

'I am homeless now, too'



Evacuated from their retirement hotel, Emily Gray, left, and Evelyn Shipley, second from left, join the newly homeless at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

Tom Van Dyke —
Mercury News

Denizens of Santa Cruz's streets make room for the newly dispossessed — those who lost their homes in the quake

By Joyce Gemperlein
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The stage lights are low and shining, center stage, on a pile of blankets.

Beyond the footlights, cots are lined up in the area where the audience would normally be, were these normal times in Santa Cruz and were this a normal gathering in the Civic Auditorium. But there is no audience. Sitting up and staring into space more often than lying down and sleeping are the homeless — the new homeless and the old homeless.

One older woman glares at a bearded man whose hair is twisted in dreadlocks. He smells of whiskey. She hunches her shoulders and slides away from him on her cot. Her hair is fashionably cut and dyed. Her shoes are of fine, unscuffed suede. She tightens her hold on her purse, which is color-coor-

inated with her skirt and swinging from her shoulder by a gleaming gold chain.

"Are you homeless?" she is asked.

"No!" she says with a passion that made her chin tremble. "No," she says again and then refuses to speak more.

The days and the nights have been like this at the half-dozen shelters that have been set up in Santa Cruz County to provide care and comfort to the hundreds of people whose homes are gone or damaged by Tuesday's earthquake. Minute by minute, middle-class people who last week might have insisted that they could not survive without their microwave oven or downy bed pillow have been coping with the fact that they now have a horrifying number of things in common with street people, for whom a sleeping bag has always been a luxury.

Some, like the finely dressed woman, refuse to accept it.

Others, like Michael Telegh, who works at Lipton Tea Co. in Santa Cruz, say the destruction of his home has made him realize that anyone is just a whisker — or a 15-second rumbling of the earth — away from being the very street person that many people revile, ignore or condemn.

"A few weeks ago I gave a guy on the street a \$5 bill because I felt sorry for him and proud of how I had made it in life. He was so different from me. I was not him, I was luckier and better than him. Now, here I am. I'm him," says Telegh, who spends his days at the shelter but has been sleeping under a tree near the Lipton factory. "I'm scared. I'm depressed."

In any city, the forced mingling of the new homeless with the old homeless would be noteworthy. But in Santa Cruz, it has a special and, perhaps, vicious irony.

See HOMELESS, Page 2C

2C Saturday, October 21, 1989 ■ San Jose Mercury News

The Quake of '89

Quake victims are a new class of homeless

HOMELESS, from Page 1C

Santa Cruz, with its homeless people roaming through what until Tuesday was a delightful business and shopping area, has been fertile ground for the national debate that rages over what to do about the homeless.

Among other things, the city has enacted and has been enforcing an anti-camping law. Street people cited for violating the rule were subject to hefty fines. Sandra Loranger, an advocate for the homeless, recently spent 23 days of a 45-day sentence in jail for feeding the homeless without having the proper license.

Loranger is hard at work feeding the homeless again. But now she is doing it without fear of being arrested. She is working with the Red Cross in the kitchen of the Civic Auditorium, an effort to serve more than 500 meals a day that is universally lauded and supported by the city government and local businesses.

Loranger says she believes that the work and travails of Santa Cruz homeless advocates and feeders have served as a dress rehearsal for the quakes.

"What we are doing here isn't any different than what homeless advocates do on the streets," says Loranger. "But now it is more massive and more accepted."

"One would hope that something would be learned by government

“Being homeless, now I know that you feel like you are at the bottom of the totem pole.”

— Fern Habecker

officials from this, that times and situations create conditions of hunger and we should not make distinctions between people," she says as she unpacks one of dozens of cartons of donated fruit-drink containers.

But such a mindset is hard to erase. The state Office of Emergency Services said Friday that it will refer to the new homeless as "displaced" to avoid confusing them with pre-quake homeless.

Many long-time homeless people are counseling the "displaced."

Ronald Bradley, 47, is wearing his usual ripped jeans and sandals but is sober — which, he says, is highly unusual. Bradley has lived on the streets of Santa Cruz for at least a year. He is now sharing space in the auditorium with people he used to pester for spare change so he could buy a bottle of booze.

He says he has talked to a few of those people at the Red Cross shelter and advised them on how to be streetwise.

"You think this will help them later to understand me better?" he

asks.

Hakim Hassan, a longtime advocate for the homeless, a former candidate for Santa Cruz City Council and now a cook at the shelter, doesn't think so.

"Look at all this food we are getting in," he says, motioning to crates of brussels sprouts and other foods stacked against a wall. "Do you know how hard we have to beg getting food for street people normally? I'm elated all this is happening, but it's like people are on the Good Ship California. Everybody's pitching in. But it's a class thing, and when it is over, things will go back to the way they were."

Fern Habecker, 79, can't wait to get back to the way things were.

"I miss my bed. I miss my bathtub and my telephone and all the little things around my house, all the things you take for granted," says Habecker, 79, who has been living at the shelter since she was evacuated after the quake from her apartment at the Palomar Inn, a Pacific Garden Mall landmark.

Like many of the new homeless,

Habecker sees a distinction between herself and the old homeless. She says she has long felt that the homeless who roam the streets do not try to help themselves or become useful citizens. She still thinks that.

"But I am homeless now, too, and I'm grateful for what they are doing here for us, but I am depressed and humbled. Being homeless, now I know that you feel like you are at the bottom of the totem pole," she says.

Bradley, the seasoned homeless man who is giving people such as Habecker pointers on being down and out, is mourning his own losses.

"I had a nice little camp outside that a lot of these new people wouldn't think is much to lose, but it was mine and I had all my blankets there and all my trinkets there, things I pick up on the street that are a part of my life," he says.

"The earthquake ruined it all. I can't find anything."

Then Bradley smiles and pulls a shiny earring out of his pocket.

"But I found something new. One of these new homeless people lost this during the earthquake. I'm going to take the clip off and drill a hole in it and make a pendant out of it," he says.

It would be, he says, his souvenir of the earthquake and of the sweet but tragic time when people who had once sneered at him became him.