

Aid workers sustained by ‘magical’ moments

Staffers recall times that inspired them this Thanksgiving



James Fotis, a staff member with We See You San Diego, dances with Lori Nordsden at Tuesday's dinner at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church. Nordsden, who recently relocated from New Mexico to San Diego, is living out of her car. Nelvin C. Cepeda / U-t

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Laura Chez was at work earlier this month when her phone buzzed.

She checked her texts and saw a photo that, on its surface, appeared unremarkable. Just a woman in a dark suit holding a girl who looked around 2 years old.

But Chez knew what that image represented: The woman had overcome homelessness, kicked a fentanyl addiction, regained custody of her daughter and was now announcing that a judge had closed her long-standing court case.

“You would never know, if you saw this woman, that she gave birth on the side of the 5,” said Chez, executive director of We See You San Diego, the organization that sponsored the woman’s recovery. “It’s just magical.”

Serving the region’s homeless population can be tough work. Shelter is scarce, the pay is often poor and the people you’re serving hard to find.

But some moments are so wonderful they make all the other stuff feel worth it.

‘A degree of experience’

For Aliyah Annis, who works for the nonprofit People Assisting the Homeless, one of those moments also involved a text. Actually, many texts. Although for a while the messages were quite hostile.

There “were often attempts to make personal jabs at myself, my character, and whether or not I actually cared about her and her case and her children,” Annis said.

The sender, a woman Annis was trying to get housed, was under a lot of pressure. Her past included domestic violence, addiction and jail time, and while she was now free, the woman couldn’t live with her baby and toddler until she got housing. At one point, everyone thought they’d found a workable apartment. The woman even moved in. But a bureaucratic error with a rental aid program forced her back out, Annis said.

Soon the woman was sleeping in a van. It looked like full reunification with her children wasn’t going to happen, at least not before the holidays.

Then, another twist: An apartment opened up, a rental aid voucher came through and a lease was signed in November. Annis and the woman suddenly found themselves standing in the unit’s kitchen, silent and in shock. Finally, the woman said, “I don’t know what possessed you to continue to be kind to me,” Annis recalled.

The woman went on to say that the work Annis and others had done ensured a better future for her kids.

“As someone who comes from a degree of experience with family members who have struggled with both mental health and a history of substance use,” Annis said, “that hit home.”

‘The relief that I felt’

A lack of affordable housing is a common problem. Especially when there’s a ticking clock.

Light Moran, who’s with the nonprofit Home Start, scrambled earlier this year to help a young woman get her own place. The woman, a 20-something former foster kid, technically had housing — she was living with a relative — but the unit was filled with rotten food and cigarette smoke, Moran said.

That all might have been endurable, except for two things: The woman was pregnant and the relative was about to be evicted.

Moran made phone calls, left voicemails and emailed property managers. Five messages turned into 10, then 20. “We had some ‘no vacancies,’ but a lot of no answers,” Moran said. “Or some folks just saying, ‘You know, I don’t think that’s a great fit.’” The fact that rent was to be paid through an aid program for former foster youths seemed to turn some people off.

Moran eventually got a call back from a property manager who was at least willing to meet the young woman. They got an application to fill out on a Friday and turned everything in the following Wednesday. The eviction date drew nearer.

With just days left, Moran reached out again. The property manager said the rent had not yet come through. But, she added, the young woman could move in anyway.

“Oh my gosh, the relief that I felt ...” Moran recalled. Moran called the woman to give her the news. “She was jumping up and down, she was dancing, she was crying, she was laughing.”

‘This happened to me once before’

Many moments that stuck with aid workers were small.

The head of the East County Transitional Living Center remembered a child who clung to a parent’s neck after the two were reunited. The leader of Brother Benno’s, in North County, marveled at the ongoing transformation of a homeless man who’d once shown up covered in so much mud and blood that

his clothes had to be cut off. The guy's still sleeping outside, but these days he stops by in cleaner clothes to help staffers spruce up the area.

Sometimes there's unexpected gratitude. On a Thursday in October, a homeless woman walked into the downtown San Diego offices of the Third Avenue Charitable Organization.

Someone asked the woman what she needed. Socks? Snacks? Picking up mail?

Instead, the woman handed over two thank-you cards, said Lorena Galligan, the organization's director. Hand-written messages were inside, including one that read, "U Saved My Life."

Other times, gratitude turns into friendship.

About a year ago, Amy Reardon, a major with The Salvation Army, helped a couple stay at a hotel after their trailer lost power. (The two were in frail health and had medication that needed to be refrigerated.) When Reardon stopped by to check in, they ended up hitting it off.

Reardon's now on the phone with them weekly.

"This happened to me once before," Reardon added. "That was 10 years ago — and the friend I met then, we're still extremely close."