

Branciforte Branch Library  
230 Gault Street  
Santa Cruz, California 95062

PAMPHLET

# These students have no home

By DAN WHITE  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — High school is rough enough without having to deal with flea bites on your arms, sleeping outside and rotten teeth.

The problems of Santa Cruz County's homeless students are sticky and convoluted. Educators trying to recruit homeless kids to school must deal with their troubled family histories, years outside of public schools and disjointed lives.

The Community Assessment Project, in looking at the issues facing schools in the county, cites a 1995 spring survey of student populations that estimates 890 students and their families were homeless in Santa Cruz County. This number is based on head counts taken at schools. But the figure is actually skimpy compared to the reality, according to county homeless advocates. (See related story).

## Living in motels

Sixteen percent live in motels or hotels. Thirteen percent live on their own without a parent or guardian. About 350 are between the seventh and 12th grades. The rest are kindergarten through sixth grade. Reaching homeless youth and bringing them to schools isn't easy. Forget about quick solutions.

But the county's mainstream and alternative teachers, homeless shelter employees and outreach workers are trying to figure out ways to get homeless kids into schools and keep them there.

- New Horizons, a new alternative school, is running on a shoe-string budget of private funds to help these students.

- The county, through a grant program, is trying to reach students who have no homes and haven't gone to school in years.

- Homeless outreach workers are stepping up their efforts to enroll students whose hard lives have interfered with their education.

"I need education to get through life," said New Horizons student Jessica Vannordstrand, 15. "If you don't have an education, you are going to be nothing, like most of the homeless people are."

Vannordstrand was homeless for four months after rains destroyed the house where she lived in Boulder Creek with her mother. She re-

cently found housing but admits it's hard going straight from being homeless to the pressures of living with others.

## 'I have goals'

But Vannordstrand is self-motivated when it comes to schooling. "If no one else gave me the idea, who would?" she said. "Me. I have goals. I want to finish school, definitely. I want to go to college, definitely. I want to get a home like a normal person would ..."

Her past experiences in public schools were negative. "I just moved up here from LA a year ago and I did go to a public school when I was in junior high and I got jumped and a bunch of stuff," she said. "I will not go to public school."

New Horizons has helped turn Vannordstrand around, but it may not be there forever. The future of the school is always on founding teacher Carol Drewes' mind. Drewes has been fighting a battle with breast cancer. She believes her health has been improving. Still, she wonders who will step in to continue her legacy if she is gone.

"What is being done about it? Who will do it?," said Drewes, who teaches about 15 county youths.

Whether or not Drewes' legacy will continue, she may influence the course of homeless outreach in the area. Her solution to the problem is straightforward.

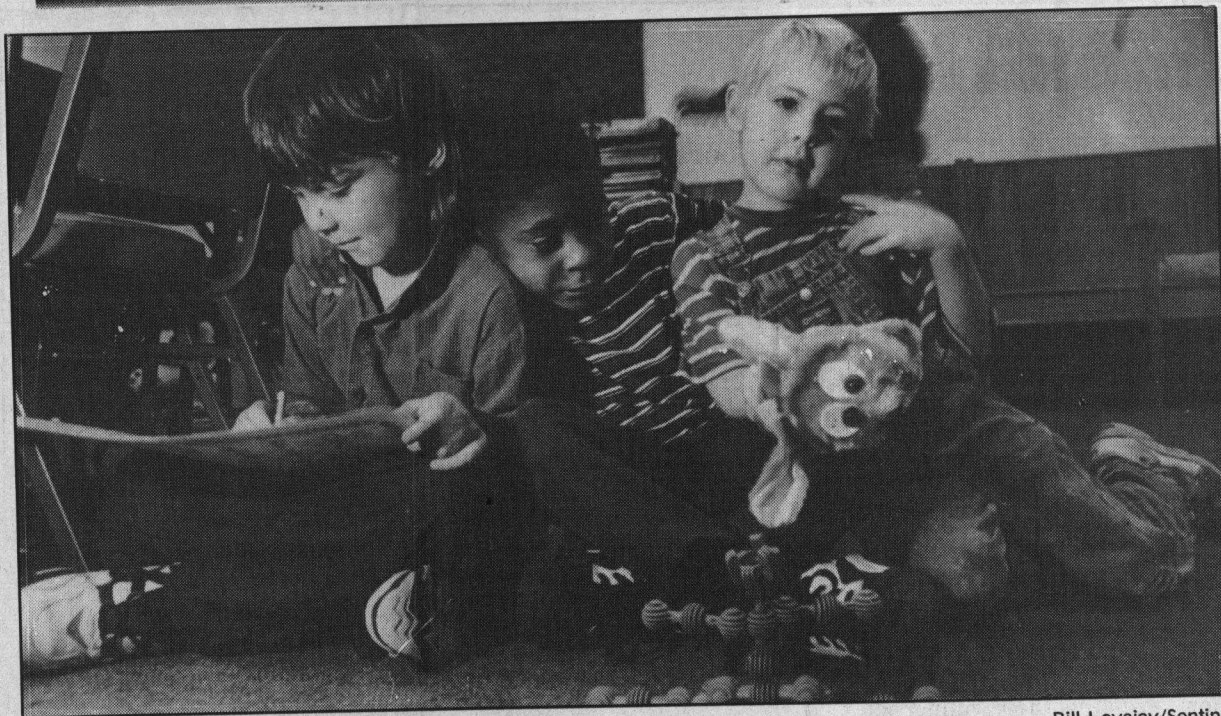
"This is how simple it is," Drewes said. "For any child, at any school, anywhere, you treat that child with dignity and respect, whether you know the history of the child, whether the child has lived in a mansion or street corner ..."

## Gaining self-esteem

Respect and self-esteem is also important to Kimberly Carter, who directed a 10-minute video on area homelessness called "Above the Line." She said educators are dealing with people whose lives are hard and who can be difficult to reach.

"By the time you deal with them, they are very troubled and they will frequently sabotage opportunities that do come their way," Carter said. "They have been living for many years with absolutely no structure whatsoever, and it is very difficult to enroll them in a situation where there is structure and discipline."

## Life in Santa Cruz County



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Homeless students pal around at New Horizons School.

**'I need education to get through life. If you don't have an education, you are going to be nothing, like most of the homeless people are.'**

— Jessica Vannordstrand, 15

Carter, who is pushing for a separate homeless shelter for county youth, has spoken to children who face peer problems in schools on top of economic hardship.

JoAnn Allen of the county Office of Education's homeless education outreach program knows a young girl who held on to her education in spite of the hardships.

## Father abandoned her

"She had every excuse to not go to school," Allen said. "Her father abandoned her. Her mother died. She's working two jobs. Those were not excuses for her. On the day of her mother's funeral she went to school to get her school picture taken."

This year the county has received \$150,000 in federal grant money for homeless education. The purpose, Allen said, is to remove barriers — such as residency requirements — that stop homeless children from enrolling. The money also goes toward bus passes, immunization, and ways to make the homeless blend in without fear of being teased.

"Part of our charge is to make sure they are not stigmatized," Allen said. "If they don't have shoes

or clothes, we will find those for families. If they have dental work that needs to be done, we try to track down some funding."

Allen said many homeless students can thrive in a public school, and that the county has been successful in keeping many in school until graduation. But she said public schools are not for everyone; some children may not be ready for a mainstream school.

One alternative is the privately funded New Horizons School for Santa Cruz County's homeless children, which opened last year and now caters to both youngsters and teenagers.

## Outreach is a must

"This school was started last year because of a vision I had to give all children a fair chance in life" founder and New Horizons teacher Carol Drewes said. "The child maybe hasn't eaten and maybe has flea bites. The child is dirty, uncomfortable and comes to school and he is late and he is already in trouble."

"I am not saying this is any fault of public schools. But they are late, their peers make fun of them, they are dirty ... they are behind in

school. And when they walk in the door, and they don't have their homework, how many crosses do they have to bear?"

Another part of the effort to educate homeless youth is the outreach worker.

"Last year we had little to no success getting kids in school," said Karen Gillette of the Homeless Resource Center on Coral Street in Santa Cruz. "They'd enroll in alternative schools for a week or so and then they wouldn't go. Now with the ability to attend New Horizons, with extra effort by our agency to get clothing and with our youth outreach worker, every teen who is here now is attending school. It is an unbelievable change."

The 30 youths the resource center serves are now enrolled in school, Gillette said.

Gillette attributed much of the success to outreach worker Deborah White.

"The biggest problem was not getting them to go to school but keeping them there," White said. "New Horizons provides the transportation to take the kids there. They are just enthused about going."