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COMMUNITY MINISTRY OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY

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An Encounter with Poverty: Statements of Candidates for the Montgomery County Council

Background. To give each candidate for the County Council some small experience of what life is like for Montgomery County's poor, Community Ministry of Montgomery County offered a choice of four activities—

1. Have a meal with homeless people of the County at a shelter or soup kitchen.
2. Travel with a family with small children by public transportation.
3. Apply for public assistance.
4. Share a food stamp meal with a family on public assistance in their home.

The purpose was to acquaint future leaders better with a minority of our community who are sometimes forgotten or neglected by our society—weak, vulnerable, impoverished folk, who, by virtue of personal problems or social circumstances, are pushed to the margins of civic life and have little part in public affairs.

We asked each candidate to write a brief reflection on the experience. Their statements appear below. Names have been changed for the sake of privacy.

At-Large Candidates

Howard Denis (Republican) *Dinner at The Lord's Table*

On September 22, 1998, from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m., I attended St. Martin's Church in Gaithersburg to participate in the meal being served to the homeless. In addition to the meal, Mobile Med parked outside and tended to the needs of the homeless.

I was very impressed with what I saw and experienced. The volunteers and organizers were unfailingly cheerful, hardworking, and compassionate. I ate part of the meal, and it was excellent. As I went from table to table I attempted to learn more about the people who were there. The stories I heard were very moving. I was struck by the articulation and keen interest in working and having a productive life. One woman said she wanted to go back to school to find a suitable position. She said she was "bi-polar" and had to be sure to take her medication. The men described to me how they go to a particular location in Silver Spring each day hoping to get day work. It was clear to me that the way these people are treated at the Lord's Table gives them a sense of dignity and self-worth along with the nourishing food. Many said they had a regular place to stay, but lack sufficient funds from their benefits to eat regular healthy meals. I also heard many supportive words for the City of Gaithersburg and the late Mayor Ed Bohrer.

Mobile Med is clearly an important part of the services made available. I've had experience working with this fine organization in the past and was very pleased to see that they are still doing such a great job.

I learned a lot during my brief visit, and welcome the opportunity to see more of the programs available. I look forward to being of service.

Blair Ewing (Democrat) *Applying for Public Assistance & Dinner at Shepherd's Table*

I applied for public assistance, creating a fictional person who needed help because of pending eviction, which in turn was the result of losing a job. The staff at the Department of Health and Human Services were friendly, compassionate, professional, and helpful. Still, the process is daunting. The forms are numerous, the questions require very substantial documentation, and the time that is likely to elapse from application to actual help appears long. There is a need to simplify the requirements and shorten this process and to respond more quickly to emergencies.

I also had dinner at the Shepherd's Table, where some 45 to 50 homeless persons gathered for dinner. The food was good and nourishing, and I felt a deep sense of guilt in eating any of it, since I wanted it all to be for them. The people who work there and who volunteer there were cheerful, businesslike and very helpful to me, as I asked questions about the numbers of those who ate there on average. Because it is a voluntary agency, the requirements are few, and that's good. The places where the homeless can eat are not adjacent to shelters, and, in fact, many miles separate them. This seems to me to be a serious problem that needs attention. The county government needs to assume a larger responsibility for the homeless, both for feeding them and housing them.

The plight of the poor is scarcely visible to most in the county. The County Council ought to make their situation well known, and pursue additional efforts to address their great needs. I am sure that this experience and others in the future will help me be a more understanding and compassionate member of the County Council.

October 1998

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL — OCTOBER 1998

Candidates (cont.)

George Sauer (Republican) Dinner at Shepherd's Table

Here are some thoughts on my recent visit to the Shepherd's Table. They were located at the Baptist Church. The move to the bakery was the right thing to do. The physical facility is much better suited than the old house, and I am sure that the neighbors are also happy.

At one time I thought that homelessness was an economic problem. Since then I have learned that about 90% of homeless people have damaged brains.

As a Christian citizen and taxpayer, I have often pondered my own and society's obligations to those less fortunate. When Jesus turned to those on his left hand and asked when they saw him hungry or in jail, did he expect them to answer? We voted for AFDC, rent subsidies, school lunches, WIC, food stamps, and Section 8. I think he wanted us to answer that we visited the sick, fed the hungry, and mentored young people.

Beyond our religious obligations, society has a need to care for its citizens. In college I read Das Kapital, but could not see what Karl Marx was talking about. One hundred years after he wrote, I lived for two years in a British colony. Then I understood the economic injustices that caused Karl Marx to write.

I think our county is wise to use volunteer organizations to deliver services. The county provides a truck and warehouse to Manna. They provide a building for the Shepherd's Table. This is certainly better than building a large, well-paid bureaucracy.

Steve Silverman (Democrat) Taking Public Transportation

Her values are the same as everyone else in Montgomery County: She wants her children to grow up healthy and get a good education. Yet, day-to-day life is a struggle for Marilyn and her two children, Marie, 4, and Juan, 1. I had the opportunity to spend four hours with them recently taking public transportation from their one bedroom apartment in Takoma Park to the Health and Human Services offices on Piccard Drive and back again. It took three buses.

A high school drop out, Marilyn was married at 17 and was separated from her husband. He is a painter. Last year he made \$14,000. She pays \$520 for a one bedroom apartment. Marie and Juan are like any other children. They love watching Barney. Marie wants to be a teacher when she grows up. Juan wants to take his shoes and socks off all the time.

Marilyn wants to work but lacks child care and transportation support. She doesn't like to ask for help but she needs to for the benefit of her children. When we stopped in Rockville to get the kids a snack and a cup of coffee, I offered to pay but she insisted on buying the coffee. It was important to her, like showing me, with pride, the way she decorated her small apartment.

Sometimes you have to walk in someone else's shoes to appreciate your own. At the end of the day what you find is that our values and aspirations are the same, but our opportunities for achieving our goals are different. We need to make sure that programs and services are available to allow people like people like Marilyn and her children to have the best opportunity for self-fulfillment and achievement.

Michael L. Subin (Democrat) No Response

Isiah Leggett (Democrat) Meal at Congregation Based Shelter

Over the course of many years I have visited centers and have worked at soup kitchens for the homeless. I continue to be struck by the tremendous need here in Montgomery County. As a county we have failed to properly recognize and acknowledge that we have people in Montgomery County who go to bed hungry and do not have adequate shelter. In order to solve a problem, we must first recognize that we have a problem.

A large number of the people who are homeless are women and children. The percentage of children living below the poverty level has increased from 4.1% in 1969 to 8.7% in 1993. Single females headed 57% of households with children and incomes below the federal poverty level. The percentage of children participating in the Free and Reduced Meals Systems has increased from 3.8% in 1972 to 22.9% in 1998.

I have never met a person who has chosen to be homeless. If it were not for some catastrophic event, many of our homeless would be living in suitable housing, making a respectable wage and able to feed and clothe their children. There is a quiet determination among the homeless to find a way out of their current plight.

Our private sector service agencies and our religious community are overwhelmed by the enormous and growing needs of the homeless population. We simply must do more. We must strengthen our public/private partnerships to leverage our assets and services to provide relief for everyone who needs help.

We cannot measure the quality of life in Montgomery County and be satisfied until there are no homeless people and no one, especially, children who go to bed hungry.

Maria Pena-Faustino (Republican) Lunch at Bethesda Cares

I have to look back and reflect on the homeless, the hungry, and the most vulnerable of our citizens, and yes, I see them in Montgomery County. One of the most affluent counties in the country, clearly we are not different than any other growing suburbs.

On the array of choices I have to decide, I choose to have lunch with the homeless at Saint Paul's lunch program in Georgetown Road in Bethesda. I did not realize the percentage of my lunch friends was so much in need of medical care. I was taken aback by this unmatched need. I saw a society that is failing them and us. This is not acceptable in our beloved Montgomery County. Shame on us when it comes to mental health. We can not continue to disregard this part of our society. We must have our priority straight and yes we need the conference centers, not the jail; we need improvements, traffic and otherwise, and so on, but our mental patients don't have the clout or the ability to personally testify in front of our elected officials, so their cry for help is not really heard as well as the others.

To the friends I have the opportunity to share lunch with, I like to thank them for the warm smile for a stranger that has come to invade their privacy. To William and the rest of my lunch partners, I promise to do something to change and get the follow-up and the maintenance that is needed to stay functional in this cool and demanding society. God bless.

Candidates for District One

Karen Kuker-Kihl (Democrat) *Lunch at Bethesda Cares*

I am most impressed with the dedication and care the volunteers display. One gentleman eats his lunch hurriedly so he can welcome guests and take their names. "I much prefer to work here than eat in a restaurant or food court each day. I enjoy helping others and giving back to my community."

George could have taught a course on the election candidates. He was more up to date on current issues and events than anyone I'd met on the campaign. He told me his secret was unfortunately have more time that he wanted to read the Post from cover to cover. B. J. and Bill were especially concerned with the gubernatorial race. They were very open about being homeless and what they had done and were doing to improve their lives. They were very vocal

about the "wonderful services and caring people that work for Bethesda Cares."

I also was able to observe the volunteer medical team in the specially equipped van which comes on a regular schedule to give medical services. I was very impressed with the close coordination of these two efforts. The van arrived just as lunch was ending, enabling a staggered service time.

Most of my volunteer work with homeless has been with CCNV in the District. Bethesda Cares is very different. As a smaller agency, it is more personal. The types of problems that occur when a shelter houses residents as well as a food program doesn't exist here. This program seems better coordinated, designed with more options to serve their clientele.

Betty Ann Krahnke (Republican) *No Response*

Candidates for District Two

Nancy Dacek (Republican) *Dinner at The Lord's Table*

On September 23, I visited The Lord's Table at St. Martin's Church and spoke with several volunteers and clients. As in the past, I found it to be a very rewarding and personal and professional experience.

I have always been struck by the incredible dedication of the volunteers. The founder of the program, Mary Canapary, has kept it going for over 15 years through determination and strong leadership. The preparers and servers all mirrored her enthusiasm, commitment, and warmth. That commitment and concern was not limited to providing meals. Clearly Mary and others help the clients with their problems in other ways, also.

Several of the clients shared with me their thoughts—from their favorite St. Martin meals to their own personal struggles. Each and everyone I spoke to was genuinely grateful for the food and very appreciative of the volunteers.

It was clear, in some cases, that St. Martin provided more than food—it provided a place of belonging and social interaction. For each client, it appeared to be a positive experience—a safe haven protected from the myriad of problems they might face outside the church doors.

Clearly the program achieves its goals of helping some of the most needy in our community. It underscores for me what I have known for a long time—the value of community non-profits to our county. St. Martin's warm and comforting atmosphere could not have been replicated by county "bureaucrats." We, in county government, must continue to be supportive of these community efforts.

I hope to personally continue helping St. Martin's in the future.

Herman Taylor (Democrat) *No Response*

Candidates for District Three

Phil Andrews (Democrat) *Breakfast at CBS*

I spoke with Daniel, Katie, and Amy at the Congregation Based Shelter in Rockville.

Zachary is about my age (39) and grew up in Montgomery County. He was an outstanding athlete in high school and until recently a successful salesman. From what I gathered, he became addicted to drugs and lost his job. Intelligent, personable, and focused, he seems to be making progress on his way back to living independently.

Katrina, also about my age, became homeless after she lost the ability to support herself because of an injury caused by an accident. This occurred about the same time that she was forced to move from an apartment she was sharing. She told me that she has a long and successful work history and looked forward to getting back as soon as she recovers from her injury. I don't doubt that she will.

Allison, on the other hand, has had a life consistently more difficult than Zachary and Katrina's. She lived with different families as a child, developed few marketable skills, and is now homeless, at least in part, because she quit a job. In her mid-40s, she appears to have a tough road ahead of her.

As an aspiring county council member, I am impressed by the effective partnership between county government and the religious community, evident at the CBS. I continue to believe that a moral community must respond to meet the basic needs of people who are homeless, and help them once again become independent members of our community.

Robert L. Clark, Jr. (Republican) *Taking Public Transportation*

I met Claire, her cousin Marie, and four of her children at a bus stop in Glenmont. She cares for a total of seven children. We realized that we knew each other, having met years earlier. I know Marie's parents.

Claire really impressed me. With seven kids, she still manages to work at a part-time job. I don't know how I could ever take care of seven kids and work too.

Today's doctor's appointment took about two hours to reach by bus. We rode three separate buses. Although it was mid-morning, the second was standing room only. Going to an appointment quickly becomes an all-day affair. It is one of the bureaucratic nightmares that although the family is closer to another clinic they are required to take a much further and more difficult trek. It is a further tragedy that in order to achieve maximum health care benefits for her children, it's a major sacrifice of time and energy.

Despite the problems she has faced in her life, Claire is determined to take care of her kids, and to help them do as well as possible. Along the way she explained some of the difficulties she had with the county government bureaucracy, and the catch-22 situations that she faced. One of the primary difficulties of bureaucracy is that logic need not apply.

As a single mother Claire has worked hard and done well. Our county government must not forget those in need. As I have volunteered in community organizations, I have met many people in similar situations. As a Council member, I will never forget them.

Candidates for District Four

Candidates for District Five

Sidney J. Burns (Republican)
No Response

Marilyn Praisner (Democrat)
Applying for Public Assistance

My experience applying for financial assistance was very informative. I applied for assistance at the Department of Health and Human Services' Piccard Drive Center during the last week of September. From this brief interaction, I have the following impressions:

1. Staff are very helpful and pleasant. From the central receptionist to 2nd floor intake and case managers, everyone was very pleasant and responsive. This was true for every contact I observed in the waiting area.

2. The forms are long and tedious to go through. A lot of documentation is needed, and some applicants may be confused. Several applicants had family or friends with them to assist with the processing.

3. The computerized system is also complicated but appears to walk staff and applicant through the documents and to assist with the calculation of eligibility and benefits. I will be continuing to monitor this issue as we progress in our efforts to extend collaboration and coordination among agencies and nonprofits.

4. The eligibility requirements seem to exclude some needy people especially for this community.

I remain concerned about access for the Piccard Drive site. My conversations with a few in the waiting room lead me to believe that we still have a problem with bus service and it is an issue I will pursue.

The waiting room is in need of materials -- toys and books for children and reading materials for adults. I will attempt to obtain donations.

Derick Berlage (Democrat)
Dinner at Shepherd's Table

John, who is about 40, grew up on Flower Avenue, in Silver Spring. He graduated from Blair High School in 1975 (just one year after my own graduation from high school). He attended college in North Carolina for two years, and then returned to the Washington area to work as an administrative assistant. Five years ago he married his wife, Maxine, who also joined us for dinner.

John became ill several years ago and lost his job. His disability check wasn't enough to cover their rent, which was \$475 per month. John and Maxine are now both "on the street." Their children are living with grandparents.

Carlos is in his mid-thirties, and grew up in Minnesota. He left the marines to start his own business, trading in rice from overseas, and used the connections he made as a marine to build his business. Last year, a big deal fell through, and his business failed. Unable to pay his rent, he was evicted in January. Carlos, a businessman himself, is quick to add, "I deserved to be evicted. I wasn't paying." Carlos, now homeless, sleeps in downtown Silver Spring, in a "nice safe spot" he has discovered. I promised to keep his spot secret.

The stories of John, Maxine, and Carlos have given me much to think about. It is now more clear to me that the homeless are ordinary people, just like you and me. However, they have confronted difficult obstacles in life and have had to do so without the kind of resources most of us take for granted. I believe that with the right kind of help, many of my table mates would be able to leave the street and recover from their misfortunes. It rests with us to provide that help.

David S. Maloney (Republican)
No Response

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An Encounter with Poverty:
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for the
Montgomery County Council

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