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A shelter with dignity



A woman naps in the front lobby of the uncompleted Julian Street Inn as a man tosses a jacket over his shoulder and heads out on the street.

José Luis Villegas
— Mercury News

S.J. inn open to homeless mentally ill

Gary Richards
Mercury News Staff Writer

They can be seen on every downtown street corner: mentally ill men and women wandering the streets of San Jose, some talking to themselves or anyone who will listen; others wandering block to block.

In the past, the men and women were ignored — by downtown workers, by

government officials. Now, something is being done for these people that has attracted the attention of health care workers from as far away as New York and Los Angeles.

That something is the Julian Street Inn — an unusual shelter for the homeless mentally ill that is open 24 hours a day, calls residents “guests” and operates with as few rules as possible. It does not

even look like a shelter but rather a modest motel.

Built at Julian and Montgomery streets with a loan from the San Jose Redevelopment Agency and operated by the San Jose Urban Ministry, the inn is perhaps the first in the country to target the mentally ill who are also homeless.

“We’re here all day, all night for them,” said staff director Keith

Schwartz. “It’s a very non-traditional approach.”

The traditional way is to have lots of rules. Lock downs and patrols are common jargon among the staff. And when it’s morning, tell everyone to leave and then lock the door.

Not at the Julian Street Inn, where

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San Jose Inn open to homeless

JULIAN, from Page 1B

names and background information are not required when checking in. "The only thing we need to know is: 'Do you need a bed?'" said Roger Hee, a daytime staff worker.

Among the staff, the motto is dignity, consistency and safety. Their goal: Permanent housing for everyone.

"People here treat you like you are somebody," said Sam Tobias, a 21-year-old San Jose native fighting to kick a cocaine habit and now attending college part time. "I've got a place to go at night. It's not like home, but it's better than living in dope houses or the armory."

Rather than an old warehouse stacked with double beds, or an armory lined with cots, the inn itself is new. So new, in fact, that it won't be finished for at least another three months, although there are already 70 people living at the inn.

When completed, it will look like a motel, with tile covering the outside of the two-story building. A fountain with running water and chairs to relax on will be at the center of the courtyard. Dorm-styled rooms with enough beds eventually for 120 will be upstairs.

Showers, a laundry room and eating area will be downstairs. Lockers can be rented for a quarter a day. A telephone is available and mail can be delivered to each guest.

When the bedrooms are closed during the day, people can stay in the lobby or day room, sleeping, reading or just talking with a buddy.

Outings and counseling sessions are available during the day. Some take part. Others, especially those on medication, often doze.

"Without the daytime program," said Jim McEntee, director of the county Human Relations Commission, "there is no alternative. The public can complain about people hanging out on the streets, but for most it's the only place they can hang."

That is exactly what 19-year-old Mathew Broze has done for the

last eight months. Since his mother ordered him out of their Phoenix home a year ago, he's drifted on the West Coast, searching for an anchor.

Three months ago, when he said he felt like he was "bobbin' around the ocean," he tried to commit suicide.

"I guess I'm glad it didn't work out," Broze said, his eyes red from tears as he tells his story. "I think I'm happy I'm still alive."

Younger guests tell of being hooked on drugs. Older ones tell of living on the street for 10 years or

more, with alcohol often their downfall.

The key to working with these people, say Schwartz and those who operated other shelters in Santa Clara County, is a staff that is sensitive to everyone's needs.

Most of the 20 staff workers at the Julian Street Inn make \$6 to \$9 an hour. Some are college graduates. Others are white collar workers who felt the need to help others, and yet others are former street people who have impressed Schwartz enough that he's hired them.

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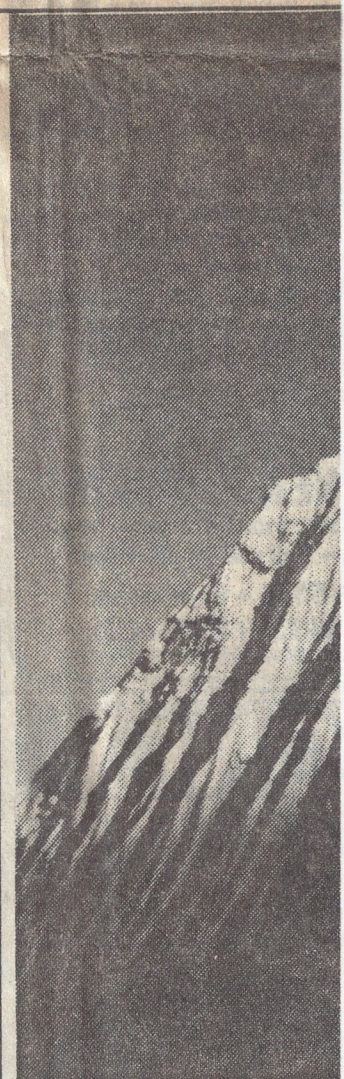
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