

# PROJECT UNDERSTANDING NEWS

A newsletter for the volunteers  
and supporters of Project  
Understanding

Volume XX No. 9  
(Monthly)

September 2005



## Daybreak Collaboration Hits Potential Snag

As was reported in the Ventura County Star on August 17, the Daybreak/Art-space project to build 50 units of affordable artist live/work space and a year-round transitional housing facility in downtown Ventura has hit a potentially serious snag.

The owner of the last piece of property needed to complete the site is asking a price that is reportedly three times the appraised value of the property.

It is our sincere hope that the negotiations over this property can be brought to a successful conclusion so that this project for which so many have labored so long can be built for the great benefit of the city of Ventura and its residents.

What follows is a letter to the editor which board president, Melinda Johnson, wrote to the Ventura County Star concerning this issue.

### Letter to the Editor

Artspace/Daybreak is a joint venture to which the City of Ventura has been committed for some time. Artspace, a nonprofit live/work space for artists, will increase tourism, provide cultur-

See Snag, Page 5

## Reception Center—Effective, Caring

By Kay Hoyt  
Reception Center Coordinator

What is compassion? Where do we learn compassion or is it simply a gift to some and not to others? Can we help our clients if we don't feel compassion for them?

Compassion helps us to feel the hurts and needs of others so that we may be better able to help them. We learn compassion not only through our own experiences but also through exposure to those experiencing circumstances in life, which cause distress. Compassion is the feeling that gives us the ability to commiserate and act with kindness and tenderness, forgiveness and mercy, all which help motivate us to search for a solution to the

problems others face.

Our Reception Center is effective not only because our staff and case assistants are inspired by their compassion but because they have the tools and knowledge at hand to find a solution to the distressful problems with which our clients are faced. It is first through the door of the Reception Center that our clients pass looking for help. "Where can I go? What can I do? How do I get help?" And sometimes, just, "Please help me, I don't know what to do?" These questions are posed to our case assistants every day.

Some questions and needs are easy and can be resolved in a few minutes. Some may take years to be worked out (please see the article below). But all

See Reception Center, Page 2

## Victwa's Victory

By Kay Hoyt  
Reception Center Coordinator

Recently, one of our long-term clients, Victwa Shakespeare, achieved her dream and goal of many years, an associates of arts degree in liberal arts. At the age of 65, and with a grade point average of 3.97 and high honors, she was the oldest graduate receiv-

ing a degree from Ventura College.

Ms. Shakespeare's educational dream began years ago as she struggled to provide care to her two grandchildren when her own children, in and out of drug rehabilitation facilities in Kentucky, were not able to take responsibility for them. Ms. Shakespeare lived on the street in a car, with her grandchildren, working multiple part-time jobs,

See Victory, Page 5

## Reception Center

Continued From Page 1

are treated with compassion and respect.

Following an extensive interview intake procedure, in which their needs are assessed, our clients may be referred to our pantry for food, the Sarah Center for laundry, showers, mail and messages, or have their questions answered regarding our transition house, rental assistance and tutoring centers. However, this is only the beginning of our intake interview procedure which unveils a myriad of other services which could be helpful.

Whether a person needs help with a utility bill, a new refrigerator, clothing, a free meal, a place to sleep that night, a permanent or at least semi-permanent place to live, health insurance for their family, help in becoming a citizen, trouble collecting child support, a job, medical attention, HIV testing, information on housing assistance through the Ventura Housing Authority, Veteran services, help for their pets, dental services, new eyeglasses, or removal of a tattoo, the list is endless.

Part of a case assistant's training includes, in-service presentations held during the year. This year a presentation by HiCap, a health insurance counseling organization, was made informing us of the new Medicare Prescription Drug Program, Part D which begins in January 2006. This advocacy outreach program was presented to Project Understanding's case assistants recently. The dedication of our case assistants in volunteering their time to keep

abreast of new programs to assist the elderly and low-income families in our community is admirable. What inspires them to keep on volunteering? Many of our case assistants have been with us for years.

It is often compassion that makes the difference. Compassion, if we could only market it as a commodity! Toward the end of this year, Project Understanding plans to expand its hours to Saturday morning. This will allow many working families a time to receive food from our pantry as well as information from case assistants on helpful resources to be found in our community. We will, of course, be depending on our volunteers once again to show their compassion in helping our clients. If you are interested in being part of this rewarding Saturday team of case assistants, please call Project Understanding. You will not be alone. ♦

## Girl Shines at Transition House!

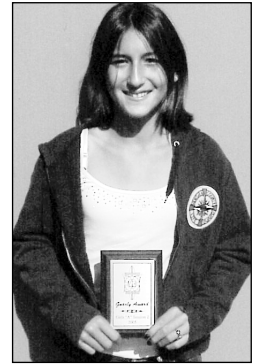
By Regina Fitz-Gerald  
Housing Case Manager

The goal of the Transition House program is to help formerly homeless families return to self-sufficiency. That "help" takes on many forms. Certainly an important aspect is to be sure that the children in the family are safe and secure so the parents are free to pursue the activities that will move them forward. The two letters that follow (from mother Dawn and daughter Alanna) show that, for one family this summer, child care turned out to be more

than just baby-sitting.

### Alanna Receives Junior Lifeguard Gnarly Award.

Dawn writes: Project Understanding afforded Alanna to have a unique daycare experience this summer by paying for her to attend the Oxnard Junior Lifeguard Program. This program prepares a child to be a lifeguard assistant that can be a paid position when they are 15. They have to run laps, swim around buoys, surf, learn first aid and much more.



Alanna with her Gnarly Award.

At the end of the summer, they give out one prestigious award called the "Gnarly Award" to the one child out of the more than 100 participants. That child has to be exceptional in all they do at Junior Lifeguards, and Alanna won that award. This shows how much she valued and treasured her experience. Here, in her own words, is what she has to say.

*This has been by far the best summer ever because Project Understanding has made it possible for me to join Junior Lifeguards, where I learned how to surf, swim better, run faster, work harder for what I want and lots, lots more. I have made new friends and I have been to new places. I had the best summer ever and I would like to thank Project Understanding for making it happen!* Always, Alanna



## Marsha Weber— Living a Very Successful Life

One day recently, longtime volunteer and supporter Marsha Weber, mentioned to the Reception Center coordinator, Kay Hoyt, that a friend had asked Marsha if she was still connected with Project Understanding because they never



saw her name in the newsletter. Of course, there are hundreds of people who make the work of Project Understanding possible whose names never get the mention they deserve. But Kay suggested that we might do an update story on Marsha if Marsha didn't mind. Marsha's response was, "If you use my story, I hope it inspires others to do good deeds."

Marsha has been involved with Project Understanding for about a decade. She began in the Reception Center as a case assistant, then moved to the SARAH Center and the Food Pantry. She has filled in as the receptionist and also been a mentor in the Transition House program.

It was while volunteering in the SARAH Center that she had the idea of helping feed homeless people on the days that Family to Family does not pro-

vide meals. She says that she does the feeding on behalf of Temple Beth Torah although the Temple is not directly involved. "But it is there we are committed to helping the needy and feeding the hungry, going forth into the community and searching out those who need a helping hand."

She goes on, "In SARAH, though they know my name, they call me The Sandwich Lady. I bring sandwiches (my egg salad is the most popular), chips, drinks, cookies and whatever goodies I have or someone donates to me. I usually feed 60 folks a morning. One day a friend asked me why I do the things I do for the needy. I answered, 'If not me, who?' Then I said, 'I get more *God bless you*s in a day than you get in a year.'"

Over the years, she has helped homeless families get into housing, helped job searchers with gas, and made sure families had Christmas gifts, and people had backpacks and sleeping bags, phone cards and bus tokens.

Marsha concluded her thoughts by saying, "I always try to get people involved, but homelessness is not an endearing undertaking. They may be dirty and substance abusers, but many are polite, decent people who are down on their luck due to many circumstances. Domestic violence and abused children are more popular causes. But as long as others do what they can to help anyone, I am happy. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, 'To leave the world a better place whether by a healthy child, a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you

have lived, this is to have succeeded.'"

By that standard, Marsha Weber is living a very successful life. ♦

## Covet

Continued From Page 8

food to me because I can afford to pay more for it than can the people who live on the land on which they were grown.

Everyone involved is acting in a rational, legal way and making sound economic decisions. The landowner is growing the most profitable crops and selling them to the people willing and able to pay the best price. I am choosing to buy the best available food at the best price to feed my family.

I would never stand in their home and take the food from their children's hand and give it to my own children. But because I am far away and I will never see them, I simply take what I can afford.

The tenth commandment tells me that just because I can afford it doesn't make it right or God's will. As the Old Testament scholar Leslie Hoppe says, "The intended effect of the tenth commandment is to reverse the tendency to make self-interest the guiding principle of one's actions. What the Torah expects of the wealthy is the willingness to give up what is rightfully theirs in order to help the poor."

"Neither shall you covet your neighbor's house or field or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

The tenth commandment. Let's put that on our courthouse walls. ♦

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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

**P**roject Understanding is a faith based agency 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.

#### Ventura County Hunger Coalition

A network of church and community-based groups and individuals committed to eliminating domestic and world hunger through communications, advocacy, networking, education, and action.

#### 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.

#### Emergency Shelter

Project Understanding is working with a coalition of interested agencies and individuals to provide year-round emergency shelter for homeless people.

#### The Bread of Life

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

## Snag

### Continued From Page 1

al opportunities for Venturans and help fulfill the city's obligation to provide affordable housing. Daybreak, a transitional living center for families committed to ending their homelessness—which has been a vision for nearly a decade, will provide shelter and assistance to the working poor of our community who wish to become self-sufficient. The melding of these two goals has led to a project which will benefit the city and its citizens in countless ways.

Now it appears that one person, Lee Sehon of Channel Islands Building and Development Partners, Inc., is demanding over \$900,000 in taxpayer dollars to sell a 3000-square-foot parcel, appraised at \$315,000, which is the last space needed to allow this \$30,000,000 project to go forward. Civic-minded members of this community, under the auspices of Project Understanding have expended thousands of hours of volunteer effort to develop the concept, locate the site, and arrange the funding to create an elegant contribution to the betterment of this city. Without Mr. Sehon's small, but apparently strategically located parcel, all of this will have been for naught. Funding will be lost. The search for a site must begin again. And very worthy people will be without a decent place to live and work.

We urge Mr. Sehon, in the strongest terms, to reconsider his unreasonable position. Other landowners have allowed the city to purchase the needed property at appraised rates. Why does Mr. Sehon choose to hold

up this critical project, demanding the taxpayers pay him hundreds of thousands of dollars beyond the value of his property?

Please, sir, examine your conscience, and behave like a responsible businessman and member of this community, and enter into good faith negotiations with the City of Ventura, for the benefit of us all.

Melinda A. Johnson ♦

## Victory

### Continued From Page 1

cleaning houses and baby-sitting. Often their only meal came from trash bins, or begging on the street. She and her grandchildren collected cans to sell for those things they could not find in the trash left by others. Still, she managed to keep them fed and in school.

During this time her little children were being ridiculed by fellow students and called names such as the "stinky three Musketeers." Their grades were good, but they were all embarrassed when they were asked to sit at the back of a room because they smelled.

In 2000, a homeless client introduced Victwa to Project Understanding. She came to our Reception Center and met our case assistants. They encouraged her to use our services at the SARAH Center, Pantry, rental assistance and introduced her to all of the other resources that might benefit her and her family. The family became regular visitors to Project Understanding. They were now able to bathe, and do their laundry and get some emergency food supplies. They no longer had to

dig through the trash or be subjected to insulting remarks. The children's teachers noticed the change with surprise. The children explained proudly, "Our Grandma took us to Project Understanding." Ms. Shakespeare says she owes so much to all who believed in her and helped her while she was living on the street, stating that was all she had plus her faith in God to give her the endurance to go on.

She now lives with her grandchildren in a nice apartment close to where the children attend school. While her daughters were never able to graduate from high school, Ms. Shakespeare hopes her granddaughters, 11 and 12 years old, will continue with their education.

Now, Ms. Shakespeare embarks on a journey to fulfill her desire to teach music in the inner city. This remarkable woman is looking forward to attending California State University, Channel Islands, in the fall. This will be no easy feat, as she will need to obtain financial aid for college and additional funds to get a used car. These kinds of challenges, however, have not deterred her in the past.

She says that Project Understanding was key to her ability to move out of the poverty in which they were living. Education was going to keep them out.

She is forever grateful for the life support help provided to them by Project Understanding throughout the years. While many at Project Understanding contributed and supported Ms. Shakespeare in her endeavor, it was this determined woman who brought it all about. ♦

## 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 July:**

**Individuals**

Judy Alexandre  
William & Dorothy Asano  
Roy & Mary Lou Ash  
Lorraine Ballance  
Marion Baranowski  
Loye Barton  
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Ventura College of Law  
Ventura Vineyard Christian  
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Westminster Presbyterian  
Church

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tributed food and other items  
to our program during the  
month of July:**

### Individuals

Maurice & Carol Bickford  
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William & Pauline Hinds  
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Peter Miller  
Jessica Sprinkle  
Leonard & Marsha Weber

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Concerns, Ventura  
Delta Theta Thau Omicron Tau  
Chapter  
First Baptist Church of Ventura  
Grace Lutheran Church  
Lighthouse Christian  
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Vons, Telegraph Rd.  
Vons, Thompson Blvd.

### Newsletter Layout

Ellen Pearson



Rheto-Rick

## Thou Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor's House

By Rick Pearson  
Executive Director

Last month I raised the question of the the implications, not of placing the Law of God (particularly the Ten Commandments) in public spaces, but of writing the Law of God on our hearts before we enter public spaces. I would like to begin that discussion with one of the commandments that doesn't seem to get much attention—the tenth one.

When I was learning the Ten Commandments, my teachers never spent much time on the last one. They might use words like “envy” or “jealousy” to explain covet and tell us not to want a nicer house or car.

But in the Biblical context, the danger is not so much when I covet things that belong to those richer than I but those who are poorer (and therefore

weaker) than I.

The covetous behavior that the commandment was intended to stop was not that of the poor wishing they were rich, but of the rich lusting more and more after the land of the poor. And, in an agrarian society, losing one's land means starving.

Surely this is what the prophet Micah had in mind when he said, “because it is in their power, they covet fields and sieze them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.” (Micah 2:2)

“But,” I say to myself, “I have never coveted and taken someone's house or farm or field.” Oh, but I have.

When I stand in the produce aisle at Vons, I marvel at the vast array of fruits and vegetables from all over the world. Tomatoes from Mexico, bananas from Honduras, grapes from Chile. In these countries and many others around the world, the vast majority of the land is held by a very small minority of the population. This wealthy minority has made the sound business decision to send this

See Covet, Page 3

## Highlights

**P. 1:** Daybreak collaboration hits potential snag.

Reception Center is effective and caring.

Victwa's victory.

**P. 2:** Transition House child shines!

**P. 3:** Marsha Weber—living a very successful life.



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