

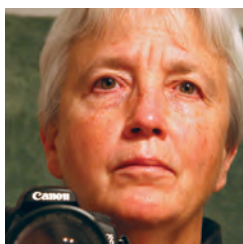
on the Record

Grassroots Homelessness Advocates

The familiar voices of generations-old grassroots advocacy organizations are being reinforced by new voices, all of which relay the urgency of the issues affecting homeless children, youth, and adults. The following are excerpts from conversations with three grassroots leaders who use media to both share the stories of the homeless and to inform and empower the homeless. Each started with a simple idea that grew into a powerful tool for change.



Joan McAllister
Executive Director
Information for Families Inc., New York City



Diane Nilan
Founder and President
HEAR US Inc., National



Mark Horvath
Founder
InvisiblePeople.tv, National

UNCENSORED: How did you get involved with working with the homeless?

McAllister: In 1987, I volunteered with the Citizens Committee for Children of New York. I was with a group assigned to monitor the welfare hotels in midtown New York City, where the city was placing the growing number of homeless families with children. These families lacked badly needed information about resources and services available to them. I brought out the first issue of my newsletter, "HOW...WHEN...WHERE," that year.

Nilan: I stumbled into this work in the mid-'80s. I was unemployed, earning money through a variety of odd jobs, when a friend pointed me to a job opening at Joliet (Illinois) Catholic Charities office. It was the time when homelessness was ravaging the Rust Belt and other parts of the country. Since I "only" had one duty, my boss tossed the increasing needs of homeless people at me.

Horvath: Many years ago, I had a great job in the television industry and I ended up homeless on Hollywood Boulevard. So I rebuilt my life back into a three-bedroom house and a 780 credit score. I've been not only homeless myself but always in some way doing something for homeless people for the past 14 years.

UNCENSORED: What do you do for the homeless?

McAllister: We publish a free, bilingual newsletter, ten issues a year, 15,500 copies of each, distributed to families in the NYC shelter system and agencies serving them containing information the families need about resources, rights, and services and stories on people and programs to inspire and guide them. We include regularly updated lists of real estate brokers and food pantries. It is primarily aimed at families and particularly those with children.

Nilan: My activism is largely documentary filmmaking, writing, and speaking. Five years ago, I started a national nonprofit, HEAR US Inc., to fund my efforts to "give voice and visibility to homeless children and youth." It's a one-woman operation with a great board and a talented video partner. In the past five years, I've put on over 100,000 miles of mostly back roads travel in my motor home, which serves as my home and office. Much credit is due to Professor Laura Vazquez, Northern Illinois University's Communication Department, who provided her ongoing expertise to making HEAR US film projects come alive.

Horvath: I was facing my own homelessness again in the fall of 2007, and scared to death.

I grabbed a camera and with \$45, I started InvisiblePeople.tv. Since then I have traveled all over the country several times, all the way from Tampa, Florida, to Anchorage, Alaska. I've been under bridges and into tent cities. I do this while fighting my own homelessness. I also work as a homeless services coordinator in Glendale, California, at PATH Achieve Glendale. The best Invisible People video is Invisible.People.tv/movie. That's the best clip that actually shows what I do.

UNCENSORED: How long have you been using video to give voice to the homeless? What impact have you noticed on both the homeless that have been videotaped and the people who see the videos?

Nilan: When I started HEAR US in 2005, I committed to the medium of video, though I knew nothing about filming and production. I had seen the reactions to a video produced by the Santa Barbara education office, "In Their Own Voices," giving homeless kids a chance to speak to audiences. Barbara Duffield, National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth policy director, and I collaborated to create a more wide-reaching, non-California version of this film, and that formed the crux of my efforts. Video is an awesome medium. It's had a profound, positive impact, as both an example

on the Homefront

of people who, in some cases, overcame their challenges, and as a way to create solidarity, encouraging advocacy. Non-homeless audiences across the board have been inspired to reexamine their stereotypes about homelessness and to explore how they can help alleviate the suffering caused by it.

Horvath: For me what makes the difference is being transparent and empowering people to tell their own stories, both the good and the bad. In homeless services we always cherry-pick the story. We find that perfect individual, but a huge percent of them go back out and start using and drinking. Well, that's real life. And people know that people fail. Rejoice in the victories, but don't hide the failures.

UNCENSORED: Recently how have policies to help the homeless changed?

McAllister: I think the current emphasis on rushing families in the shelter system into jobs, without regard for their different needs, so they can qualify for the only available rent subsidy and move out quickly is not a great idea. To assume that every young family that gets into enough trouble to wind up homeless can move right back into the community in a few months without any additional preparation and prosper doesn't make sense to me. Many people running shelters agree that there is a real danger that we are going to see a lot more relocated families failing and returning to shelter again. They are concerned that people leaving shelter with low-paying jobs will not be making enough to pay the rent in one or two years when their subsidy ends. They warn that figures for recidivism could soar and should be watched carefully.

Nilan: I'd like to say things are getting better for homeless families and youth, and maybe on the surface some improvements have occurred, but for the most part we're falling dreadfully behind the increasing numbers of people who find themselves without a place to call home. In no way do I think twenty-first-century America is adequately addressing poverty, domestic violence, mental and physical health needs, family and youth support, employment and wage security, or myriad other systemic contributors to the injus-

tice of homelessness. And I fear these next few years will be horrifically worse unless we, the ordinary citizens who have what we need to survive and thrive, take a powerful, unprecedented stand.

UNCENSORED: What challenges do you see for the future as you continue to work with the homeless?

McAllister: It's more challenging than ever to get information from shelter providers because they are under such pressure to achieve city goals (shorten shelter stays, move more families out quicker) and feel they are being discouraged from challenging or changing policies.

Horvath: Right now there are two million people losing their unemployment benefits. We have a silver tsunami coming with the older generations and we're not ready for it. And nobody's really talking about it. Everyone's looking at the car wreck in front of them instead of the big earthquake down the road.

UNCENSORED: Do you hope to expand or further develop your work?

Nilan: We—Laura and my board—are constantly looking for ways to expand our influence. We have great tools—our videos and books are very effective, and the online presence of HEAR US will continue to grow. We'd love to get our materials in colleges and universities to educate our future leaders about homelessness and poverty.

Horvath: I started WeAreVisible.com. It's a social media literacy site for homeless people. If you look at the Facebook page, which is facebook.com/wearevisible, it's run by a homeless mom in Seattle with two kids. It's a community of homeless people helping homeless people. What I'm trying to do is establish the worth of virtual case management. If you look at any Web site of any homeless services organization, it's always donor-centric or for the board members. There's nothing for homeless people. But homeless people are at the public library all day, they're searching for us. They're searching for help, but we're not there listening. I'm going to expand my efforts to use technology to help both homeless services and homeless people be able to

expedite the process from homeless to housing. InvisiblePeople.tv will always be homeless stories.

UNCENSORED: Is there anything else that you believe is important to share about your work or that others should know about homelessness?

McAllister: I don't think most New Yorkers are aware of the fact that thousands of homeless families in the city, over 8,000 of them with children, are pretty much like all families. Certainly addictions or mental illness, where they exist, complicate finding solutions. But their problem is poverty and solutions must come from recognizing society's obligation to help.

Nilan: I am more and more convinced that the American public has been bamboozled by government leaders and media about homelessness. Stereotypes of "bag ladies" and "grizzled bums" are straight out wrong. People who have lived a nomadic, neglected existence for any period of time don't become less human, but sadly that is how they are portrayed, making them less "worthy" of our help. Furthermore, our nation has all but totally ignored the reality of homeless unaccompanied youth and families.

Horvath: Poverty and homelessness is so big, it's so huge that we have to start working together. We have to partner with the homeless services across the street, and partner with the churches, and partner with the businesses. It's the only way that it will work. I've had the unique experience to travel around the country and see the face of homelessness and the only differences are in the communities that embrace it and don't bulldoze it. Some communities literally bulldoze homelessness, but it never goes away. Some communities say, "Let's join together and let's really work on getting people into housing." And those communities have had a huge impact. My focus when I do the winter shelters is on the homeless families that arrive. It's very hard to get a homeless family off the streets, but it's something that we cannot stop doing. And if we started being smarter about our resources and working together, we could have much more impact. ■