

Homelessness brought to light in city ceremony

Published: Wednesday, December 22, 2010

MIDDLETOWN — A sudden job loss. A debilitating injury. A drug addiction. A death in the family. For many of Middletown's homeless, years of stability were torn down in a matter of weeks.

"I have known homelessness," said Maryellen Rodino during a ceremony in Middletown Tuesday. "The next time you see someone who is homeless, do not be offended by them. Rather, offer them a cup of coffee."

Rodino joined nearly a dozen other speakers celebrating the annual National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day event at the Church of the Holy Trinity in an effort to draw attention to the problem of homelessness just hours before the longest night of the year.

Celebrated by more than 150 communities across the country, the event aims to create awareness of political advocacy and efforts to end homelessness. Wherever You Are Healthcare for the Homeless—a program of Community Health Center Inc.—co-sponsored the event with the National Coalition for the Homeless, National Health Care for the Homeless Council and National Consumer Advisory Board.

Speakers who had been or were currently battling homelessness came from all walks of life. They were from isolated rural towns and thriving inner cities. Some grew up with two parents, some have only known foster parents, and some were single parents themselves, before they were of legal age.

A number have suffered unthinkable abuse, while others only watched episodes of family violence as regular as the evening news. They have been straight-A students, drug addicts, thieves and scared little girls.

But despite their differences, each speaker divulged a story of destruction, of regret and of hope for the future.

One was Azure Smikle, a former homeless single mother of four. She told her story to an audience packed into the pews of the church watching intently as she smoothed over her words like a sweet caramel.

Smikle became homeless at 26 after a divorce and sudden death of her mother.

"I remember knocking on the door of my friend to get my kids ready for school," she said adding that she would often sleep on her friends couches at night. "I started to miss what life had to offer."

Marcellet, who did not wish to publish her last name, told attendees that she is currently fighting homelessness. She initiated her speech with a story about the movie "The Little Match Girl," removed from cable television because its depiction of homelessness was so startling.

"My addiction brought me to homelessness completely," she said. "In Middletown I have found the resources I needed to keep myself on track to battle my addiction. I am no longer that little match girl."

In January 2007, Middlesex County joined a growing national movement to end homelessness when Mayor Sebastian Giuliano and other elected officials from Portland, Essex and Old Saybrook announced plans to develop a 10-year plan to end and prevent homelessness.

The plan, unveiled three years ago in the same church where the ceremony was held, called for the creation of more affordable and supportive housing units, the development of a housing assistance fund, and the creation of a housing and services consortium for multiple Middlesex County communities, among other priorities.

THE MIDDLETOWN PRESS

Shelters for the homeless have become so crowded in many U.S. cities that they have been turning people away, according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Annual Hunger and Homelessness Report. The National Coalition for the Homeless reports there were at least 2,600 deaths in 2009 among people living on the streets.

The report examined homelessness in 27 cities. It found a jump of 9 percent in those cities in the number of homeless families while homelessness among single people was up 2.5 percent.

In two-thirds of the cities, shelters reported having to turn people away for lack of space.

Advocates say the long economic slump is straining local agencies and charitable groups.

St. Vincent DePaul Place Executive Director Ron Krom can attest to that fact. Through the programs offered at St. Vincent, hundreds of local residents — homeless and non — are aided by way of a soup kitchen, the Amazing Grace Food Pantry and the Community Assistance Program, among others.

“The homeless are victims to many things: medical illnesses, substance abuse and poverty,” Krom said. “It is our duty to serve our homeless and offer (aid) to them as soon as possible.”

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