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## Home With the Homeless

Spending a night with the L.A. count

by CHRISTINE PELISEK

“Can you see anyone?” asks 33-year-old Elson Trinidad, slowly sliding his silver '92 Saturn to the curb near Cypress Recreation Center in Cypress Park, about three miles north of downtown L.A. “Yeah, finally!” responds Monica, as she points toward a dark form beneath a down comforter next to a concrete staircase and shopping cart. “Look, it’s two people having sex. Look at the blankets move.”

As it turns out, the community center and park off San Fernando Road is a haven of the homeless. After a quick circling of the park, Monica pulls out a tally sheet and checks off under “unspecified gender” an additional five homeless. “It is kind of adventurous,” admits Elson.

Elson and Monica were among 800 people — many of them homeless themselves — who canvassed 500 census tracts in L.A. County last week to meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s demand for a more accurate assessment of the homeless. The two strangers slowly crisscrossed 15 blocks of streets, rail yards and the 110 and 5 freeway overpasses when they discovered that they had something in common. Monica, a 28-year-old unemployed mother who is living at the YMCA in Hollywood with her 15-month-old son, sold crack on the same street corner in East Hollywood where Elson grew up.

“What a small world,” she said.

Elson went on to graduate with a journalism degree from the University of Southern California and currently works as a research associate. On the weekends, he sings in a gospel choir at St. Agatha’s Church in L.A. Monica, a former Los Angeles Unified School District substitute teacher, found herself living on a couch under a bridge at Melrose and Normandie after she got addicted to the crack she was selling. She ended up with hepatitis.

But, last Thursday, the L.A. natives were on a mission. At stake in L.A. County: \$52 million in federal money shared by about 150 homeless programs run by 75 nonprofit agencies.

“The feds have asked for more accountability,” said Siri Khalsa, director of development and communications with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, a city and county agency that controls federal and local funds for the homeless, which led the count. “It is good. We want to make sure that taxpayer money is used wisely. This will give us all a better understanding of the homeless problem and why they became homeless so we can better serve them.”

The count comes at a time when the needs of the homeless are being overlooked by development and downtown gentrification and are threatened by a city ordinance, which makes it a crime to loiter outside the city’s public libraries between 9 p.m. and 9 a.m. City officials have a new resolve to scatter homeless programs around the county.

“We have seen homeless youth spiking in numbers and Section 8 vouchers being cut,” said Councilman Eric Garcetti, who stopped by the Hollywood Count headquarters. “There is a stable chronic homeless community and we are finding people who don’t fit the bill. The safety net is fraying. Hopefully this count is a part of holding it back.”

The count included jails, rehabilitation facilities, shelters, and motels that accept government vouchers. In the coming weeks, an in-depth, in-person survey of 3,300 homeless people and a telephone survey of households will also be carried out. The results, expected in June, will be used to decide which programs get federal money. The three-day count cost the city and county \$350,000.

In Hollywood, more than 90 volunteers sporting bright orange baseball hats with the words "Everyone Counts 2005 Homeless County in L.A.," gathered at People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) last Thursday night. Volunteers were paired up with the homeless, fed muffins and given maps detailing the 33 census tracts in Hollywood, tally sheets and clipboards. Monica and Elson joined forces after spending more than an hour in line together. "I got here at 7:30 p.m.," said Monica, who didn't want to miss the chance to make \$10 an hour. "We were the first ones in line."

For the past two years she has been bouncing from the street to shelters to transitional housing, with no job prospects in sight. "I never thought I would be living in a shelter or transitional house," she said. "But I would rather be where I am at than selling drugs. I never thought my life would end up so twisted."

By 1 a.m., around 50 volunteers returned to PATH. Monica waited patiently in line for the \$40 the county agency doled out to its homeless volunteers. Elson decided to give Monica the \$12 he received for driving. She is grateful for the gas money. For Elson, the experience was a true eye opener.

"I realized that the homeless are not just people who live on the street," he said. "This count will help us gauge the problem even more. It also enabled the homeless and non-homeless to interact in a way that is not normally possible and hopefully both sides will understand each other more."