



Paper: Telegraph, The (Nashua, NH)

Title: About 100 turn out for 3rd annual 'homeless fair' in Nashua

Date: December 7, 2007

NASHUA - It's not always the big steps, like finding a place to live or getting a job you can count on to put food on your table.

Little things, too, make a difference. For example, consider the free haircuts provided Thursday at the third annual "homeless fair" sponsored by the Greater Nashua Continuum of Care and held at **Harbor Homes** on High Street.

"I had a lot of dead ends, and my hair wasn't growing," said Melissa Arsenault, 18. "I always wanted to have my hair layered."

Her boyfriend, Marc Buck, 25, wants someday to grow his hair shoulder-length, like he wore it in high school.

Until then, a trim is in order.

"I didn't have the money to have my hair trimmed," Buck said.

He and Arsenault were among about 100 people who attended the only fair in New Hampshire tied to the nationwide Project Homeless Connect initiative.

The advantage of having a fair is that it offered a variety of services and materials under one roof, a sort of "one-stop shopping" expo for people struggling just to get by, organizers said.

At the fair, a mix of nonprofit groups and local businesses provided such services as health screening and eye exams. Men and women could get winter coats, hats and scarves, other clothing and information about services available to homeless and people described as being "at the edge of homelessness."

Arsenault and Buck fall into the category of being at the edge. She said she's staying with friends on Ash Street. He has a place on Temple Street.

Buck said he got involved with the Gathering Place - now Connections - in 2000 through the assistance of former staff member Jeanne Maestranzi.

"She helped me get on my feet," he said.

Buck now works with an employment services program and is on a list for housing.

"Honey, do I look good?" Arsenault asked, showing off her newly layered haircut.

"Yes, you look sexy," Buck responded, as his brunette girlfriend shyly smiled.

The homeless fair last year drew more people, said Lori Wilshire, chairwoman of the Continuum of Care.

While some might suggest that means there are fewer homeless people to serve here, Wilshire cited another factor that may have contributed to a lighter turnout: Great American Downtown denied her group's request to put a banner over Main Street promoting the fair.

"They're a great organization; don't get me wrong," Wilshire said, but added, "We have homeless in Nashua. They're part of the fabric of our community. Unless we can address it, the problem is not going to go away."

Sarah DiSano, the GAD executive director, said the request was turned down because guidelines say the banner should only be used to promote events of wide public interest in the city's downtown or at select other places, such as Greeley Park, Holman Stadium, the Nashua Public Library and Rotary Commons.

Nonprofits such as the Continuum of Care do great work, DiSano said, but promoting the homeless fair wasn't an appropriate use of the banner.

A banner announcing the fair did stretch across Main Street near the foot of Library Hill last year, but it was hung without going through the proper city channels, DiSano said.

The fair was supported by the state Department of Housing and Human Services and the United Way. Many local businesses donated services - for example, Cravings provided lunches and Brookdale Farms provided apples. LensCrafters offered eye exams.

The **Harbor Homes** basement was converted to a salon. Haircuts were given by Poppy Venetos, owner of Poppy's Unisex Hair Salon on Elm Street, and by Patty Mason, a nurse with the Nashua Area Health Center who's also a hair stylist.

Maria Mireles, of the health center, also is a hair stylist on the side and shampooed customers.

As her client sat quietly getting his hair trimmed, Maria Kokkalis, a case manager who works with the mentally ill, said something most people take so much for granted can be a big deal to others.

Her client would never be able to deal with going to salon, Kokkalis said.

One floor above, Tommy, 37, sat eating lunch. He said he heard about the homeless fair at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Asked if he has a place to live, Tommy answered, "Sometimes." He explained he occasionally stays with friends.

Tommy wears a wedding ring, but he said he has no wife or family - not anymore.

"I keep the ring," he said. "It means a lot to me. It really does."

Tommy is articulate and streetwise. He had his own take on why the turnout at the fair wasn't as large as it could have been.

Many homeless people refuse to take advantage of the services offered, particularly the people who are mentally ill or struggling with substance abuse, he said.

"They just can't find it in themselves to fight for a place to stand," he said.

"They also have pride, like everybody else too, don't forget."

Especially the men, he said.

The older a homeless man is, the more shame he feels, and the more he turns everything inside himself, Tommy said.

Patrick Meighan can be reached at 594-6518 or pmeighan@nashuatelegraph.com.

"They're a great organization; don't get me wrong," Wilshire said, but added, "We have homeless in Nashua. They're part of the fabric of our community. Unless we can address it, the problem is not going to go away."

Sarah DiSano, the GAD executive director, said the request was turned down because guidelines say the banner should only be used to promote events of wide public interest in the city's downtown or at select other places, such as Greeley Park, Holman Stadium, the Nashua Public Library and Rotary Commons.

Nonprofits such as the Continuum of Care do great work, DiSano said, but promoting the homeless fair wasn't an appropriate use of the banner.

A banner announcing the fair did stretch across Main Street near the foot of Library Hill last year, but it was hung without going through the proper city channels, DiSano said.

The fair was supported by the state Department of Housing and Human Services and the United Way. Many local businesses donated services - for example, Cravings provided lunches and Brookdale Farms provided apples. LensCrafters offered eye exams.

The **Harbor Homes** basement was converted to a salon. Haircuts were given by Poppy Venetos, owner of Poppy's Unisex Hair Salon on Elm Street, and by Patty Mason, a nurse with the Nashua Area Health Center who's also a hair stylist.

Maria Mireles, of the health center, also is a hair stylist on the side and shampooed customers.

As her client sat quietly getting his hair trimmed, Maria Kokkalis, a case manager who works with the mentally ill, said something most people take so much for granted can be a big deal to others.

Her client would never be able to deal with going to salon, Kokkalis said.

One floor above, Tommy, 37, sat eating lunch. He said he heard about the homeless fair at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Asked if he has a place to live, Tommy answered, "Sometimes." He explained he occasionally stays with friends.

Tommy wears a wedding ring, but he said he has no wife or family - not anymore.

"I keep the ring," he said. "It means a lot to me. It really does."

Tommy is articulate and streetwise. He had his own take on why the turnout at the fair wasn't as large as it could have been.

Many homeless people refuse to take advantage of the services offered, particularly the people who are mentally ill or struggling with substance abuse, he said.

"They just can't find it in themselves to fight for a place to stand," he said.

"They also have pride, like everybody else too, don't forget."

Especially the men, he said.

The older a homeless man is, the more shame he feels, and the more he turns everything inside himself, Tommy said.

Patrick Meighan can be reached at 594-6518 or pmeighan@nashuatelegraph.com.

Caption:
Veda Maker-Par and Roger Bourgault look through mittens and hats with Crystal Richard, left, at Wednesday's homeless fair in Nashua. The third annual event, sponsored by the Greater Nashua Continuum of Care, was held at **Harbor Homes** on High Street.

Caption:
Staff photo by Don Himsel

Copyright, 2007, The Telegraph, Nashua, N.H. All Rights Reserved.