

*'They've got this zombie-ish walk to them. Many need help.'*

LEE KANELLIS, SALVATION ARMY

# OLD AND ON THE STREET



A woman, her belongings in a shopping cart, waits for dinner at the Watsonville Salvation Army on Thursday night. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

## Watsonville sees surge in frail, elderly homeless

By **TOM RAGAN**  
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### WATSONVILLE

**T**he increasing number of frail and elderly homeless showing up on the doorstep of the Salvation Army in search of a place to sleep is beginning to alarm social services director Lee Kanellis, a woman not prone to exaggeration.

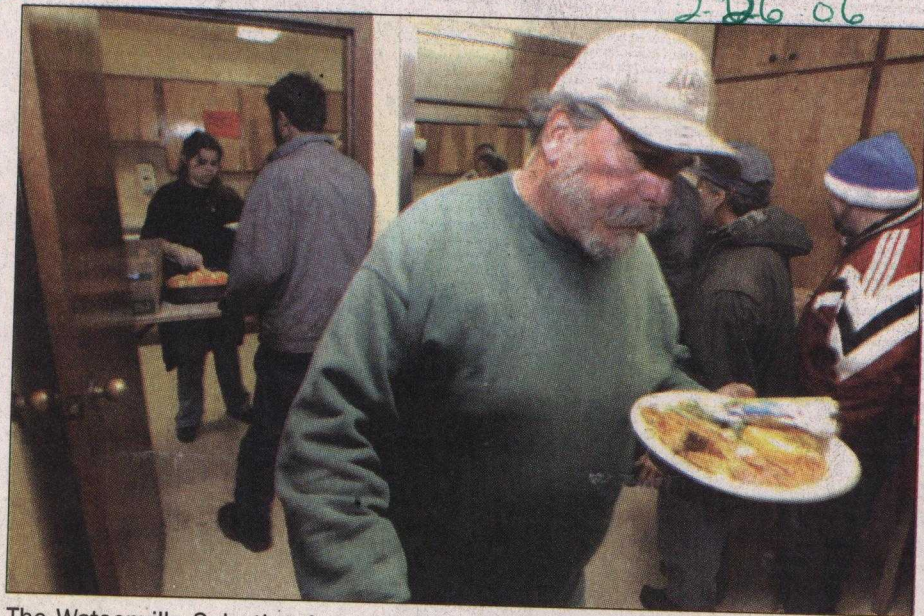
"It's getting scary, actually," said Kanellis, who's worked for The Salvation Army on Union Street in Watsonville for more than a decade and has seen more hardship than she cares to admit.

There are times, she said, when she'll look out her office window just a few blocks from the town square and see elderly people standing in the street, their shopping carts momentarily stalled, a faraway look in their eyes.

It's gotten to the point where they're becoming a risk to themselves, she said.

"You can tell that they're dazed, and you get the feeling they don't know where they are or what they're doing," she added. "They've got this zombie-ish walk to them. Many need help. Some of them have dementia."

While the city of Santa Cruz has long been accustomed to dealing with the homeless — including the passage of an ordinance that prohibits them from sleeping on benches



The Watsonville Salvation Army serves between 50 and 60 meals to the homeless or hungry every night, according to Major Carlos Gonzatti.

— Watsonville is starting to feel the effects of an often overlooked segment: elderly and disabled Latinos, who make up a third of the city's homeless population.

They're the ones who've worked in the fields all their lives but now have no family close, no Social Security to rely on, and no health insurance to take care of them — just an uncanny threshold of tolerance when it comes to making do with very little.

Of the estimated 300 people who roam the streets of Watsonville, searching out the warmer corners in side alleys, or hunker down by the Pajaro River, Kanellis ventures at least a third of them are older than 60 — some as old as 80.

As much as the Salvation Army tries to help by providing as many beds as possi-

# Homeless

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ble, the unfortunate upshot is that there are fewer than 75 cots, and at least half of those are filled by foreign seasonal workers who cross deserts and rivers to get here — often with only the clothes on their backs and a will to work.

And fewer spots to sleep, of course, leave some of the elderly with no choice but to stake out places around town or leave the city altogether, making a bee-line for the larger cities of Los Angeles or San Francisco, where there's more room and a wider variety of accommodations for them, Kanellis says.

But most of them just stick it out, and learn how to live off the streets.

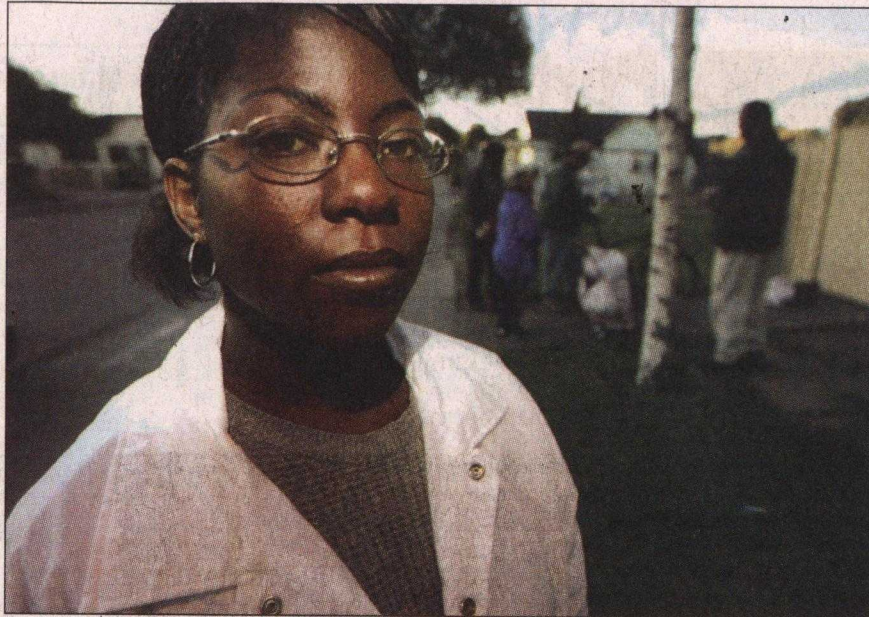
## A fieldworker's woes

Miguel Rangel, a retired farmworker who's lived in Watsonville and toiled in the fields for the past 50 years, is down on his luck. His calloused hands and the large gaps between his teeth tell volumes about his life.

"When I first came here, I was young and full of energy and I could work for hours without stopping," the 70-something Rangel said in Spanish recently, a hint of boasting in his voice as he sat down to eat at Loaves and Fishes, a food pantry on Second Street.

"Now I'm just an old man, and I need help, and I just don't know what the next day will bring, to be honest. But if you put your faith in God, it always works out. That's the way I was raised, and that's the way I still am."

But even Rangel's faith and his knack



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

On the street for two months in Watsonville, Cassandra Gardner, 27, can sleep at the Salvation Army, but must leave during the day.

for being able to sleep in small spaces have done little to head off last week's bad news from Second Harvest Food Bank, which found that tens of thousands of San Benito and Santa Cruz county residents go hungry each day, more than twice the national average.

The two issues — that of hunger and a lack of housing — are linked, because something's got to give on a fixed income, and often it ends up being a home to live in or less food to eat, according to Kanellis and Second Harvest Food Bank.

A study of a random sampling of 300 people in February and March last year

discovered the following:

■ 66 percent of respondents face food insecurity, up 17 percent; 39 percent experience hunger, up 18 percent.

■ 11,886 different people receive assistance from Second Harvest agencies weekly (about 44,000 a month, up from 32,000 in 2001.)

■ One in three households had a monthly income of less than \$500 last month.

■ 11 percent are elderly or disabled.

As Kanellis notes, some of the elderly who are lucky enough to receive help from the federal government only net

about \$400 a month, not enough to pitch in for shared living.

"The city needs more affordable housing," says Kanellis.

## Housing void

While the city has made headway in building new affordable housing in the past decade, and is to be commended for its efforts, Kanellis said, there's still an obvious void, particularly among those who make very little money or are living on a fixed income.

Add shrinking state and federal funds into the mix and suddenly all cities in Santa Cruz County have a problem on their hands, according to Paul Brindel, shelter project program director for the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County Inc., devoted to combatting poverty and what causes it by coordinating community programs.

"There's never enough affordable housing for folks, and it's not just the elderly who are suffering," said Brindel. "One of the fastest growing populations among the homeless is families with children, and what's happening is many are just leaving the county. They just can't afford it."

According to a 2000 Homeless Census conducted by the board, there were an estimated 3,000 homeless people in Santa Cruz County, with 18 percent living in Watsonville and nearly 40 percent in the city of Santa Cruz, and the rest in the surrounding unincorporated areas of the county.

Remarkably, 10 percent of the homeless who were interviewed in the census said they held full-time jobs, 30 percent held part-time jobs, and a third of them lived out of their cars, trucks and vans

and didn't consider themselves to be homeless.

According to the census, the average amount of time spent on the streets was five months with intermittent periods of employment.

"One of the misnomers is that there's the homeless and the rest of us," said Brindel. "But it's not. It's our relatives, our sons, our daughters, our neighbors, and they're cycling in and out."

And now come the elderly, Brindel said.

"There was a time, maybe five years ago, that it was rare for elderly to show up at shelters," he said. "But now it's happening more and more often. The rental market is just way beyond the price of what people bring in in Social Security and disability payments.

"It just doesn't catch up with the cost of living out here."

That's a fact of life that has been proven true with many of the homeless, not just the elderly.

Take Cassandra Gardner, 27, originally from Maryland, having most recently migrated here from Florida.

She followed her boyfriend to Santa Cruz a few months ago but was forced to take to the streets after he became physically abusive.

"Nothing worked out for me here," said Gardner, who ended up seeking shelter at the Salvation Army in Watsonville. "I couldn't find a job, and even if I did, it was like, 'Good luck, how am I going to afford a place anyway?'"

Now she's headed back to Maryland, her home state.

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