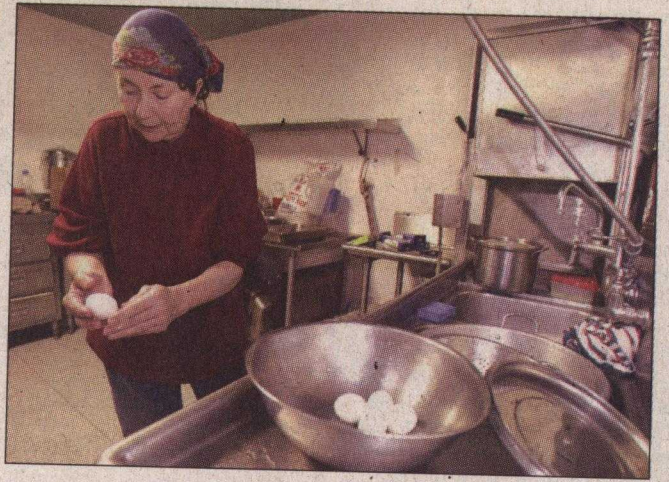


Shelter marks 20 years of aiding homeless



ABOVE: Sylvia Beard-Blan is working to turn her life around with the help of the staff and facilities at the River Street Shelter. **TOP:** Leigh Liles, who has worked at the River Street Shelter as a cook for seven years, peels boiled eggs for Thursday's dinner. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

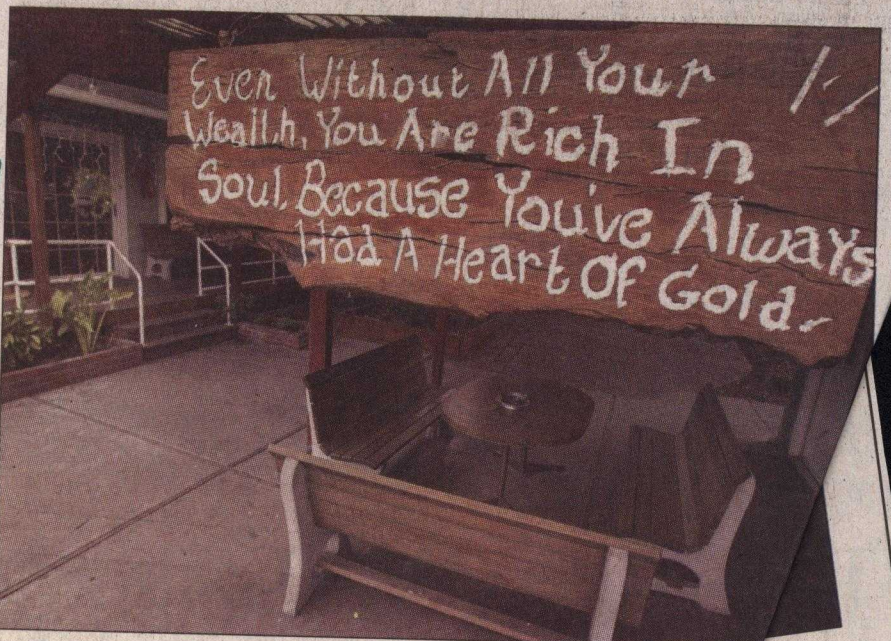
River Street facility
has helped many
turn lives around

By **SHANNA McCORD**
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#Homeless-2000
SANTA CRUZ — Sylvia Beard-Blan glows like a lottery winner when talking about the new direction her life has taken since landing at the River Street Shelter in August.

The 48-year-old recovering cocaine addict, who says she lived on the streets on and off since 1981, survived a long marriage of abuse and was convicted of a string of felonies, now sleeps in a warm bed at night and receives medical attention for deep depression.

Beard-Blan celebrated Christmas with a tree, gifts and a table full of pastries and other food for the first time that she can remember.



A handmade sign offers inspiration at the River Street Shelter, which has been serving the county for 20 years.

Shelter

Continued from Page A1

"It's just like a rescue here," Beard-Blan said about the River Street Shelter. "I was ready to die. That's where I was headed — I didn't want the street life but I didn't feel I could do anything more."

Beard-Blan is one of several thousand people in the past two decades who have used the River Street Shelter to get off the streets and take a shot at starting down a new path.

The River Street Shelter was started in November 1987 by a citizens committee that convinced the city and county to provide money to purchase the property for a permanent shelter. It was one of the first such services for homeless people in Santa Cruz County.

"I think it's a very important piece to handling the very difficult problem of homelessness," Santa Cruz Mayor Ryan Coonerty said. "It's an inspiring place, something the community should be proud of."

It has been run by Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center since 1989. It serves homeless adults with special emphasis on those with a mental illness or chemical dependency — often both.

The River Street Shelter helps an estimated 300-400 people each year, providing 32 beds, phones, laundry services and serves breakfast and dinner. Residents are typically allowed to stay 30 days, though exceptions can be made for longer stays, manager Tracey Heggum said.

Residents have access to mental health counselors and on-site 12-step meetings such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to support the recovery process.

Residents get together on Friday and Saturday nights to watch movies on the television in the shelter's cozy living room, a big part of what makes them feel like family.

"It's a loving and safe environment for people to be inside," said Heggum, who was homeless herself many years ago. "Here they get to see they're valuable and worthwhile.



Cheryl Ruby is director of the River Street Shelter.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

It's the first step in a process of rebuilding their lives."

The majority of River Street residents return to the streets when their 30 days are up, Heggum said. Many wait for 30 days to pass — a mandatory waiting period — before signing up for the shelter again.

Most never seek permanent housing, she said.

"A lot go back outside and camp and come through as many times as they can in a year," Heggum said. "It's at least opening their minds to the idea that housing is possible for them. Housing is the goal for people who are open to that."

Few homeless shelters in Santa Cruz County offer the services of River Street. The Salvation Army, Pajaro Valley Shelter, the National Guard Armory in the winter and the Jesus, Joseph and Mary Home are other shelters that operate on a smaller scale.

It costs nearly \$500,000 to run the River Street Shelter each year, Heggum said.

The majority of the funding, about \$345,000, comes from the Santa Cruz County Mental Health Department; the city of Santa Cruz contributes \$20,000; a grant provides \$21,000;

\$4,000 comes from FEMA; \$5,000 from the United Way; the Human Resources Agency gives \$79,000 and other money is raised privately, Heggum said.

The shelter receives a wealth of other community contributions.

La Mission Restaurant contributes monthly meals; the Santa Cruz Bible Church has been a regular supporter and Temple Beth El of Aptos has brought dinner every Sunday night for 20 years.

Beard-Blan left the River Street Shelter a month ago. She moved next door to Page Smith Community House, a transitional shelter for single men and women. For now she says the focus is on recovering from the cocaine addiction and working through issues related to depression.

She hopes to go to school and one day start her own business.

"I've created a whole lot of wreckage in my life and I have no one to blame but myself," Beard-Blan said. "It ain't going to be easy but it is possible to find a new way."

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