

Suburban Life

Lorraine McClish editor/477-5450



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SOS

One man's story of being among the county's 10,000 homeless

By Lorraine McClish
staff writer

THERE IS A BELIEF among the homeless that anyone who makes a minimum wage, or close to a minimum wage, is only a few paychecks away from being without a roof over his head. It was certainly that way for Hank and Monica Filhart.

Hank Filhart was hitting the burn-out zone in a too-little-money, too-many-hours job when he quit to find something better. There was no reason for worry. He had never had any trouble finding another job.

"In two weeks time I was a month behind. In three weeks time I was two months behind. It wasn't long before we were evicted. The then car conked out," he said speaking of himself, his wife who was nine months pregnant at the time and his 4-year-old son, Michael.

"The worst of it all was being called a bum. I got another job, set us up in a motel, got to work and worried all day. I've had a migraine headache for a month. Yet I was thought of as a bum, a transient, a vagrant, someone who didn't pay his bills."

"It was all very humiliating. I asked for public assistance and was made to wait for someone to talk to for a full eight hours one day. And the foul-ups on the paper work — it was hard to believe what was happening," he said.

There were a lot of paperwork foul-ups, but the one most hard to believe concerned his request for Medicaid.

When the request came through, he had hospital coverage. His wife

was not covered, nor was his unborn child nor his son.

OAKLAND COUNTY has an estimated 10,000 homeless people. The U.S. Census taken in 1990 was the first attempt at trying to do a count of the homeless, but Lillian Melville, a Farmington Hills resident and the director of SOS (South Oakland Shelter), said she believes that trying to get statistics on people with neither address nor phone number prevented the census takers from getting anything more than a vague estimate.

What she is sure of are her own figures. Five years ago when SOS opened, the agency served 73 people in a year's time. From July 1, 1988 to June 30, 1989, SOS served 577 people.

Melville is a member of Trinity Episcopal Church in Farmington Hills, one of the 48 churches in Oakland County on the SOS circuit, which give overnight shelter to the homeless. She says with some pride that six of those churches are in this area. Trinity and St. Alexander Catholic Church, were among the first churches to open their doors for the homeless here.

Other congregations in this area who prepare a meal and bedding for those who come for shelter are Orchard United Methodist, Our Lady of Sorrows, Nardin Park United Methodist, and most recently the Michigan National Corp., "which is working out wonderfully well," Melville said.

Melville believes that the experience of the Filharts is neither typical nor non-typical.



The Filhart family are checked in for the night in one of the 48 churches on the shelter circuit in Oakland County. From left, Monica holds her less-than-a-month-old baby Desiree, Michael, 4 years, and Hank.

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Yvonne Grace travels throughout the state on the craft show circuit selling her wooden Santas, and says within the past four years they've found their way into thousands of homes.

SHARON LEMIEUX/staff photographer

Crafter works toward Christmas all year

By Debbie L. Sklar
special writer

While most of us set aside our Christmas festivities after the big holiday Dec. 25 — one local woman seems to think about it all year round.

Yvonne Grace, 43, makes wooden Santas that look like they're straight from the turn-of-the-century.

"I've been doing this for about four years," said Grace from her Farmington Hills home that is decorated a la country style.

"It started when I went in for knee surgery and I had a lot of time on my hands. My son suggested I take up a craft and so I did."

Now, four years later, Grace has made thousands of Santas that can be found in homes around the state. The Santas range in price from \$4 to \$12.

"I basically started looking in magazines and the idea just kinda popped into my head," she says as she points to her vast collection of Santas.

"My husband cuts the shape out of wood once I've designed it," she said. "After that I paint, antique (stain and speckle), and add last minute

touches like bells, wreaths and sacks of gifts."

Grace says the craft, which is called Folk Art, is a three step process: design, cut, decorate.

"I find it to be a very relaxing hobby, although I do make a pretty good living at it," she says. "I've done very well with my creations."

GRACE SAYS her Santas are available for purchase at the trade and craft shows she attends quite frequently.

"The shows that I go to are all juried," she said. "That means the artist has to be accepted to the show in order to show his handiwork — that means all the items at a juried show will be of top quality — usually items made from scratch."

Grace says she usually works five to six hours per day in her basement which has been converted into a "production line" of sorts. Currently she is busy at work on the 1990 line of Santas; there are 12 Santas to choose from.

It's amazing how popular these wooden figures have become," she said. "People buy them and use them for gift giving. I have people who have come back every year to buy

something from the new line. It's nice knowing they like my work that much to keep coming back again and again."

Grace grew up in Mt. Clemens and attended St. Mary's High School.

She was married two years after she graduated to her husband of 22 years, Edward, who works for New York Life Insurance in Northville.

The Grace's have one son, Edward, 20, who is a professional bowler. "We're very proud of him; he just won his first PBA title," she said.

GRACE SAYS she plans on working on her Santas for three or four more years at least.

"I really enjoy what I'm doing," she said. "I'm not doing it for the money. I do it because I enjoy meeting new people and making them happy. I sell my crafts at a moderate price because I want to help the people who don't have a lot of money — it's nice to see them smile and that's what the giving season is all about."

Grace will be at these shows with her antique Santas, on Nov. 17 in Novi High School; and Dec. 1-2 in Plymouth Cultural Center in Plymouth.



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