

PROJECT UNDERSTANDING NEWS

A newsletter for the volunteers and supporters of Project Understanding



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(Monthly)

March 2008

Related Articles on Page 2

■ We walk because they walk: A commentary by Rick Pearson.

■ Volunteer opportunities for the Walk.

Ventura CROP Walk Scheduled for April 13

The Ventura CROP Walk, which has traditionally been held in early March, will be held on Sunday, April 13, 2008. The change was necessitated by scheduling conflicts at First United Methodist Church, where the walk begins and ends, as well as the early date for Easter this year. Walks will also be held in most of the cities of Ventura County. (Please see the box on page 2 for the dates of walks in other cities.)

As in previous years, the CROP Walks give individuals an opportunity to walk ten kilometers (a little over six miles) to raise money to combat hunger, both in Ventura County and around the world. Funds are raised by walkers who secure donations and pledges for the distance that they will walk.

Of the funds raised, 75% goes to Church World Service, an international relief and development organization, to support their world-wide efforts. (Individual donors may opt to designate their donation to the relief organization of their choice.)

The remaining 25% is designated to organizations fighting hunger locally. The steering



committee decided on the following distribution of the funds:

Project Understanding	11%
Catholic Charities	6%
Family to Family	5%
FOOD Share	3%

Most people who walk get their walker packets from the recruiter in their local congregation or organization. If you are not a member of a participating congregation or organization, you may sign up by contacting coordinator, Renata Hundley, via phone, 658-7446, or e-mail: venturacropwalk@gmail.com. Renata can also put you in contact with the coordinators for the other Walks around the county if you should wish to participate.

See CROP Walk, Page 2

We Can Prevent Homelessness One Family at a Time

The Ventura County Ten-Year Plan to End Homeless estimates that 90% of the approximately 2,000 people who are homeless in the county today will not be homeless one year from today. That is good news.

The bad news is that 1,800 other people will become homeless and the number of homeless people is likely to remain about the same unless we act to prevent it.

That is exactly what the Project Understanding Eviction Prevention program is designed to do.

With the high rents in the county, many working families are in danger of an unexpected car repair or medical emergency. This may have a severe enough impact on the family budget putting them in danger of losing their housing.

Let's think about those 1,800 people who are in danger of becoming homeless within the next year. If we could prevent half of them from being evicted, we could cut the number of homeless people in the county by 45%. Certainly a laudable goal!

Here is how the program

See Prevention, Page 3

CROP Walk

Continued From Page 1

Even if you cannot walk, you can help out by sponsoring someone who is walking.

There are also a number of volunteer opportunities for those who are unable to or choose not to walk. Please see the article on this page for more information about volunteering.

Venturans have been participating in the CROP Walk for well over a quarter of a century. Last year's Walk raised nearly \$32,000 (\$8,000 of which stayed right here in our community).

So get your tax return done early and plan now to participate in the Ventura CROP Walk on April 13. ♦

We Walk Because They Walk

By Rick Pearson
Executive Director

We have a small pond in our backyard. Last weekend I decided that it was time to give it its annual cleaning to get ready for the spring and summer. In order to lower the water level so I could give the sides a good cleaning, I was carrying the pond water, five gallons at a time, in a bucket to the front yard to put in on the lawn and plants.

When I was in college I learned a little ditty that says, "A pint's a pound the world around." So I knew that five gallons of water weigh about 40 pounds. I was glad that I only had to carry each bucketful about 40 yards. I had emptied about 50 gallons of

water out of my pond, about ten trips. Ten trips mean I carried five gallons of water about a quarter of a mile.

When I was done I needed a shower. I was struck by the fact that, even with my low-flow showerhead and turning the water off while I soaped up, I used about three bucketsful of water.

In much of the world people (mostly women) walk one or two or even ten miles to get water for their families. Even if it is only one mile, someone would have had to walk six miles just to get the water for my low-flow, short shower.

For several years, the CROP Walk has used the slogan, "We walk because they walk." The walkers in this year's Walk will walk just over six miles, just about the distance necessary to supply the water for my six-minute shower. Walk with us this year. ♦

Even Nonwalkers Can Help CROP Raise Funds

For at least 15 years, Project Understanding has served as one of the check points for the Ventura CROP Walk, and Project Understanding has taken the responsibility for providing the volunteers to staff each of the five check points along the route.

This is an excellent opportunity for those who want to participate in the Walk but who are unable to actually walk for whatever reason.

This is a good way to greet and encourage each walker and to offer a few moments of

respite and a drink of water. If you are interested in being a check point volunteer this year, please call Rick Pearson at 652-1326.

Nor are the check points the only volunteer opportunities for nonwalkers. Volunteers are needed on the day of the Walk so we can use people to help set up, help serve refreshments after walkers return, clean up, sort and count canned food donations, or drive a "sag wagon." Anyone who wants to help could contact Renata via phone, 658-7446, or by e-mail: venturacropwalk@gmail.com.

Walk, give or volunteer — everyone can find a place in the CROP Walk. ♦

Ventura County CROP Walks

Ventura	April 13
Oxnard and	April 13
Port Hueneme	
Santa Paula	March 9
Conejo Valley	March 9
Camarillo	March 9
Simi Valley	June 8
Ojai	TBD
Moorpark	TBD

Pantry Usage Up

The Project Understanding Food Pantry has experienced a 35% increase in the number of families seeking assistance in the past six months and these families have made 45% more visits.

Please consider donating food, especially tuna, peanut butter and breakfast cereal to the Food Pantry. ♦

Prevention

Continued From Page 1

works: Project Understanding has approximately \$50,000 to spend during the year to help prevent eviction. The rental assistance program is designed to either assist families who are currently homeless to get into permanent housing or to prevent families from being evicted from their permanent housing.

Rental assistance is provided to families in the form of a one-time grant that funds a maximum of one month's rent. The funding is awarded to families who have an income that would typically sustain them but experience an unexpected circumstance that makes it impossible to pay rent. Funding can also be used to assist families with the first month's rent once the deposit for housing has been paid. Families must complete a thorough application process and work closely with the housing case manager to ensure that the appropriate referrals are in place so that the family is stabilized.

This year, Project Understanding assisted 172 people to either attain or maintain permanent housing through the provision of rental assistance. One such family was a two-parent household with two teenage children. The family was dependent on two incomes to pay rent, so when one parent unexpectedly lost his job the family found themselves on the verge of eviction. Both parents were employed again by the end of the month, but without a grant to assist with the payment of rent, the family would have lost their housing before having a chance to catch up. This is just

one of the many families who are in need of assistance due to unforeseen circumstances and a quick turn of events.

Though Project Understanding continues to increase the level of assistance that is provided to families throughout Ventura County, there are still many families that do not receive the much needed assistance due to a lack of funding available.

When we think of homeless people, we usually do not think of families with children. Yet these families make up a large portion of the homeless population. They may not be sleeping under bridges or in the river bottom. Rather they are more likely to be sleeping in their car, or in a friend's living room, or in a pay-by-the-week motel room when they can scrape together enough cash.

Certainly, it is not our desire that anyone be homeless in our midst. But our hearts go out most especially to innocent children who are homeless entirely through no fault of their own. Thanks to you we continue to make a difference in the lives of people who might otherwise be on the street.

Together, we can work towards the goal of ending homelessness in ten years. ♦

Regina Returns to Staff as Housing Case Manager

Project Understanding is happy to announce the return of Regina Fitz-Gerald to the Project Understanding staff as housing case manager.

See Regina, Page 5

Friends of Tutoring Gather at the Avenue Center

■ Everyone admired the two new murals on the Avenue Tutoring building.

By Marcia Wakelee
Tutoring Coordinator

The Open House at the Avenue Center in January welcomed many old and new friends who celebrated our new murals.

Students played games while parents, friends and tutors visited and met

the artists **From left to right: Moe Bickford, Lorena Varela, Lynn Nelson, and Virgil Nelson** who painted the murals. **reminisce about tutoring over the years.**

It was also an occasion for old friends to gather. Virgil and Lynn Nelson are home from their work in Africa and they were able to be here. Virgil is one of the founders of Project Understanding, and Lynn started the tutoring program in 1982.

They visited with Moe Bickford, a former Tutoring coordinator, and his sister. Lynn and Lorena Varela, the Avenue site coordinator, reminisced about when Lorena was one of the Tutoring Center's students while she was in middle school.

It was a joyful gathering. How great to see so many people, past and present, who have worked so hard to help children get a good start in life. ♦

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“What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Micah 6:8

Our Mission and Programs

Mission

Project Understanding is a faith-based agency founded and established on the principles and ideals of Judaism and Christianity whose mission is twofold: to do justice by serving the poor, hungry and oppressed with compassion and mercy, and to provide avenues for those who wish to serve others.

Programs

Project Understanding initiates, develops, and maintains special projects pulling together the efforts of individuals, local congregations and groups to meet the needs of the less fortunate. The programs are:

Reception Center

A program that utilizes an intake process with skilled, supportive listeners to minister to and assess the needs of individuals and families in order to make appropriate referrals.

Focus on Food Emergency Food Pantry

A pantry program designed to help homeless and hungry people through times of crisis. The Pantry provides recipients with a three-day supply of food.

SARAH (Simply Arranging Real Assistance Here)

A source of basic services for homeless people. Services include shower and laundry facilities, a mail and message center for job seekers, and assistance in attaining food and shelter.

Tutoring Station

To assist economically disadvantaged children, this program provides one hour per week of extra classroom instruction with volunteer tutors in one-to-one interaction at five locations in Ventura and Oxnard.

Religious Coalition for the Homeless

Churches and synagogues joining in faith-based action to provide transitional shelter and a voice for the homeless of Ventura County.

Permanent Supportive Housing

Project Understanding is working with a coalition of interested agencies and individuals to provide permanent supportive housing for homeless people.

The Bread of Life

Five congregations are working together to prepare and serve meals to hungry people in Oxnard each week.

Regina

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Regina held that position from 2002 through last spring when she left Project Understanding to accept a position at Catholic Charities.

Regina was succeeded at Project Understanding by Melissa Wilkins. Melissa left the position late last year because she and her husband were expecting their first child and the commute from Santa Barbara became a burden. Project Understanding has been seeking a qualified replacement for several months.

After nearly a year at Catholic Charities, Regina decided to return to the housing case manager position for two reasons. First, the position at Catholic Charities did not allow for the one-on-one interaction



with families in need as the case manager position does. Regina missed this interaction badly. And second, the case manager position allows the flexibility in scheduling to permit Regina to further her education.

Regina's willing spirit and cheerful personality have been a blessing to the staff and volunteers of this agency in the past. And her deep compassion and great understanding have been a

blessing to the people she served, both in Transition House and in the eviction prevention program.

So we are glad to have Regina back in her old position and on the Project Understanding staff. Welcome home, Regina. ♦

Shari Kempton Fills In as Case Manager

As is mentioned in the previous article, Project Understanding has been without a housing case manager for several months. However the needs of families in Ventura for eviction prevention assistance do not diminish. To help us meet that need we are deeply appreciative of the help of former staff member, Shari Kempton.

Shari was the co-coordinator of the SARAH Center and afternoon receptionist at Project Understanding for a dozen years during the period from 1989 to 2005. (She and her husband Wayne spent four years in Germany in the early 1990s.) She "retired" in 2005 to spend more time with her mother who had recently moved to the area.

Just before she retired, Shari wrote: "I have been working at the SARAH Center for a total of 12 years, and have seen hundreds of homeless people. All have faces, names and stories. I try to care for and help them all. Too few succeed and make it out of this cycle of alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness. However, I keep on trying. Some days I am discouraged and even think about giving up. Then I think of the

folks like Dave, Brian and Karen (folks who made it). These faces and the wonderful news of the Gospel keep me from giving up. The Lord never quits loving each and every one of us, including Fred, Dave, Carl, Cathy, Brian, Karen, Walter, Jack and Teresa. He never gives up on any of us."

Shari still hasn't given up on people in need. So in the interim until

Regina is ready to take up the position, Shari is seeing families facing eviction and doing the case management necessary to decide which families we will be able to assist.

Project Understanding and families in need of assistance thank Shari for her continued willingness to serve. ♦



Losing a Home

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of people in our county have been losing their homes — not to foreclosure, but to eviction.

The reasons here are myriad as well: Unexpected expenses like medical bills or car repairs ate up the money needed for the rent. The money that the family could make at low wage jobs could not meet the rising rents. Poor decisions led to overspending on non-essentials.

But whatever the reason, the loss of one's home — whether through foreclosure or eviction — is a tragedy. It is a tragedy that calls out for solutions, because nobody deserves to lose a home. ♦

Thank You to Supporters of Project Understanding

Thank you to the following people and groups who contributed cash to our program during the month of January:

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Thank you to the following people and groups who contributed food and other items to our program during the month of January:

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Ellen Pearson

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Rheto-Rick

Foreclosure or Eviction — No One Deserves to Lose a Home

By Rick Pearson
Executive Director

You have probably seen the same articles I have. Like the one in the Ventura County Star in mid-February about the man whose house was sold out from under him by the bank because he was in default on his mortgage.

There were some 1,500 foreclosures in Ventura County last year — a 90% increase over the previous year. More than 600 were in the last three

months. Every one of those is a personal tragedy. A story likely without a happy ending, at least in the short term.

There are many reasons for the increase: families who have refinanced while home values were increasing astronomically; families who did not understand (or did not want to understand) how much their payments would rise when interest rates went up; families that were lied to by unscrupulous lenders who were only interested in making a fast buck before reselling the loan.

But whatever the reason it is a tragedy that makes front page news. A tragedy that calls out for a solution. Maybe fixing the interest rate to keep the payments in check. Maybe a bail-out that helps make the payments. I support finding a

solution because I hate to see any family lose their home.

But then, I have always hated seeing families lose their home.

Long before this record number of home foreclosures made the front page, thousands

See *Losing a Home*, Page 5



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