

Hearts for the hungry

Vigil calls attention to plight of homeless

By Nechama Bakst
staff writer

They came on Valentine's Day eve. They came from as far as Livonia and as close as down the block. They came from Bloomfield Hills and they came from West Bloomfield. They came from Troy, from Union City, from Farmington Hills and from Southfield, from Pontiac and Detroit, from Royal Oak and Rochester and Keego Harbor.

They came from high schools and middle schools, elementary schools and colleges, from private schools and public schools, from congressmen's offices and private homes.

They came in groups, in pairs and as individuals, for an hour or two or all evening. They came at 7:30 p.m. and at 10 p.m. at 2 and at 3 and at 4. The most intrepid planned to be up all night.

They came. They came to affluent Birmingham to show their support for the hungry and the homeless and to create a sense of awareness about the problem.

"We want to help make people aware of the homeless in Oakland County," said Sheila Brice who represented Birmingham Community Education.

They came to speak and to listen, to march and to sing, to pray, to laugh and to cry.

THERE WERE not as many as had been expected, less than 100, but the ones who came were there with an urgent sense of commitment and a genuine desire to help their neighbors and their friends.

"I think it shows Birmingham has a heart," said Judy Anderson, a Birmingham resident who is with United Way of Pontiac.

"I like the tone," said Jim Macy from the Oakland County Food Bank.

Hearts for the Hungry and the Homeless, a program sponsored by the Oakland County Hunger Task Force and The Community House in Birmingham, was organized "to address the issues of hunger and homelessness throughout Southeastern Michigan," according to Farmington Hills resident Jean Egan, co-chairwoman of the event.

'We have about 900 people who are homeless every night in Oakland County.'

— Nancy McQuillan
county social services

"We have about 900 people who are homeless every night in Oakland County," said Nancy McQuillan of the Oakland County Department of Social Services, Egan's co-chairwoman. Seventy are turned away each month from food pantries, and soup kitchens for lack of food, she said.

Long-term goals of the walk and vigil are a change in housing policy, development of a pool of lower-cost housing and the creation of a full-time permanent shelter in South Oakland County.

THE PROGRAM took off at the First Baptist Church with speeches by dignitaries including Eleanor (CoCo) Stewart, mayor of Birmingham and state Rep. Charlie Harrison, D-Pontiac.

Hymns were sung by the Northwestern Baptist Church Choir of Southfield.

Following the program, the group, led by Joan LaBine, a committee member carrying a red umbrella, began a peaceful march through the quiet streets of Birmingham.

The procession ended at Shain Park, where participants marched around a giant heart formed by heart-shaped luminaries and settled down for a night-long vigil.

"There's a spirit here that I think will generate more involvement," said Nancy Lee of Birmingham.

Jennifer Vancil, 9, and her 11-year-old sister, Linda, with eyes big and round in the darkness of the park,

said they planned to donate money and food to the poor.

The grass was covered with snow and although the night was comparatively warm for February, after about a half-hour the chill began to seep into even the most warmly shod feet. But those who marched and sang didn't seem to notice.

Or perhaps they felt their pain was worthwhile if it could accomplish something.

"I THINK it's unfortunate how few people realize that this is an issue that could hit everybody," said Nancy Gid-Hart of West Bloomfield, who is associated with the United Association of Hebrew Congregations. Gid-Hart was there with her husband, David, a speaker at the church, and their 8-year-old son, Joshua.

"This is really happening," said Florence LaPonsa, of the League of Women Voters in Southfield.

Roreen Keating of Bloomfield Township who started as a volunteer and is now on the staff at the Pontiac Area Lighthouse says there have been West Bloomfield and Birmingham residents who have come to the Lighthouse for help.

They come from all walks of life, said Val Mellon of West Bloomfield, Keating's co-worker. She said she has given assistance to college graduates.

Laura Considine and Randi Walker, 17-year-olds at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Bloomfield Hills sang as they marched around the heart they and a group of others had crafted.

It was a project the girls did as an after school program with "the little kids in Pontiac Crowfoot Elementary School, Considine said."

AT 2:15 A.M., 10 people kept the vigil alive in Shain Park, among them two Livonia women who had heard about the event through the media and come to join.

On Tuesday McQuillan and Egan, who stayed at the park until 6 a.m. were unable to be reached. Presumably they were sleeping. But they, and the others, had made their point.

They came.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Birmingham's "Freedom of the Human Spirit" statue is backdrop for Farmington Hills resident Jean Egan's plea for the hungry and homeless.

Assessments up an average of 10% in Hills

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"We're still up because of the reappraisal," Babb said.

In 1987, a reappraisal of the city's industrial and commercial properties was completed, resulting in assessments increases averaging 35 percent.

Apartments, faced with many vacancies, and office buildings on 12 Mile and Northwestern Highway, the city's two major office corridors, are not expected to receive any increase, Babb said.

"The market is still soft," Babb

said. "Our office development is doing better than most but it's soft."

Babb predicts that when the 1996 expansion and improvement project is complete next year, the office boom will begin again in Farmington Hills.

ASSESSMENT NOTICES will be mailed Friday, March 3. Only property owners whose assessments are increasing will be notified. Property owners who believe their assessments are out of line may appeal to the three-member board of review. Board members are George Doorn, Gordon Meyers and Dorothy Jeffries.

Property owners may begin making appointments to appear before the board of review beginning Monday, March 6. Appointments must be scheduled by Wednesday, March 15. The city's assessment roll must be completed by the first week in April.

Property owners also may appeal their assessments by letter. Those appealing because of hardship may call the assessor's office and request a hardship appeal form.

"They can fill out and there's no need to come in," Babb said.

THE ASSESSMENT process de-

termines the true cash value of property for the purpose of calculating property taxes. City, school and county tax rates are levied against the assessed value of property. An assessment is generally 50 percent of the "usual selling price" of a house, for example.

When Farmington Hills neighbors compare each other's property tax assessment notices, they'll notice some disparity.

"This year, you're going to see that not every increase in the subdivisions is the same," Babb said.

The assessing staff has been working to bring "overall equity" to the city's assessment roll. The staff is working from a new cost table that's expected to provide greater equity in assessments.

That's why a subdivision may be increased, for example, 10 percent, some homeowners within the neigh-

borhood may receive even higher increases, depending on their individual property, Babb said.

"We're going to have people thinking there's something wrong because their assessment increase is 12 percent and the neighborhood is 10 percent," Babb said. "The equity has always been good between subdivisions. Now we're trying to get better equity between individual properties."

Could traffic signal have prevented fatal accident?

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FARMINGTON HILLS STILL doesn't know how much of a stretch must be paved. It will extend from 14 Mile north "just enough to satisfy the road commission's desires," Call said.

Approval of the signal is before the West Bloomfield Township Board tonight.

And the Farmington Hills City Council is expected to OK bids on the signal at its Feb. 27 meeting, according to Call.

WOULD A TRAFFIC signal have helped prevent the accident that killed Holly?

"It's hard to say," West Bloomfield Police Sgt. Mike Madigan said. "My best guess is, yeah, it may have helped in this instance, but not in some others."

Holly, a fourth grade student at Twin Beach Elementary, died from head injuries when she was thrown out the back of her family's Jeep Wagoneer in a collision with a car driven by Mary Foran, 62, of Farmington Hills.

Witnesses said the Jeep, driven by Holly's mother, Gail, stopped at the stop sign, then proceeded across 14 Mile where it was hit in the left-rear by Foran's car. Gail, husband Tim and two other children received minor injuries as did Foran.

It was the second personal injury accident of the day at the corner and the second fatality in a little over a year.

IN THE OTHER fatality, a driver going north on Drake "just blew past the stop sign," Madigan said.

He was referring to the Dec. 23, 1987, incident in which Dean Burrier, a Southfield teen was killed.

According to police reports, Burrier was driving north on Drake at 10:15 a.m. when he ignored a stop sign. His new Buick Skylark was struck by a westbound stake truck trailing a bulldozer on 14 Mile. The force of the impact carried Burrier's car across the intersection. The truck and trailer flipped over.

West Bloomfield statistics show nine accidents in 1987, including the fatal; eight accidents in 1988 and one so far in 1989, the recent fatal, at the intersection. The Farmington Hills police handled nine accidents there in 1988 and one in 1989, coincidentally on the same day as the recent fatal.

Sgt. Roy Cranston of Farmington Hills police said the intersection was rated by the Traffic Improvement Association 30th out of all intersections in that city, not a significant rating.

However, if both communities' statistics were pooled, that would move up significantly.

STILL, MADIGAN considers Holly Pawl's death a freak occurrence. "It should have been a minor injury, but she was without a seat belt. The seat belt was the key issue."

He fears that adding a light would increase the number of accidents of the "fenderbender, slip and slide" type. "We'll be trading one problem for another."

Free 'Ask a CPA' calls scheduled for Feb. 23, 25

Last year, 5.6 million Americans were late filing their tax returns. One likely reason — the confusion brought about by tax reform. If you're dreading the thought of tackling tax reform — again, take heart, free professional assistance is only a phone call away.

On two days this month, you'll have a chance to ask a Certified Public Accountant questions on your federal or state taxes, without charge. The Farmington Hills-based Michigan Association of CPAs (MACPA) is sponsoring its second annual free "Ask a CPA"

Call-In Days as a public service during tax season.

CPAs will be taking calls at 855-2288 5:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 23, and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 25. Callers will be limited to two questions per call in order to accommodate as many calls as possible. More than 40 CPAs will be on hand to answer questions during the two days of the Call In.

"Because of the tremendous response to last year's Call-In Day, we decided to expand the program to two days this year," said Cheryl Reitaloff, CPA, who serves as chair

of the "Ask a CPA" call-in program.

"We know that taxpayers are still having a tough time adjusting to tax reform and we want to assist them as much as possible."

"Our primary goal in offering the Call-In Days is to share our tax expertise with the public, particularly those individuals who usually complete their own tax returns but have a few questions."

The MACPA maintains offices in Farmington Hills and serves 10,500 CPAs in Michigan through its educational and professional programs.

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