

# Homeless woman gets chance at a new start

By Susan Buck  
staff writer

Sonja Hall, 25, walking north on Cass Avenue, recognized Darlene Feldman immediately in the dusk. "You're Darlene, the Blanket Lady," Hall said. "You gave blankets to me and my babies."

Then Hall, who clutched a red wallet and cellophane package, burst into tears and told Feldman her story.

Hall left her four children, ages 1 to 7, with their grandmother in Lansing after spending Christmas there. She returned to Detroit to look for work. Hall paid her security deposit on an apartment but the landlord never gave her a key.

She didn't want to stay with her boyfriend, she said, because he was using crack. So she ended up on the street.

Hall, who lost a child she was carrying in November, has also spent time in a seven-day rotating shelter. But she exhausted her time and was kicked out.

Now, Hall wanted to go back to Lansing. But first, she wanted to gather up her belongings. "I ain't never been on drugs and I don't want my babies on them," she said.

HALL RECALLED the time she spent at the Coalition on Temporary Shelter on Peterboro in Detroit with her children. She got into a tiff with an employee who tried to hurry her and her children during a meal to make room for the men waiting to eat.

"My kids got to eat first," Hall recalled screaming to the employee. It's a common scenario among shelter women, according to Feldman. These women hush their children silent for fear of upsetting an unstable man in the room. Rather than revealing in childhood exuberance, the children become fearful zombies, Feldman said.

"People have to be close to the soup kitchens," she said.

Feldman is fond of saying that she has one foot in each world.

"I'd like to get a '60s mentality in this generation," she said, referring to suburban youth. "I think the children in the Farmington area need to know that they are privileged, that everybody doesn't have a Nintendo and Reeboks."

Feldman knows the Cass Corridor sits outside of the American dream. After she exhausted efforts to find available overnight housing, Hall chose to go to the Billingshurst Hotel, where she knew the manager would find a vacant room for her until morning.

FELDMAN USED a Detroit Cover-Up check to buy a non-refundable \$13.50 ticket to Lansing that Hall could pick up at the Greyhound Terminal in the morning after gathering her belongings.

On the way to the Greyhound terminal to buy the ticket, Hall showed Feldman the contents of the cellophane package she was holding — a



SHARON LEMUEUX/staff photographer

Darlene Feldman calls these Christmas decorations "food for the soul and the spirit." They were donated for her shelter's holiday feast by the manager of the K mart on Orchard Lake Road in Farmington Hills.

Polish sausage sandwich. A man gave her a cigarette that she, in turn, gave another man in exchange for the sandwich.

Glancing at the store name on the package, Feldman went back against the car seat in disbelief. "I can't believe it," Feldman said. "That's our food that was stolen. I hope the thieves get indigestion."

It's a tough call to distinguish between the street people who are con artists and those who are truly needy, Feldman said.

She relies on her instinct while watching a person's eyes and body language. "Sonja's eyes weren't dilated, her body was relaxed and she wasn't jerky," Feldman said.

Hall never changed her story either.

Thanks to Feldman's effort Friday, Hall did change her direction.



SHARON LEMUEUX/staff photographer

Darlene Feldman waves to the Detroit police as they drive by her new shelter on Cass — Detroit Cover-Up's Learning Center for Homeless Women and Children or simply, the Blanket Lady's Place. For safety reasons, she hopes someone will donate and install exterior lighting, a garage door and an automatic garage door opener for the unlighted drive-in bay.

## Center to aid women, kids

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downward spiral of the shelter. Handing out blankets isn't enough.

This woman who believes dreams can come true has a contemporary business wish list. She refuses to spend money that has been donated to the poor on business essentials, even if they would make her life easier.

"Everything has been a hurdle. Right now, we have a safe, warm place. We have to get it equipped to get the people in it."

First on the agenda is getting the plumbing fixed.

FOR HER safety and that of volunteers who go down regularly into the impoverished corridor, some things appear essential:

• One, installation of outside lighting in the two-car bay.

The place is pitch-dark by late afternoon and cramped with only two vehicles. For Feldman to find the keys to the wrought-iron exterior gate and then the wooden door, she needs a flashlight or must turn on her headlights. Once inside, she must back-track to the car to turn off the headlights. She does all this while carrying in boxes and bags of donated merchandise.

Even the street-smart can recognize the potential danger. Twice,

that potential came too close for comfort for Feldman, she said.

• Two, a massive garage door with opener.

With this, Feldman could drive in and move around safely in the bay.

• Three, the use of vans, trucks and drivers to pick up and deliver to the center. Feldman needs to transport continuous donations, some large, like furniture.

Also, from Jan. 2 to Feb. 2, WOMC-FM is sponsoring a blanket drive at five Little Caesar Fun Centers. Now as well as clean, used blankets can be dropped off at 208 S. Wayne at Cherry Hill, Westland, 729-5100; 15060 Eureka, Southgate, 285-5545; 11555 Englemann, Hoover and 10 1/2 Mile, Warren, 754-8888; 1241 W. 14 Mile, Clawson, 425-2770, and 2380 Orchard Lake, Sylvan Lake, 682-4880.

• Four, a word processor and a fax machine. Feldman must rely on spiral notebooks and a rolodex to keep track of volunteers and resources.

LOCALLY, THE Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills has adopted Detroit Cover-Up as its 1990 mitzvah — Yiddish for charity or worthy deed. The youth group volunteered to come down and help do work.

"As a matter of fact, on Christmas

Day when our food was stolen, it was that Farmington Hills temple which pulled together and collected \$400 within an hour and had teams out here in the suburbs to shop.

"It was the Farmington Hills Jewish community which paid for Christmas. An hour before people were to show up, we were left standing there with empty hands."

The food, donated by merchants, was stolen from vans parked on Jefferson. Twenty-five Detroit-area restaurants had contributed. "There was clam chowder, stew, roasts, hams, ribs, wonderful gourmet foods," Feldman said.

These foods were part of "Street Feast 1989," the personal project of a Royal Oak woman, who Feldman will identify only as Terri.

"This is her baby," Feldman said. "We simply joined with her because we had that building and we had that liability insurance and it motivated us to get the center going. In no way can I ever take credit for Terri's second annual 'Street Feast.'"

At least a half-dozen women came down on the bus Christmas Day to see if the center was open, then made a return bus trip to retrieve their children, Feldman said.

(To donate to Detroit Cover-Up, write P.O. Box 35277, Detroit 48235 or call 851-9027.)

## Citing possible conflicts, Call quits Center board

By Joanno Melliszowski  
staff writer

Concerned about possible conflicts of interest, Farmington Hills assistant city manager David Call has resigned as a Community Center of Farmington-Farmington Hills board member.

He will finish out the remaining months of the last year of his term as a liaison between the city and the center.

Call's decision to resign followed an early December meeting between city staff and residents near the community center on Farmington Road. Residents, he said, felt uncomfortable speaking about their concerns with him present, Call said.

"I felt that upon complaints and

concerns (of residents) and the community center getting involved with the planning committee's decision, there could be a conflict," Call said.

Call referred to the Farmington Hills Planning Commission's Nov. 16 decision to ban the center's use of speakers and microphones outdoors for one year. Commissioners' decision was prompted by nearby residents' complaints. At least one of whom was at the early December meeting.

CENTER BOARD president Lawrence Freedman said he's "not tight" about Call's decision to resign, effective Dec. 5. "I feel very frankly being that Dave is an employee with the city, it's probably in the best interest of the city and the center."

Call was the city official who Farmington Hills police contacted in August when Farmington Road resident William Shortt filed a disturbing the peace complaint against executive director Dorothy Pfaff during an outdoor concert.

The Farmington Hills City Council is expected to discuss the community center at a study session Saturday, Jan. 20. Councilman Ben Marks also is a community center board member.

The community center's deed states that should the center fail financially, it will fall to the Farmington Community Library. If the library board chooses not to take it, it becomes the responsibility of Farmington Hills.



John Donohue  
center board member

THOUGH UNCERTAIN whether it's related, Pfaff said 1989 year-end contributions were markedly reduced compared to 1988 year-end contributions. "I'm not ready to say that's the cause," Pfaff said.

Center officials also continue to be concerned whether the ban will ensure neighbors' or planning commissioners' wrath if occurrences, such as children playing loudly at the center's day camp, constitute a violation of the commission's ban and accompanying list of restrictions.

Despite the ban, planning commissioners Sept. 16 approved a special use to allow the center to have the outdoor theater in a residential zoning district. Should there be any more complaints during the one-year ban, the issue is to be returned to planning commissioners for discussion.

## Noise complaint trial postponed

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served as center spokesman when the Farmington Hills Planning Commission in September established a ban on the center's outdoor use of speakers and microphones, as urged by nearby residents.

Farmington Hills city attorney Timothy Kenny didn't wish to discuss in detail the change in allegations other than to confirm that the trial will be rescheduled.

Community Center president Lawrence Freedman said board members agreed with Donohue's recommendation to detain Bruffoff. Donohue said he will recommend the same with other issues confronting the center.

Despite the delay, Farmington Hills resident William Shortt said he's not disappointed. Shortt lives next to the community center and filed the disturbing the peace complaint during an outdoor concert Aug. 23.

"I just think these are the wheels of justice grinding slowly. We'll just wait it out. There is nothing personal against Dorothy Pfaff. I'm sure she'll walk out with a suspended sentence. I think justice will be served then," Shortt said.

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