



Elk Grove's Homeless Assistance Resource Team

Written by **KENDRA HOLMAN**

When that very popular song “Another Day in Paradise” by Phil Collins plays over the radio, listening to the haunting lyrics, “Oh think twice/it’s another day for you and me in paradise” pulls on my heartstrings, because it brings to mind the very real struggle of what it must feel like to be homeless and feel hopeless, humiliated and invisible. When the homeless woman, in the song, calls out to the man on the street, “Sir can you help me?” he pretends not to see her, avoids contact with her by crossing the street, and feels embarrassed. When I used to sing along to the lyrics, I remember thinking, “That man is a jerk.” However, now I am not so quick to rush to judgment. That man represents many of us. The truth is, “Another Day in Paradise” is a song that highlights the awkwardness that many of us feel when confronted with the plight of the homeless.

It is so easy to look the other way, because we often assume that it’s an individual’s fault that they are homeless. We believe there is a drug or drinking problem, when often this is simply not the case. Many of our homeless are women and children who are trying to escape a violent environment, the loss of a job, physical illness, or aging out of the foster system, with little to no real resources at their disposal. Homeless people are no different than you and I, the only difference is circumstances, often beyond their control, have caused them to be without a place to lay their heads. We think, “Well, there are programs/shelters to help them.” Sadly, all of the shelters are overcrowded, and many times in areas where the homeless may feel unsafe. In addition, shelters that take women with children have an ongoing wait list of over 200 families. The desire to keep their children in school and as “normal” as possible, drives many families to live in their cars or “couch surf” with friends.

The hidden crisis, in the once little town of Elk Grove, is the alarming fact of approximately 150 homeless people living in the area.

HART is providing
new opportunities for
homeless children.



HART is best known for its two transitional homes, The Grace House and The Meadow House. The Grace House serves single homeless individuals, and The Meadow House serves families. HART, along with the mayor, local service organizations, and several faith groups established these homes.

The saddest aspect of this problem is the fact that many children are without homes. The Elk Grove School Unified School District identified more than 450 homeless children from its approximately 63,000 students. Debbie Schoeneshoefer, co-founder of the Elk Grove Homeless Assistance Resource Team (HART), estimates that many of those children live in a severe state of homelessness, living in cars and without shelter. Organizations like HART were created to make a difference.

HART is an organization founded in 2010, as a response to the growing issue of homelessness in Elk Grove. HART's objective is to provide support and mentorship for homeless individuals and families who are seeking to escape homelessness. In addition to breaking the often generational habits, that perpetuate ongoing homelessness. What is truly exceptional about HART is how committed its volunteers are. Initially, Debbie and Frank had a group of 12 volunteers. That number has grown substantially, and it is important to note that HART does not have any paid workers. All volunteers, work because of their dedication and compassion. 100% of funds and donations go to serving HART's clients.

When asked how HART came to be, co-founder Debbie Schoeneshoefer explains how about six years ago, when the housing market dropped, she was working at the Elk Grove Food Bank and noticed an increase in homeless people coming in for services: "I hadn't really noticed previously, and suddenly we had this significant increase. I just knew that something needed to be done." About that same time Frank Lucia, who co-founded HART with Debbie, was working at Project Ride. He shared that there were homeless people going into the stables, asking if they could stay in the riding arena. Frank came into the food bank and asked the director, Marie Jacino, if she could get involved and what could we do? "Marie told Frank that I was interested, so we started HART without really knowing what we were doing. We just knew that something needed to be done." said Debbie.

People like Debbie and Frank (and all of the volunteers who assist them) are special because they are the caliber of people who see a problem, then become part of the solution. They are too humble to draw attention to themselves, but their contribution to the welfare of the less fortunate is selfless, incalculable and heroic. I often wonder what motivates a person to devote their energy to this type of work. Debbie credits it to her faith, "I was actually praying one night and God laid the word "advocate" on my heart and I thought, yes! The homeless need an advocate!" And He said, "It's you."

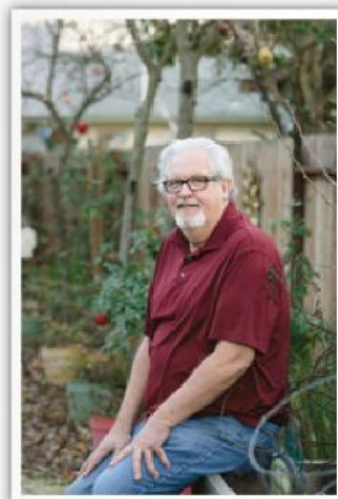
"I'd been working with a homeless woman for about two years, and He showed me that individuals did not want to be treated like children, what they really needed was a friend. I recognized that individuals, who are homeless, need someone to walk alongside them and identify what their issues are, and to help them through them."

Debbie further explained that she has learned to listen to God. Through an encounter two years ago, with a woman who we will call Sara, her interest was peaked regarding the homeless situation. In addition, it prepared her for the work she now does with HART.

While Debbie was working at the food bank and clothes closet, Cathy O'Neil (who was running the clothes closet) decided that she wanted to give every family member, who used the food bank, a donated gift. This involved wrapping gifts for over 2000 people, and distributing them. At the end of the day, Sara, a disheveled woman—came in wearing a big yellow rain slicker and hat. She was dirty and had no teeth. When Debbie went to help her find a gift, a long lavender down coat caught Debbie's eye and she thought, "I've got just the thing." When she presented Sara with the coat, Sara was overjoyed. Debbie watched in amazement as Sara took off multiple layers of sweaters, before putting on the coat. The reality of the fact that this woman lived in the cold, and was homeless really hit Debbie. Sara told Debbie that she



Over time, Debbie has developed a strong bond with many of the homeless children—a perk that she treasures.



While HART is stabilizing the parents, it is changing the future of the children.



would sleep in the coat and that it would be her sleeping bag. As Sara was walking out, she turned and said, "You know something? God created us all equally." In that moment Debbie was deeply moved

That was Debbie's pivotal moment. Over the next two years, Debbie spent a lot of time with Sara, and they went through some crazy situations together. Through that experience, Debbie says, "God showed her, you just go where I send you, and I will show you the way. So when He lay the word "advocate" on my heart and I said, no, it was because I really didn't want to do it. What God showed me was that He was training me through my experiences with Sara and that He would walk with me."

HART was born out of this kind of compassion. When co-founder, Frank Lucia, showed up at the food bank that day, Debbie knew that God had sent her an angel. For the last six years, they have been making a difference by improving the lives of Elk Grove's homeless population.

Another touching story, of how mentoring can change a life, happened in regard to

a man named Jake. Jake was living in his truck, at a strip mall in Elk Grove. A family member had stolen all of the money Jake had saved from his part time job. In addition, his car engine had died, and his hearing aids weren't working anymore (which left him almost deaf). The property manager gave Jake notice that he had to move his truck. The property manager also notified the food bank about Jake's situation, and that's when HART stepped in. An anonymous donor had his engine fixed, HART provided used tires for his truck, and UC Davis fitted him with new hearing aids. Now Jake is working two jobs, has his own apartment, a new used car, and he's built his savings back up. Frank Lucia, who was Jake's mentor, now has a different relationship with Jake—he's his friend.

Unfortunate circumstances led to Jake finding himself homeless. However, Ted (another inspirational individual) became homeless due to an alcohol dependency problem. After burning several bridges with family and friends, he became homeless for six years. After going into the hospital for liver failure and seizures, he received help from Union Gospel Missions,

then turned to HART for support. Ted has been sober for eight months and has been hired by a temp agency. "He's a reminder that you should never give up on people, because you never know when they are a ready to change," said Debbie.

HART is best known for its two transitional homes, The Grace House and The Meadow House. The Grace House serves single homeless individuals, and The Meadow House serves families. HART, along with the mayor, local service organizations, and several faith groups established these homes. Shelter, mentoring, and counseling are provided for the residents. The counseling teaches residents how to cultivate long-term solutions, because the homeless are often in crisis mode and geared toward finding short-term solutions. HART is interested in long-term solutions.

Another component of HART is its Elk Grove Winter Sanctuary (EG WINS), which helps to provide shelter for local homeless during the cold winter months. EG Win is a 12-week program that teams up with local churches to provide food, shelter, and companionship for area homeless.

HART and EGWINS has many dedicated volunteers, and 100% of the money donated goes to help the homeless.



Friendship, rather than judgement, has given many of the homeless the courage to trust others and make a life change.

It's funny how we celebrate athletes, entertainers, and the ultra-rich in this country, when the real heroes are men and woman like Frank Lucia and Debbie Schoeneshoefer, who are the founders of the Elk Grove Homeless Assistance Resource Team (HART). In addition to Linda Strom and Fred Bremerman, who founded The Elk Grove Winter Sanctuary (EG WINS). These people, along with a host of dedicated volunteers, see people suffering and do something about it. It is amazing that there are people in the world who really care—not just with words, but with action. Here in Elk Grove, we have a group of volunteers who work tirelessly to make life for Elk Grove's homeless people (approximately 160) not only bearable, but full of hope and promise. You, too, can make a difference.

How can you get involved? Elk Grove has been incredible in its support of these causes! In fact, hundreds of locals came out to help with the grunt work involved in renovating both Grace and Meadow houses. However, there is still quite a bit of work that needs to be done. HART is in need of mentors. If you have, in your heart, the desire to be a facilitator, HART needs you. All the training and support needed, will be provided.

If you are interested in volunteering call 916-623-5858. Perhaps you would like to contribute financially, you can visit Hart's website, www.elkGroveHART.org. You can either use PayPal for monthly support, or contribute by mailing your gift to P.O. Box 1343, Elk Grove, CA 95759.



Elk Grove's winter sanctuary (EGWINS) is a collaboration of over nine churches and 100 volunteers who have joined hands to help the homeless.