

Plight of the homeless awakens local support

By Ronnie Levine

AREA—Complacency is the enemy of compassion—the insidious desensitizing to the needs of other people that chisels away at one's humanity, diminishing those who might "need" and those who might "give" alike. Nestled in the affluence of Northern Bergen County, wrapped in a cocoon of comfort, it is easy to forget—tempting to block out problems generally associated with inner cities, with poverty, with substance abuse or perhaps with untreated mental illness.

But for the Interreligious Fellowship for the Homeless of Bergen County, the problem is real, very tangible and growing and, while some may choose to "see it not," the 100 congregations associated with the Fellowship, "see it now."

It is estimated that there are 3,000,000 homeless people in America presently, and, if current trends continue, that figure is expected to swell to 19,000,000 by 1990. In comparison, Bergen County's estimated 50 homeless families a night seems almost miniscule—but the trend is apparent. The numbers are growing and county, city and state lines provide no boundaries for need.

While approximately 50 percent of all the homeless in the country are thought to be "street people"—drug abusers, alcoholics, or deinstitutionalized mental patients—the other 50 percent represent the "working poor," people who simply cannot afford to find a place to live near their jobs or cannot make ends meet on their monthly social security payments.

The Interreligious Fellowship was formed during the winter of 1986 when five congregations, working in cooperation with the Bergen County Community Action Program (CAP) offered shelter to the homeless, supplementing



Lucy Janjigian's "Homeless"

CAP's 32 bed shelter in Hackensack. Originally providing nine or 10 extra beds per night during winter months only for people "turned away from the Hackensack shelter because of space restrictions," the Overflow Shelter program has grown with the increase in the numbers of participating churches and temples.

Currently, the Fellowship provides beds for 20 homeless people per night in shelters open year round in different congregations throughout Bergen County. In addition, the Fellowship has located and furnished six apartments in Hackensack, using the facilities to house mostly single parent families, while supportive congregations provide financial assistance and Fellowship trained volunteers provide one-on-one nurturance to the families.

The success of the Fellowship's programs depend large-

ly on the number of participating volunteers and Fellowship members are always eager to draw new congregations into taking an active role in their work. Options, however, do exist, so that different congregations can get involved in the homeless program in a fashion that is best suited to their individual needs.

If space permits, churches and temples might consider offering emergency overnight shelter one night a week for a three month period of time. That program is coordinated and managed by CAP who screens the homeless persons for nervous or mental problems, offers transportation to and from the shelter and provides meals and washing

facilities for the homeless prior to their arrival at the emergency shelter.

For those congregations who do not have space to provide an emergency shelter or who prefer a different avenue of involvement, options include offering financial assistance to cover the cost of emergency shelters, to lease apartments or other facilities, or to offer low or no interest loans to people facing eviction or foreclosure. While space and money are primary problems, the third, and equally pivotal part of this program depends on manpower, and congregations might also consider the option of organizing teams of volunteers to help operate emergency overnight shelters.

While community involvement in the homeless program is still a relatively new phenomenon, it is apparent that the level of awareness and participation is rising steadily. While few programs of involvement have been totally formulated within the FLOW area, many churches and synagogues are actively at work at the moment, making their plans and examining their options for involvement.

Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff, a leader in the assistance to homeless program, has been offering help to the homeless through the Fellowship since 1986, paying rents, covering utility costs and providing furnishings for apartments located by the Fellowship, utilizing funds provided through the parish budget and individual donations. As Reverend Paul Joncas explained, "What was originally perceived as a local Hackensack problem, has expanded to the level of county awareness. In one sense that is a bad sign because it indicates the problem is growing. On another level it is a good sign, however, because it indi-

Currently, Advent Lutheran is considering what additional involvement in the plight of the homeless they might consider. Other Wyckoff parishes, St. Elizabeth's R.C. Church and the Wyckoff Reformed Church, for instance, are also examining potential methods of involvement, considering, for instance, organizing teams of volunteers who are imperative to the functioning of the program. Each emergency shelter depends on between two to four volunteers per night.

All people turned away from the shelter in Hackensack are screening by CAP before being sent to emergency shelters. The homeless have dinner, bathe and then are transported by Community Action Buses to their overnight shelters. Although cots are stored in the participating congregations, the homeless set up their own beds, dormitory style. A light snack is provided during the evening, perhaps milk, coffee, etc. and ideally the shelters offer space for the people to watch TV, relax or read. Lights out is mandated for 11 p.m. With two to four volunteers on duty, one naps while the others sleep. The people are awakened at 5 a.m., put their beds away, have coffee or juice and they are picked up at 6:30 by the Community Action Bus which takes them back to Hackensack for breakfast. Transportation to work after breakfast in Hackensack is the responsibility of each person individually. "Turn-aways" from the Hackensack shelter are always carefully screened, and anyone with a substance abuse problem or medical, criminal or emotional problem of any sort, remains in Hackensack.

But if space, money and volunteer assistance is what allows the Fellowship to offer its assistance, the initial step begins with an awareness of the problem, a sensitivity to the homeless and a commitment to the spiritual and biblical teachings "to share your bread with the hungry." Few have taken that commitment and that sensitivity and mo-

bilized them into action in the fashion that Franklin Lakes artist Lucy Janjigian has done and what had started, as an individual commission to do five paintings in connection with the 70th commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, turned into a spiritual affinity and a personal ministry with the uprooted and the homeless at its core.

"I had been commissioned to do five paintings for the Armenian Genocide 70th commemoration," Janjigian explained. "I looked deep inside me to focus on the theme and came up with five very strong paintings, dealing with the uprooted Armenians. When I was done, I thought 'Thank God. That's finished. Now I can go back to something else.' But somehow, when I went back to the abstracts, they seemed trivial. I realized that the problems of the uprooted were universal and then I thought of the problems of the city and the problems of the homeless. It was a flow of thought, one thing just led to another."

"Originally," she continued, "I was going to do a series of paintings on the City. I would do one on the homeless, one on prostitutes, one on alcoholics, etc. But I soon found that I had enough to do just focusing on the homeless. Originally I thought of the uprooted as a universal theme. Now I see that homelessness is universal. So I continued doing my paintings, although I didn't know for what purpose."

A deeply religious woman, Janjigian continued to paint, focusing her enormous talent on the homeless. "I painted more and more," she explained, "and I found myself asking, 'Is this what God wanted.'" With prayer, meditation and through bible study, she continued. "Without any planning," she went on, "it grew to become a personal ministry. It was nothing

I knew of or planned, it just happened. People would give me things, show me things, invite me to seminars and it

just grew." And as her experiences grew, so did her commitment.

Janjigian, who is included among artists in "Who's Who in America," describes the very large paintings in her "Homeless Series" as very strong and mood provoking, agreeing that they do much to raise the viewer's general level of sensitivity and awareness. "Consciousness raising is what it is all about," she said. "My works are multi-level. They tell a story, they have a psychological impact and they are religious and spiritual as well. Homelessness has no barrier," she went on. "It is a problem that does not apply to one person, one nationality or one political entity. My paintings are moving people in ways that I never expected," she continued. "I have become more spiritual through doing them and painting them and painting them has given my life more purpose. I want to be a conduit for the needs of the homeless."

Janjigian, whose work displayed regularly in New York, has already had five six showings of her series paintings on the Homeless as well as an equal number showings of her Uprooted Series. As part of the Wyckoff Reformed Church's commitment to involvement with the homeless, a showing of Janjigian's work will be held Sunday afternoon, June 5, in the Church Building.

"This is the beginning having our conscience called alive," The Reverend Wil Jones, Minister of the Wyckoff Reformed Church commented. "The Lutherans were the leaders in the work with the homeless in this community. Now we must join forces and coordinate efforts."