

Weekend report

Behind the veil

Quake strips away any complacency about Watsonville's housing crisis

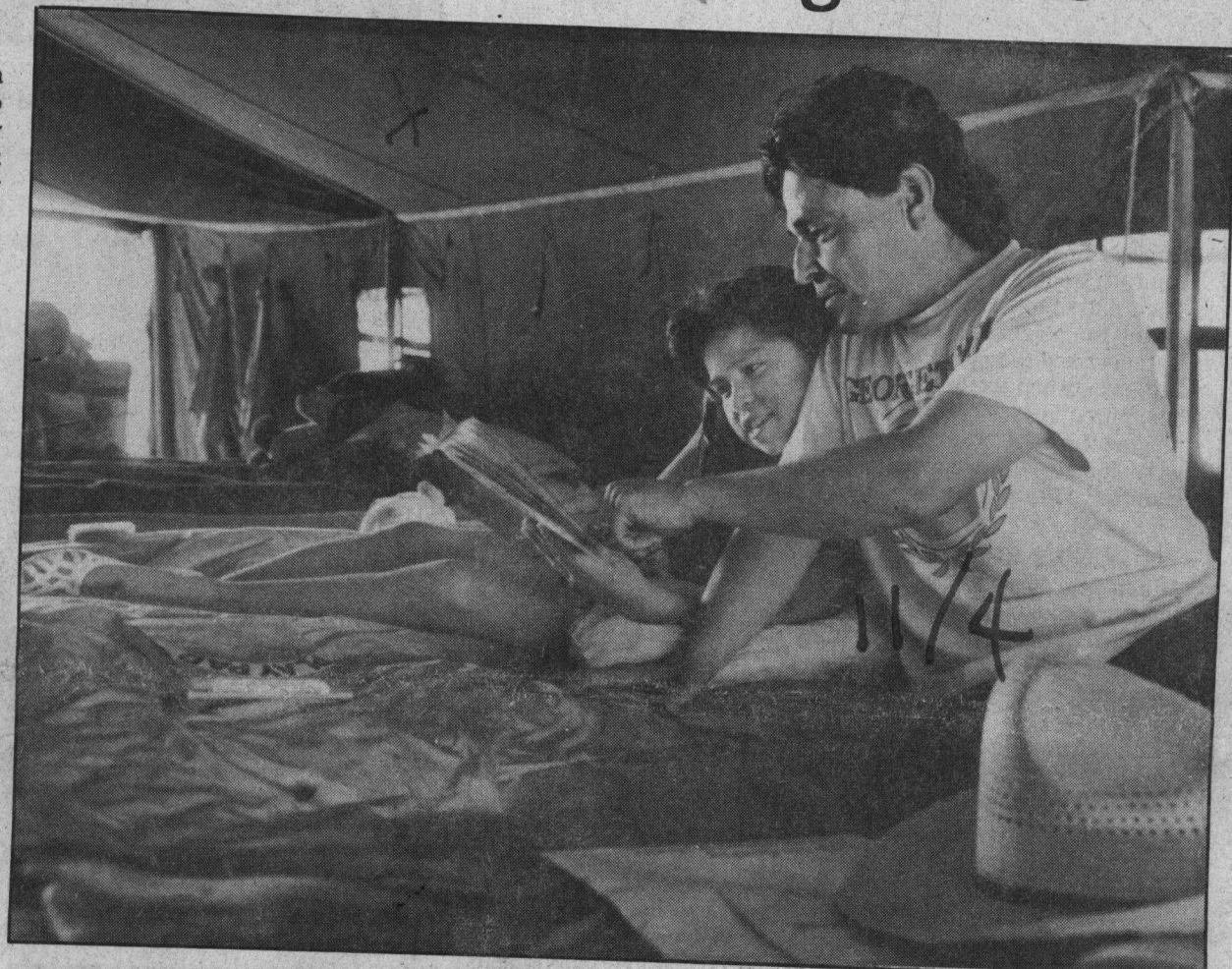
By KATHARINE BAIL
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Before the earthquake, Alicia Hernandez, her husband, two small children and mother-in-law had a roof over their heads. But that's about all that can be said for the garage on Marchant Street that was the family's home for four years.

Designed to protect one car from the elements, the old wood-frame garage was apparently converted to "housing" by nailing its car entrance shut and installing a flimsy partition to create "dining" and "sleeping" areas. The whole structure is about 10-by-15 feet. There is no ceiling, or interior finish to the walls. The building's single window was boarded over years before the earthquake struck, Hernandez said.

The dilapidated structure looks as if it could never have received certification as habitable. Nonetheless, the Hernandez family made a home of it. The farmworker family's prize possession has pride of place in the garage: A well-polished color television set, adorned with a sparkling clean hand-worked doily and a figurine, occupies the focal point of the sleeping area.

Much attention has been devoted in recent days to the plight of those left homeless by the Oct. 17 earthquake. But along with destroying buildings outright, the earthquake has stripped away the



Juan Corrales helps daughter Maria with her homework in a Ramsay Park tent. Kurt Ellison

veil that used to conceal a larger, more shameful problem: The slum conditions in which many working poor people in the Watsonville

area have lived for years.

The Hernandezes' garage-home, for which they paid \$200 a month in rent, has been condemned as a

result of the quake. The house it stands by is leaning dangerously in its direction, buckled just above

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Abandoned laundry still hangs in the yard behind a Rodriguez Street Victorian.

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the outside spigot that served as the Hernandezes' water supply.

Alicia Hernandez is distraught at the idea of losing her home. The family is using a FEMA voucher for motel accommodations for the next month. But Hernandez doesn't know what her family will do when the voucher expires.

"The park awaits us," she said through an interpreter, referring to the "tent city" at Ramsay Park, where some of the family's friends are already living.

Watsonville and Santa Cruz County officials of every political stripe agree that the earthquake has necessarily forced the issue of affordable housing to the top of all local political agendas.

Both Sherry Mehl, the Pajaro

Valley's representative on the county Board of Supervisors, and Dennis Osmer, the Watsonville city councilman who has announced his intention to go after Mehl's seat, agree that for the foreseeable future, providing housing will be the most urgent issue facing local politicians.

Mehl noted that the problem of slum-housing conditions for poor people is not contained within Watsonville's city limits.

She pointed to the example of Marmo's trailer park at Pinto Lake, which the county cited earlier this year for numerous violations of the health and safety codes. At one point, county officials threatened to evict residents of the trailer park — but there was no place else for them to go.

"It was so difficult to try and relocate people," Mehl said. "The Housing Authority waiting list (for subsidized housing) is closed. It

left you wondering if you were moving people into something worse than what you moved them out of."

A new focus

Mehl, Osmer, and a number of people who have been working for years to get affordable housing built in the Watsonville area all say the earthquake, terrifying and devastating as it was, had the benefit of bringing state and national focus onto the housing crisis here. With that focus, they hope, will come dollars.

"I think we're going to get more of a response as a result of the earthquake than we ever have before (from state and national officials)," Osmer said.

Celia Organista, a member of the League of United Latin-American Citizens, who has been lobbying for better low-income housing for years, also said the earthquake may, in the long run, turn out to be a boon to Watson-

ville's poorest residents, although, she said, it is sad that it took a natural catastrophe to wake up "the powers that be."

"We have been repeatedly talking about this," Organista said, referring to the slum conditions many poor people live in. "We have been urging the powers that be to invest in this community. These are the people who keep this community alive — the field workers, the cannery workers, the people who work in small stores."

Organista said officials in Watsonville will no longer be able to "sweep under the carpet" the slum housing that has been quietly allowed for so long — the garages-turned-apartments powered by extension cords running from the main house; the sagging, untended Victorians that housed several families at once; the squalid trailer parks.