



Annette March, Daniel Madison and Stephanie Golino are working on March's Oral Histories of People Experiencing Homelessness project which includes photos, performance, music, speakers and audience interaction. Madison has been homeless for nearly a year. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

**'Over the years, I began to get to know the homeless community here. First by just noticing people and they would notice me and starting to say hi and then have conversations and hang out with them a little. Our neighbors are all the people who share the neighborhood. Whether we have a house or we don't have a house.'**

ANNETTE MARCH, project director

# Telling Tales

Project focuses on homeless stories, changing stereotypes

By CALVIN MEN

calvinmen@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Annette March said she wants to give back the dignity to the homeless people of Santa Cruz. "You know what they say, they say mostly look me in the eye and recognize I'm human, too," March said. March is the founder and project director for Not the Other: The Oral Histories of People Experiencing Homelessness. The organization focused on dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions Santa Cruz residents have about the homeless through publishing interviews with homeless residents. "The point of the project is to make visible those everyday lives of people who live on the street and to get people to begin to question their own assumptions and stereotype," March

SEE PROJECT ON C3

## AT A GLANCE

**WHAT:** Not the Other: Oral Histories of People Experiencing Homelessness, a project focused on changing stereotypes about homeless people in Santa Cruz.

**EVENTS:** The project will have a photo exhibit at the Santa Cruz Public Library from April 1 to June 30.

**DETAILS:** www.oralhistoriesproject.org.

## PROJECT

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said. Since June 2013, she's interviewed hundreds of homeless people on video about how they became homeless, what their daily struggles are and what they want the most.

The most recent homeless census for Santa Cruz County, which came out in October, showed 3,536 people without an address, a 28 percent increase since the census was conducted in 2011.

March says the numbers aren't likely to decrease.

"The homeless people are not going to go away," she said. "They're here. They live here. They're our neighbors."

March, a retired Cal State Monterey Bay professor who taught literature and cultural studies, said her friendships with the homeless started years ago. She began walking around the neighborhood as part of her

exercise routine and started talking to homeless people she frequently saw.

"Over the years, I began to get to know the homeless community here," she said. "First by just noticing people and they would notice me and starting to say hi and then have conversations and hang out with them a little."

March believes a majority of the Santa Cruz homeless population are not dangerous. She sees them as neighbors who just happen to be without shelter.

"Our neighbors are all the people who share the neighborhood," she said. "Whether we have a house or we don't have a house."

Since March began the documenting the stories, she's garnered support and donations from the community. The project has a staff of 14 volunteers that have worked to photograph, transcribe and record all the interviews.

The website, www.oralhistoriesproject.org, has 40 videos March conducted with homeless people.

"Are there mentally ill among the homeless? Yes. Are there drug addicts? You bet. Is that everybody? No," she said.

The project is fiscally sponsored by the Homeless Services Center, meaning it serves as a third party for donations to the voices project, said Valerie Thomas, director of communications for the shelter.

"I think anytime we can raise the public awareness of the issue of people experiencing homelessness, it's going to be beneficial for doing what we're trying to do here at the Homeless Services Center," Thomas said.

Daniel Madison, a 53-year-old homeless man interviewed for the project, was open to the idea from the beginning.

"It makes people aware of individual stories and not just blanket stereotypes," he said. "That not everybody is a problem. Not everybody is an emergency that needs to be taken care of."

Madison has been homeless in Santa Cruz since April 2013 and is diagnosed

with bipolar disorder and Gilbert's syndrome, a common mild liver condition.

"I'm pretty stable now but not always," Madison said. "I'm not a danger, just different."

Madison is working with March and Stephanie Golino, a writer, on a play to show the struggles of homeless people.

Golino, 66, said she generally feared and avoided homeless people before she started working with the project.

"It was almost too much to think about," she said. "There was a lot of fear because of a lot of different things that go on in the street."

But through March, she was introduced to the stories behind the people and gradually learned why some people become homeless.

"I understand that it's a pretty fine line that keeps you with a job and family relationships," she said.

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