

# SEEKING A BETTER LIFE

SANTA CRUZ SHELTER PUTS DOWN-AND-OUT BACK ON THEIR FEET



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

There are 18 families currently living at the Rowland & Pat Rebele Family Shelter in Santa Cruz. It can hold 30 families.

## County has many services to help myriad homeless population

By **SHANNA McCORD**

Sentinel staff writer

### SANTA CRUZ

✓ **A** night of shooting pool and sipping Guinness at a pub in Cong, Ireland, sparked a marriage that would ultimately test an Aptos couple's commitment and survival.

Neil Lyttle, 30, a native of Belfast, Ireland, and Valerie Lyttle, 42, a California native, were financially unprepared for the series of mishaps — including Neil's expired visa that cost \$2,000 to remedy — that marked

their long-distance courtship and led the couple to become homeless and live in an old Ford Probe in Santa Cruz.

"It was nonstop trouble we were in," Valerie said, holding their 10-week-old daughter, Ashlyn. "We had no money and had to go to the welfare office to see about getting food stamps."

Today, the couple is getting back on their feet, living in a low-income apartment complex in Aptos. They're appreciative of help they received this year from the Rowland & Pat Rebele Family Shelter in Santa Cruz, which allowed them to save enough money to rent a place and buy food for their children.

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**ABOVE:** Program Director Peg Foster keeps things running smoothly at the Rowland & Pat Rebele Family Shelter. **LEFT:** The roominess of the Lyttles' Seacliff Highlands townhouse seems huge to 14-month-old Catherine.



# Homeless

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"Wondering where we were going to take showers, get food in our stomachs — that's hard struggling like that," Valerie said. "The shelter freed us from all those worries."

The shelter, one of few for families in Santa Cruz County, opened in May 2005 and so far has served 88 families, including 125 children, said Peg Foster, the shelter's program director.

The shelter is more than a warm place to sleep at night. It has a strict focus on making families self-reliant again — finding jobs and housing.

Of the families who have sought assistance, 71 have improved their financial stability enough to move out of the shelter and into permanent housing, Foster said.

Though the maximum stay is six months, Foster said for most families it doesn't take that long.

"They're getting their lives together and back into the mainstream much faster than we imagined," she said.

The Lyttles' money problems began as the couple bounced back and forth between California and Ireland.

Neil quit his job as a furniture assemblerman in Belfast and moved to California soon after meeting Valerie. The couple wed in Aptos in July 2004, three months after meeting at the pub.

Not long after the wedding, the couple moved to Ireland to be closer to Neil's family, which forced Valerie to sell most of her belongings and the manicure business she owned for several years.

In Ireland, work was hard to find, they said, and Valerie became homesick for family and friends in California, prompting the couple to return to Aptos where they would wind up on the streets because of lack of money and jobs.

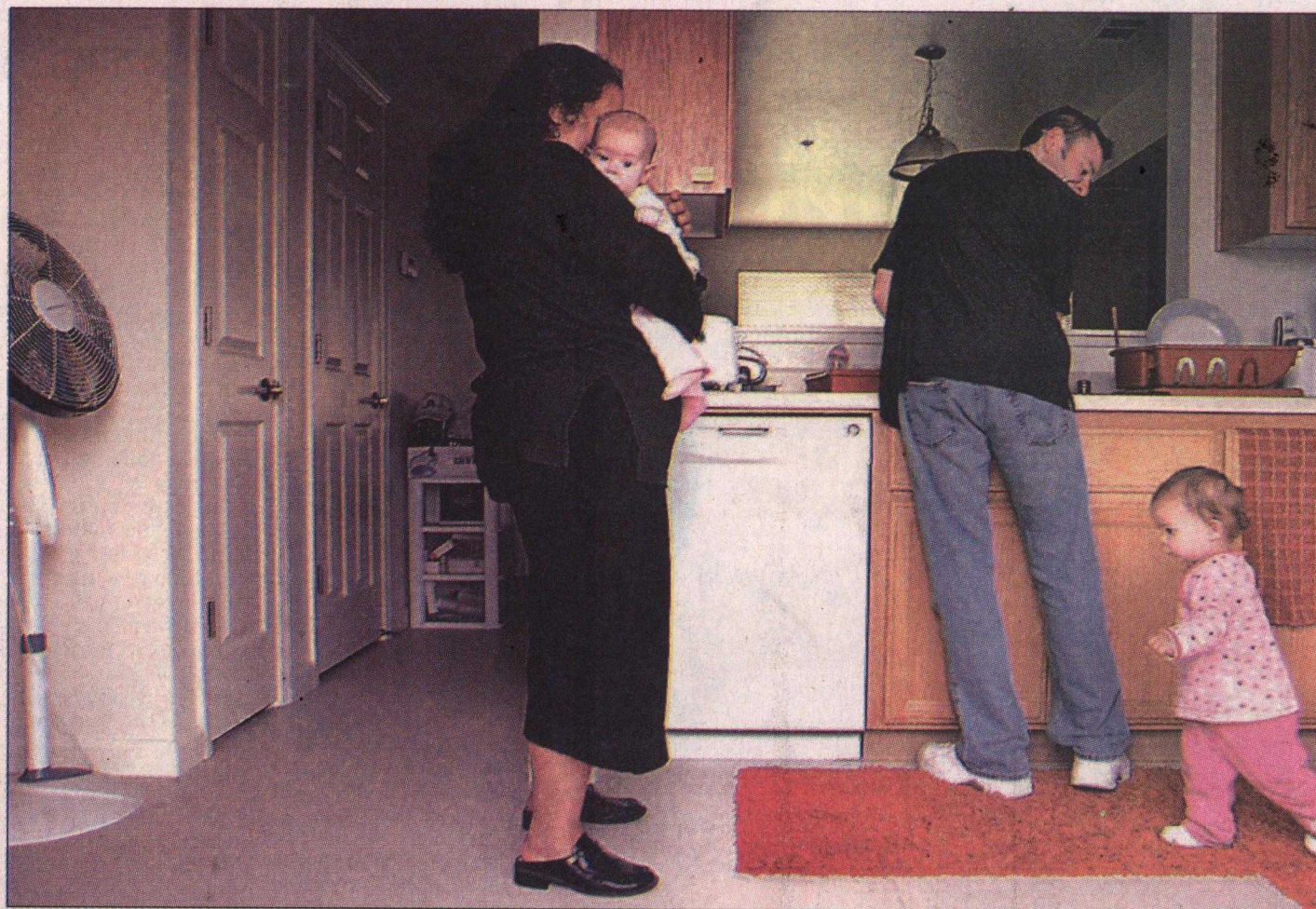
## Meeting county's needs

There are approximately 3,300 homeless people in the county, according to statistics from Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, an organization that works to combat poverty.

The county's high cost of housing is the primary reason for poverty and homelessness, according to the organization.

"The family shelter meets a need we didn't have before," said Paul Brindel, who runs the Community Action Board's shelter project. "Most shelters available are designed for single people. We need more."

Across the county, about 1,300 shelter beds are available, according to the latest estimates. The number includes beds not only for people seeking temporary shelter,



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Former Rowland & Pat Rebele Family Shelter occupants Valerie and Neil Lytle get dinner ready in their new Seacliff Highlands townhouse with their daughters Ashlyn and Catherine.

but also long-term shelter for people transitioning to permanent housing.

Currently, 18 families are housed at the Rowland & Pat Rebele Family Shelter, which has a capacity for 30 families.

The majority of families in the shelter are referred from various social services in the county. While most are single mothers, Foster said there has been a surprising number of single fathers and married couples with two or three children. At least half are victims of domestic violence, and some are battling drug and alcohol addictions or other behavioral problems, she said.

The shelter is part of the Homeless Services Center campus on Coral Street, which includes laundry, hygiene, and postal and food services for the chronically homeless.

The shelter is designed for homeless people with children who are serious about turning their lives around.

A strict screening process weeds out people unwilling to kick drug and alcohol habits, and anyone not interested in finding a job and housing. Clients accepted to live at the family shelter are required to save mon-

ey, pitch in on chores around the shelter, actively seek work, stay off drugs and alcohol, stick to the shelter's curfew and be willing to have their rooms inspected.

"We require them to save 85 percent of their income," Foster said. "They get a crash course in budgeting and have to meet with a case manager on a weekly basis."

Families leaving the shelter have saved an average of \$1,000 to \$2,000, Foster said.

## Accepting help

Neil and Valerie had no place to live, no jobs and very little money when they returned to Santa Cruz County in October 2005.

They were looking for work when their daughter Catherine was born. The family had to live in their Ford Probe.

Valerie also learned she was pregnant again.

Around that time, Neil discovered his visa would expire and he had to return to Ireland to address the immigration paperwork. The visa cost \$900, plus a roundtrip plane ticket for

\$1,000, which was paid for with money from his dad to help the couple get settled here.

Neil and Valerie learned about the Rowland & Pat Rebele Family Shelter before Neil flew back to Ireland.

"It was a scary, scary feeling, being pregnant and having Catherine and he was flying away," Valerie said.

Neil said, "Knowing she was safe in the shelter put me at ease. Knowing she had a roof over her head was a big load off my mind."

Valerie seized the opportunity to live in the shelter and used the time to re-establish her manicure clientele.

She and Catherine lived there for less than two months while Neil obtained a visa and returned to Santa Cruz County to look for work.

Now the family lives in a two-bedroom low-income apartment in Aptos.

"Being homeless really taught me humility," Valerie said. "I had to swallow my pride and accept help."

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## Shelters open doors

As overnight temperatures drop into the 30s, various homeless shelters across the county expect to be busy.

The National Guard Armory near DeLaveaga Park has been one of the county's emergency winter shelters for several years.

The armory, with 100 beds available nightly, opened Nov. 15 and is set to close April 15. The armory's overnight shelter is run by the Homeless Services Center with funding from the county.

Other shelters include:

- The Pajaro Rescue Mission, for men only.
- Interfaith Satellite Shelter Program, a year-round service provided by various churches.
- Jesus, Mary and Joseph Home, for women and children only. Requires clean and sober living.
- Pajaro Valley Shelter Services, for women and children in transition.
- Salvation Army Emergency Shelter in Watsonville.

■ Page Smith Community House, a transitional center for single adults. Participants are required to save 30 percent of their income.

■ River Street Shelter, for 32 single adults.

Across the county, about 1,300 shelter beds are available, according to the Community Action Board, a group that works to help people in poverty.

The number includes beds not only for people seeking temporary shelter, but also long-term shelter for people transitioning to permanent housing.

For information about homeless shelters in Santa Cruz County, call 763-2147 or 458-6020.