewal' in the sixties," said Kathy McAffe of Oxfam-America, a Boston based international relief and development agency, "and they ripped down whole neighborhoods to do it. Mayor White channeled huge sums of federal money into his downtown gentrification program, and actively discouraged local neighborhood development and low-income housing."

The statistics of the last 20 years highlight the staggering odds that low and middle-income Americans face. In Boston, according to McAffe, one-half of all public housing units are vacant, due to political and bureaucratic struggles over the fate of the area's housing projects. In the nation's cities, 50 percent to 90 percent of low-income single-

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room dwellings have been destroyed or converted into more expensive housing since 1970, according to a recent *Newsweek* article. Then there is the havoc wreaked by the policies of the Reagan administration: construction and renovation of low-income housing has been slashed by 75 percent in the last four years, down to 55,120 units in 1983.

Lyndon Johnson argued in 1968 that six million units of low-income housing would be needed for the nation's poor. Only three million of those dwellings were ever built — a far cry from Johnson's vision of a "great society."

When something happens that doesn't fit into the American explanation of how the world works, there is always a rush to find out who is to blame for the problem. In the case of the homelessness, we blame the victim. In American capitalism, we live by the ethic that if you work hard, you make a good living. But homelessness gives the lie to that myth of how our society works. To point out the real source of this chronic and growing problem would be to strike too deep. To acknowledge that homelessness is as much a product of our socio-economic system as are McDonald's hamburgers is to come to the inevitable conclusion that for as many as 2 million Americans, the system does *not* work.

In the TV room, a group of people sit around watching "Cannon." The air is thick with smoke. John asks if he can have permission to stay up past the 11 p.m. lights-out time to see the results of the Celtics game on the news. Mary is busy pouring herself some tea in the kitchen, talking to the evening staff person about the new leads for housing that the Shelter social worker suggested to her.

In the dining room, an animated discussion is going on between a group of four men and women about which city is tougher New York or Boston. "Where I come from in the South Bronx," laughs Carlos, "ya get y'head blown off just for talkin back to someone. I don't fuck with no one down there." "Awright, awright," concedes Hank. "Even Roxbury ain't that bad."

In their own uncelebrated way, the homeless people of the city are survivors. They are unlikely looking warriors, not our image of the fearless uniformed soldier, but fighters they are. "I guess if I thought about my predicament a lot more, I'd probably want to kill myself. But I'm not into that," said Mike softly. A thin wiry man with glasses, puffing intently on his cigarette, said, "I have faith in people. It keeps me tryin' to get through another day."

They will be back on the street by 8 a.m. the next morning, the time that Shelter closes its doors for the day. It will be cold, but people make it clear that they are not about to give up. "If the sun rises in the morning, I will be thankful," said Arthur, paraphrasing an old African folktale. "And why shouldn't I be? It will be a good day."

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

Shelter, Inc. is a non-profit organization that has run a 20-bed shelter in Cambridge for homeless men and women since 1974. In the spring of 1983, they opened a shelter for homeless families in Boston. They are currently planning the purchase of another building in Cambridge which they hope to open as a shelter in 1984.

Guests arrive at 6 p.m. and leave the following morning at 8 a.m., receiving dinner and breakfast. All guests must be referred by a church, social service agency, police or other social worker, and can stay at the Cambridge shelter for three nights every two weeks. Shelter also has free clothing available to people who stay there, and a full-time social worker helps guests in finding homes, jobs and how to get assistance from the city and state social services bureaucracy.

Shelter, Inc. is supported primarily by private donations. Gifts of food, money and clothing are much needed and welcomed, but a phone call to them in advance of any deliveries at 547-1885 is appreciated.