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The War on the Poor in America

By Sandra Dorr

They come from all over the West to Grand Junction, loaded on buses like freight from Salt Lake, bailing out of struggling desert towns, riding the rails, praying for jobs on the rigs. They walk, pushing strollers, carrying kids, hoisting backpacks. They bike, and they hitchhike Interstate 70 between Grand Junction and Denver, a long corridor of towns without a single shelter.

If they make it to our city's Homeward Bound shelter, and it's already full, they join the cave- or river-dwellers, and build fires to stay warm.

My children and I have come to recognize the rural homeless through helping at a Catholic Outreach soup kitchen and day center. Hundreds of people volunteer in this generous, not-so-big city. Almost more food than we need appears each week, a new eight-bed youth shelter is in the works, and a local government-church-nonprofit consortium has recently formed to help the poor.

I have never met kinder people.

At 8:30 a.m., we lean over stainless steel counters to scheme a menu from a puzzling cornucopia of meat cuts, semi-wilted vegetables and fruit, canned goods and day-old breads. Enchiladas again? There's enough ham. Our kids jump with excitement: There's a crowd to feed!

At noon we fill the huge serving trays with steaming mounds of ham and sweet potatoes, dress the salad and tomatoes, pull on the required plastic gloves.

The throng presses through the door in a blast of near-freezing air, their faces mottled with cold. "It's the wind," an old man with bags around his feet mutters.

"I haven't eaten in two days," says another, wrapped ridiculously in scarves.

They look like refugees, in shock at being back inside. A woman in an oversized coat gives the thanks in a barely audible voice.

"Bless you, oh bless you," says one of my favorites, a buoyant guy in thick glasses who reminds me of Woody Allen. "Pile it up, there. I'll take as much as you can give me."

For an hour we race like short-order cooks, facing the same range of personality you'd find in a restaurant serving 300 people. I spot Eddie, our local St. Francis, a gentle man often followed by pigeons and children, who spends his Social Security check on birdseed. He smiles timidly. Next to him a pretty woman with dozens of piercings in each ear winks and insists hoarsely, "Oh, it's not that bad out."

A mother with two young children hurries through, not looking at us. White-haired men with shaking hands can't respond when we ask if they want a roll, but help each other to their chairs.

A Native American man steals a glance at us from under a cowboy hat. "Reminds me of being a kid," he mumbles, as we heap up his plate. "More potatoes," he adds, his voice cracking.

A World War II concentration camp survivor, Agate Nesaule, writes in "A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile," that of all the horrors she witnessed as a child, nothing made her feel as worthless as being denied food. "I still despair whenever I see pictures of hungry children and adults humbly waiting for handouts," she says, "because I know their scars will continue to throb for a long time after they are fed."

The Grand Junction soup kitchen's needy eat quickly, looking around like birds. Then they're gone.

Twenty years ago, recognizing an epidemic of people on the streets following the first round of drastic federal cuts under Reagan, New York Gov. Mario Cuomo argued that the problem was "poverty, not pathology."

This century is more frightening, cold and mean as the wind. Over the last four years, despite all efforts, Grand Junction's homeless doubled. In February, a suspicious fire damaged the day shelter.

At any given time, 500 children in Mesa County are homeless. *Five hundred*. When school's out, they ride buses all day to keep warm. The president who signed the No Child Left Behind Act has done exactly that: abandoned them. Of course, we have their CSAP scores.

It's high time our town and others increased the minimum wage, which no longer covers food and rent. Our housing costs jumped 14 percent last year, and almost 50 percent since 2001, leading the state. Add these things up with unaffordable medical insurance and its resultant bankruptcies, new legislation restricting even the bankruptcy option, and the relentless Republican transfer of billions in debt from the wealthiest onto the taxable backs of working people, and you get thousands of families tossed into the street, helpless as garbage.

The War on Terror simply masks the ongoing War on the Poor. Under President Bush's 2007 budget, 1,400 more people in our county lost food aid.

If they can make it to our soup kitchen, where will we put them? How do we keep track of people who are lost? When will we weave the poor into our hearts and minds and bring them back from the war at home?