



# AT THE CORNER OF HOPE AND MERCY

By ESTELLE DE ZAN

It's 7:30 AM on a Saturday in downtown Mountain View. Outside the steps of Trinity Methodist Church people are bundled up, warding themselves from the early morning breeze. Inside there are others who are heating up food and filling paper bags to the brim with fruit cups, juice boxes, granola bars, and other portable snacks. Some walked, drove, or biked, and here they are now. Between the volunteers snapping on their latex gloves and walking to their serving stations and the 'customers' lining up to enter the room and eat a warm meal, the atmosphere is both anxious and eager.

Established in 2011 by the Los Altos Methodist Church's Just Faith

Class, Hope's Corner is a soup kitchen that serves the hungry every Saturday from 8AM to 11AM. Starting off as the mere glimmer of an idea, the proposal came forward because of the visibly increasing wealth disparity in the Silicon Valley. Recalling the process, Kevin Thompson, a frequent volunteer, said, "We wanted to do something in the local community to make a difference" (Thompson).

The land of large tech industries and startups, Mountain View and the surrounding area have been deeply affected by the steep rise in the cost of housing and the overall cost of living. As Rachael Myrow points out in "A Year After 'The Jungle,' San Jose's New Approach to Homelessness," "while Silicon



Valley's explosive economic growth didn't create the homeless problem, experts say it made it worse for the homeless — and the working poor, who struggle to pay the cost of rising rents." This has created an economic divide between the elite and those who are struggling to



stay afloat. "In the most recent point-in-time survey conducted for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Santa Clara County had 6,556 homeless people. That represents a drop of more than 1,000 people from 2014, but it's still a substantial population" (Myrow).

My introduction to Hope's Corner came last year from a friend who briefly described it as a soup kitchen that serves the homeless, a potential volunteering opportunity, but once I stepped foot inside the establishment, I

realized that the operation is much more than that. Although it can be categorized as such, Hope's Corner is not just a soup kitchen; it's a new friend, a warm hello, an environment exempt from labels, and a home, to more than a few. The people that come to Hope's Corner for the services provided are just that – people. They come from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds; they're not all homeless, as one might assume, and despite their different circumstances, they're just about normal as you and me.

Because Hope's Corner's clients come for a variety of reasons, it's difficult to find an appropriate term that is capable of

describing them and encompassing the range of their situations. Jackie Risley, who first found out about the opportunity through a local newspaper and became involved with her son, suggests that the most inclusive term is food-insecure. "We have a significant number of people who are homeless, we have a lot of people who live in their cars [...] For people who are living on fixed income, we see a lot of retirees who are food-insecure, and for people who have minimum wage jobs, it's practically impossible to be able to afford rent" (Risley). Serving around 225 to 280 people every Saturday morning, this means that the individuals going to Hope's Corner are struggling with the household-level economic condition of limited access to adequate food. As a result of this, numbers in attendance are typically higher towards the end of the month. Risley describes the reason for this change as being





related to the fact that a paycheck isn't always able to provide for that final stretch.

At the heart of Hope's Corner's creation was the goal of defying stereotypes and misconceptions that people may have about the less fortunate. Kaiy, who has been homeless, living in her car, and in between residences since 2009, mentioned, "Everybody thinks homelessness is all the extreme stuff [...] They think that everybody is this filthy person and you're not trying" (Kaiy).

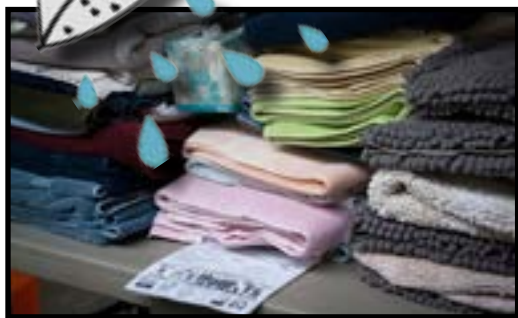
In "A Gift of Hope: Helping the Homeless", Danielle Steel shares her experience of helping the homeless of San Francisco. Through the act of distributing food, clothing, and toiletries to the city's citizens that are cloaked by darkness, she describes the homeless population as, "the forgotten people, whom no one wants to think about or know" (Steel).

Being aware that others might not want to see the homeless problem and accept the situation that you're in is difficult to say the least because this invisibility has a toll on the way you see yourself. This reinstates the idea that fear of the problem itself causes some people to turn their heads instead of addressing it. As a homeless individual, you're not oblivious to this fact, which casts a divide between the individuals who are homeless and those who are not.

In such situations, you have a lot of time to yourself, by yourself, with yourself and with the constant buzz of your thoughts to the extent that it's easy to lose touch with the outside world. To hold onto social norms and such, it's essential to maintain structure

and create habits you can rely on. Facilities like Hope's Corner help with maintaining the human interaction that's essential to maintaining a balanced lifestyle. A recent modification of Hope's Corner that has helped with this has been the addition of two large bathrooms with showers that individuals can use at their disposal. With 15 minutes allotted per person, it may not sound like much, but for someone who is living without the privacy of four walls and such amenities, having access to privacy is a luxury. This also helps instate a sense of dignity and normalcy in a person's life, which they may have lost. "A shower is like heaven," raved a woman as she pat her hair dry. This encapsulates the general sentiment concerning the showers—gratuity and excitement.

For the percentage of Hope's Corner's customer-base that are indeed homeless, they may not have a place to call their own, a place they can feel comfortable in, so the organization is looking to fill that void. In front of the showers and the entrance of Hope's Corner is a social area where people stand, coffee in hand, greeting their friends, making small talk, sharing stories, and waiting for a bathroom to become available. It was walking through this scene that I met Rafael, one of their regular clients. A true craftsman, he makes what one could consider nontraditional works of art by collecting popsicle sticks and piecing them together to create picture frames. Beautifully ornate, they have no explicit price because, in his own words, you can't put a price on





Rafael, The Happiest Man Alive

love. Rafael believes that while some people go to college to become doctors and make money, that's not living. Unless you love your work and are excited to wake up every day to do your job, you're not living right.

Yes, Rafael is homeless. Yes, life has been hard on him. But is he happy? Yes. More so than he has been in a while. Through his experiences, he has learned to appreciate the fine moments in life, live in the moment, and find comfort in his own company. He declared repeatedly that he is the happiest man in the world.

The name 'Hope's Corner' stems from the fact that the soup kitchen is located at the corner of Hope and Mercy streets, but it has now come to represent the sense of inclusivity and community it strives to provide people with. "A lot of people think Hope's Corner is about the food, and it's not. It's really about the dignity. People come every week, and they know each other. It's a place to have coffee and socialize, and be accepted, no matter what—and that's really more important than food" (Risley). With a goal set in mind to initiate conversations and break

through social constructs of labels, it is always seeking to further the sense of camaraderie. Because of this, various adjustments have been made. The tables, for example, were changed from rectangular to circular. Simple as it is, this configuration received many compliments, with customers emphasizing the fact that it allowed for more comfortable discussion. What you'll learn as you get

In reality, the bond between the food-insecure individuals and the volunteers goes both ways. Through the experience of providing food and resources for those in need, volunteers grow personally and even reduce their own stress. After Kevin Thompson's wife passed away from ovarian cancer, volunteering at Hope's Corner helped him heal from the heartbreak and channel the negative energy building up into something good. "I love being here. Honestly, it's the best day of my week. I love it. I love my job and everything, but coming to Hope's Corner and doing this and seeing the people – it's this one day of the week when I know I'm going to be here. This is what I'm doing from 6:30 to 10:30. That's

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to know the volunteers is that they have stories of their own. In the case of Elena Pacheco, volunteering at the soup kitchen has helped her through the adorous journey of being a cancer patient. Although the treatment has taken a toll on her life, putting on a smile, meeting strangers, and waking up early every Saturday has served as a form of alternative healing mechanism.

what I want to do. It just feels good" (Thompson). We see the homeless pacing around, yet we choose to not ask questions. In some cases, we'd rather not learn about their story because it's easier for us to assume the worse—they're in the situation they're in because they're mentally unstable or abusive of substances, when that's not always the case. Having gotten to know Hope's Corner, I see it as an

alternate universe in which initial differences are dismissed; we're united by the fact that we're all there. Because of this closeness, the "homeless" no longer have to carry that title. Perhaps this is why every time I've left, the stress of reality melts away. I'm left smiling to myself, thinking back to the encounters I've had and the people I've helped in the simplest form.

Over the course of five years, Hope's Corner has now firmly established itself as a well-oiled machine. Although the number of individuals being served on Saturdays has reached a sort of plateau, the soup kitchen is looking forward to expanding its sphere. A step in this direction would be spreading awareness to people in the community that are in need of help but haven't found the resources. One way in which Thompson is helping is by referring homeless individuals to Hope's Corner. "When I see someone standing in the street with a sign looking for anything—

water, money, or food—I always give them a Hope's Corner flier and say, 'Come see us'" (Thompson). Another would be encouraging people to come volunteer for them to see the process that takes place

every week; once a problem has a face, it's a lot harder for it to go unnoticed. With sign-ins online, just show up at 7 o'clock and you'll meet a wealth of volunteers that will show you the facilities and direct you where to go.

Following every shift at Hope's Corner, I'd make my way to the public library to reflect upon that morning. Sitting there, jotting down notes about the individuals I'd talked to, I would come to notice a person that looked vaguely familiar. And then another.



The woman I met near the showers smiles at me and Rafael passes by in his bike. In awe, reality seeps in. "In fact they literally are right here in our neighborhood. Once we began to be active with Hope's Corner, we began to see these people. You know they work here, they live here. Some of them are on the streets. But some of them are people who are waiting in local businesses. So they really are our neighbors" (Risley).



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# Artist Bio

Estelle De Zan is a student at Mountain View High School and Freestyle Academy. Having been raised in a multicultural home, she speaks both Spanish and French. An aspiring journalist, you can find her lost in train of thought and writing about nothing in particular. In the future, she hopes to pursue her passion for traveling and continue sharing the stories of people she meets along the way.

