

Homeless - 1990-1999

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Living Above the Line — for Good

Residential program for homeless teens gains momentum

by Helen Meservey

KIMBERLY CARTER'S IDEA OF RECU-perating from breast cancer involves tackling one of the biggest problems plaguing Santa Cruz County.

Feeling "consumed with the idea of making my life more meaningful," Carter two years ago decided to see what she could do about the problem of homelessness among teenage residents of the county.

"Santa Cruz is such an excellent community," says Carter, who now finds herself devoted, full-time, to launching Above the Line, a multifaceted residential program for homeless kids and those who face the risk of homelessness and the bevy of troubles so often associated with it. "We live in an area that could come up with a solution. It seemed to me to be just a matter of organizing."

So organize she did. Leaving a successful career as an organizer of various for-profit productions and a raiser of funds, Carter used her business savvy to develop a network of social service workers, business owners, politicians, law enforcement personnel, real estate developers and others who were willing to invest in creating a solution to this devastating social ill.

"There isn't anybody out there who benefits from kids being homeless," she says. "There are a lot of services in place already, so I just worked like a spark plug. It just took some coordination."

Consuming Project

Expecting to devote a few months to this project, Carter is now consumed with it. Supporting herself and her three kids on a grant that pays a third of her former salary, Carter, 44, knows she has begun a new career, working to help adolescents.

She quickly runs down a long mental list of players who also have worked on getting Above the Line in motion, including David Kashtan, founder of Cisco Systems, Morty Cohen, founder of Falcon Trading and SunRidge Farms and Santa Cruz City Manager Dick Wilson. She



Kimberly Carter stands in front of the residential treatment center she has helped establish for homeless teens. The staff at the center will provide emergency shelter, transitional housing, education, counseling and ongoing care for the teens. Carter hopes the center opens in July.

is also anxious to credit real estate developer Namvar Dinyari, who provided the actual facility at 2716 Freedom Blvd. in Watsonville, as well as the adjacent strip of six cottages and a two-story, 2,000-square-foot facility to house the various educational, training and counseling services.

Leaning against a still unfinished wall in what will be the office of a 6,500-square-foot, 10-bedroom house sitting on 1.4 acres, Carter talks easily about this mammoth project. The actual program, expected to begin in earnest in July, will provide an emergency shelter, 18-month transitional housing, education, tutoring, counseling, medical and dental care and ongoing case management. Despite the array of services already in place for the at least 200 home-

less kids here between the ages of 11 and 18 years, no regular, dependable shelter had been in operation.

"We hadn't created a better option for these kids. Young kids don't choose this unless their sense of the options is really bad," she says, adding that the programs that provide education, job training and drug counseling need to work in concert to be truly effective. "You can't make your life work if you don't deal with the drug issue. But you can't really deal with that when you don't know where you're going to sleep. It's like, if my house is on fire, I'm not thinking about my future investments."

Above the Line intends to fill in all the gaps. Plans call for an annual operating budget of \$800,000, only half of which has been raised so

far. Additionally, about half of the \$1.8 million needed to launch the initial program has been raised. ("There's still a lot to do, but we won't stop until we're all the way there," she says.)

Funds have come largely from private donors and a major point-of-sale campaign is currently being conducted in more than 60 businesses throughout the county. The project, which organizer Peggy Flynn hopes will bring in \$200,000 per year, involves the sale of \$2 coupons that customers can include in their final bill. Then, once per month, the business owner sends a check to Above the Line.

Volunteer Orientation

"The real crux of it is that it is a way for the community to participate and become part of the solution," explains Flynn, who conducts volunteer orientation trainings the last Thursday evening of every month. Tonight's session is scheduled to be held at 7 at the business office located at 500 Chestnut St., Santa Cruz. "This campaign is a way to provide discretionary funds so we can provide a full array of services for as long as a child needs them."

Because many social services administered through government funds come burdened with time limitations and other restrictions, Above the Line is committed to garnering enough private financial backing to meet the needs of every client who asks for them.

"We're here. We have the time," Carter says, adding that many of the teens with whom she has spoken mention care and shelter for their pets as their highest priority. "You can have your dogs. You can have more chances if you need them. We'll do whatever it takes to do the healing."

Morty Cohen, who is one of a distinguished list of community leaders who serve on the board of directors, says business leaders and others have contributed eagerly to the project.

"These kids, through no fault of their own, did not inherit the best of circumstances in their lives," he says. "A lot of people know that. This program gives (kids) an opportunity to transform their lives so they can live with integrity and dignity, so they don't have to embrace the legacy they inherited."

Donations can be sent to Above the Line, 505 Cayuga St., Santa Cruz, CA 95062. For more information, call 459-8913 ext. 123. To volunteer, call Peggy Flynn at ext. 205.

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