



Homelessness not an option

One City prevention drive aims to raise funds for Ventura's residents at risk of becoming homeless

By [Paul Sisolak](#) 02/12/2009

Tom Cash was named after Thomas Alva Edison, and much like the intrepid inventor and scholar, he was gifted with a profound ingenuity.

Cash was also homeless for more than 30 years and died so in Ventura almost three years ago, destitute and despondent.

“He had a brilliant mind. He just had a hard time and took the wrong turns,” remembers his sister, Sherry Cash.

It was in June 1963 that a sudden heart attack killed Tom and Sherry's father. The death of the Cash patriarch imprinted the young Tom so deeply that the 13-year-old ran away from home. He never came back.

Fast forward 33 years later, and Tom, diagnosed with a form of mental illness, dies in a hospital on Oct. 13, 2006, of a massive staph infection and severe cirrhosis of the liver, the result of chronic alcoholism.

There's no doubt Cash's fate is yet another example of the neglect that has plagued the homeless community for what seems like an eternity. But it was what happened during his lifespan — those in-between years of sobriety and cleaning up, only to fall off the wagon, onto the streets of Ventura once more — that most lends credence to a fundraiser to curb homelessness happening this weekend.

The “One City, One Weekend, One Fund” pledge, taking place Feb. 14-16, is a drive for the Ventura Homeless Prevention Fund, and will raise dollars to support low-income families on the brink of homelessness, those people who have endured setbacks and who live one paycheck away from losing their homes and living on the street.

“These are people who are working. But something happens that was unexpected,” says Cindy Cante, who chairs a homelessness prevention committee through Ventura County 1st District Supervisor Steve Bennett’s office. “There have been families who get rid of their cable TV bills. They make some adjustments to pay their rent.”

“When you become homeless, even the most hard-working ones, when you hit a bump in the road, it’s hard to get back into housing because your credit’s no good,” says Karl Keller, a volunteer with One City Ventura.

As of last year’s One City homeless census, there were at least 20,000 homeless people in Ventura County, the majority in Ventura and Oxnard. The 2009 count was completed just two weeks ago, and though statistics have not yet become available, due to a higher unemployment rate and foreclosures, it’s safe to say that that number has increased. Still, in the last year alone, monies from the One City fund have prevented at least 120 more people from losing their homes.

“The fund has kept 52 households, over 120 people,” off the street, says Cante. But, she adds, “The need is greater than our resources.”

Those resources would have to account for what Cash estimates are the nearly 7,000 at risk of losing their homes. But so far, the outlook is good: going into the pledge drive this weekend, almost \$10,000 has been raised by at least two local churches.

Ventura’s Missionary Church has already contributed \$7,000 to the cause, according to the Rev. Jan Christian, pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ventura, whose own congregation, she said, will forward \$2,800.

Both churches are part of the joint effort that includes both faith-based organizations and members of the Ventura Social Services Task Force homeless prevention subcommittee, all adding up to the One City effort. Their template is the task force’s 10-year strategy on ending homelessness in the county.

According to Keller, the fundraising aspect tops the strategy’s list as the most effective way of curbing and preventing homelessness.

“The reason is it’s the most cost-effective,” he said.

Christian said the pledge drive also solicits business and private donations. Anyone is invited to bring a donation to the One City event at the My Florist wine café and bakery on Feb. 16. She hopes it will serve additionally to germinate other, similar fundraising efforts.

“People can come this weekend and don’t have to donate, but could say, ‘I’ll have a fundraiser this weekend so we can keep the coffers full,’ ” she said.

As Keller stated, the difficulties faced by a person displaced to the street can make finding housing again nearly insurmountable. Sherry Cash, who has made volunteering for the homeless a full-time affair since her brother’s death, knows this firsthand.

“If you’re in poverty, everything costs five to 10 times as much,” she said.

Many of the homeless she visits daily spend their time in Ventura’s downtown Plaza Park. Tom Cash frequented the park, and he was one of the deceased homeless who were remembered at a One City gathering at the park this past Christmas.

Cash said they remain examples of the “face of homelessness,” those whose health or alcoholism have worsened, those who have passed the tipping point, who can’t even keep a home if it ever becomes available again.

“The group I work with on the streets, agencies have a hard time dealing with. There’s no coherence or clarity,” Cash says. “(Tom) went in and out of housing. Because of his mental illness, he did not make a good neighbor. He would last three to 10 months in any one location. But I tried to look at every day as a fresh, new day.

“They’re a really great group of people who watch each others’ backs,” she adds, “who would like nothing better than [to] have a roof over their head.”

The “One City, One Weekend, One Fund” drive takes place on Feb. 16, 1-3 p.m., at My Florist, 76 S. Oak St., Ventura. For more information on the fundraiser, call Cantle at 654-2703, or Christian at 644-3898.

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