

From LAPD's performance / installation
"Is there history on Skid Row?"
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LAPD's Catherine Shepard
Interviews The Catholic Worker's
Jeff Dietrich



Cathy: Hello.
My name is Kathy Shepard and this is Mr. Jeff Dietrich. Jeff Dietrich is doing a very important work in the community. I'd like to thank you first for this service. I think it's wonderful. How long has your group been on skid row?

Jeff: The Los Angeles Catholic Worker is part of the Catholic Worker movement which was founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. So we're part of a larger movement within the Catholic church - the lay Catholic movement- that started during the depression in 1933. There are about 150 houses like ours through-out the country and a few through-out Europe and Australia. We started in 1970. We were founded by a an ex-priest and an ex-nun named Dan and Chris Dolini. Their very first feed was just two blocks from here at 2nd and Main, in front of St. Vibiana's Cathedral, as a kind of a protest against- at the time- Cardinal Manning. So, I came about 6 months after that happened and the community was Dan and Chris and their son. They were serving meals on Winston Street right down on the next block from here, where it's called the "Misery House". Is it still called the "Misery House"? Yeah, I mean you know that it's the St. Vincent Center or something. Does anyone know why it's called the "Misery House"? It's so miserable? Well anyway, the Misery House was actually called "Miserere House"- a Latin word- and it means "Have mercy on us." Lord have mercy on us. But all the guys called it "Misery House", cause it was a pretty miserable place to be and it did smell like Hell. So, I was serving across the street and we'd wash our pots there. So we started serving right in front of "Misery House" and of course the police came up and said "You can't serve right here". We were cooking at St. Joseph Church down at- on 12th and Santie, in the fashion district. We went and asked Francis, the priest there, if we could use their church and he said: "Well...maybe we could rent you a place." So, rather than serve in a church for God's sake... we went downtown and we looked around 5th Street and finally found a place next-door to the Regal Hotel. It was called the Regal Annex on 6th and Gladys St. We went in and plastered up and fixed it up as best as we could and we served in here -started up in 1971 and we've been there ever since.



Cathy: I use your service, your facilities and I find the differences between your facilities and the other facilities is you deal with the whole man- the whole person: spiritually and the hunger, clothing, medical.

Jeff: You know, we try to treat the people like human beings, and that's our philosophy. We think that Jesus Christ came to earth not to worship God, but to teach us how to become human beings. And how to treat each other with compassion and love, and not be judgmental of our brothers and sisters but to be compassionate and opening and welcoming. And- you know- there's reason people don't practice that it's really hard to do. But you know we really try to do it. So, you know our place like in 1987, our kitchen got destroyed by the earthquake. Instead of building a big building, like a big mission- or something like that- we decided to use our money to build a smaller place, and then to build a garden outside because we we're serving outside and we noticed people kind of liked it outside, but we thought "Wouldn't it be nice if there were plants and flowers and birds and trees and water fountains", so when people come by our place, the contrast between the streets and our garden is so stark that people are overwhelmed by it. But, it would be a beautiful place even if it were at Malibu or something. A lot of our folks who eat there say: "You know, you could charge a lot a money for people to eat here. You should open a restaurant." So, we try to treat people as if they were in a really nice restaurant. As if they were in- you know- to me it has the feel of a fancy spa, you know Beverly Hills or Palms Springs or something. These are the people who have come to this wonderful oasis. That's how we want people to feel when they come there. And so, we don't have a re-hab program or anything like that. But we know that people who come to our place, they are really affected by it. They come back years later and they say: "I'm doing really better now. But I want to tell you, that if it wasn't for you guys...I don't know what I would've done. So, it's really heartening- sometimes you don't think that you're really making a difference, in fact- a lot of times you don't feel like you're making a difference



Cathy: Believe me, "The Hippy Kitchen" is making a difference. Do you see- since your group started off making a political statement- and just about had to fight your way in here to order to give help to the community- do you find that in 1939 and 1999- the difference, is there any difference?

Jeff: Let me just say, I wasn't around in 1939, but I was around in 1970. What I see as different- uh, God-when I came in 1970, that Skid Row was very much what traditional Skid Rows have been in the United States for about a hundred years since the end of the Civil War. It was the home of the white working class, itinerant male working man. You know, the itinerant working man that build this nation. The steel workers, the maritime workers. And you guys know that Skid Row was named for the

loggers in Seattle. Skid Row is where they skid the logs down to the bay. The loggers lived on either side of Skid Row. On the off-season, they did a lot of drinking and carrying on. Traditionally, Skid Row was like that. It was the place where the white itinerant, working class male lived. When he was working on the railroad, for maritime service, in the logging or agriculture work- all these seasonal workers would come back to L.A. That's the way it was. It was end of that era. Two things happened back then: The rise of the Labor Unions. Maybe three things. The end of prosperity at the end of WW2. And, civil rights. So, what we saw when we came here was older white males and they were alcoholics. And that's the population we served initially. By 1980, all that changed. And, I want to tell you- 5th street was all white when I came. Like the "Alamo"- at the corner of 5th and Wall- had a sign that said: "We don't serve niggers." Back then, I'm sorry, that's what it said. Yeah. And across the street, was the Hard Rock Cafe. I don't know if you ever saw the album-- Jim Morrison, his first album. It was on the cover. It was the first place on 5th Street that served Black people. And 6th Street was all Blacks. It was black because of the black porters. 5th Street ended in a train depot. And Skid Row is all about transportation: the end of transportation, terminuses, bus stations, and train lines. And you get off there- the working class hotels are there, the upper class hotels are over here on Main Street. So, the White people lived on 5th Street, the Black People lived on 6th street and the Latino People lived on 7th. And, it was pretty segregated.



But then, by the 80's, all that changed. The effects of civil rights transformed that. So that what happened is, the majority of people on Skid Row became black male- young Black males. And the drug of choice- the recreational drug of choice was no longer alcohol, but it was crack. And because of civil rights now black people have the right to be in the same places poor white people, so they could avail themselves of the services of the missions and other services that were available in this area.

So, that's what I see as changing- what has changed. The biggest change I think is the economic change. At the end of WW2 up until the 70's there was a sense of -"Yeah, we're all going to get jobs, it's all going to work out. That capitalism is going to happen. And everybody's going to get a job eventually." I don't see that happening anymore. I see the advent of economy affecting us the same way it affects poor people all over the world and it places our people in the same ghetto as the people of Sri Lanka and Madagascar. They are superfluous people who are not needed. And if they are needed, the work that's available isn't worth doing. They're going to cut out the welfare and they're going to cut out all of that stuff. And people are going to be in a way worse situation than they were in 1970. And one of the things that we did- John, you must remember the Law Center we founded was instrumental in getting General Relief raised from \$212.00 up to what- like \$317.00 for awhile. And now it's back to \$212.00. So, I have to tell you, I'm not really, I don't come here speaking as a really hopeful person in transforming these larger structures. But, whatever progress we made in the 80's is down the tubes right now, I feel like we're starting at below ground zero. I feel like we're on permanent war economy. This whole phony war on terrorism is just a total sham to transform this place into a slave nation of people who are poor who are jobless and on the streets.

The wealthy get to suck up all of the resources of all the world, and..I'm pretty damn mad about it.



Cathy: Passion. So much passion. I'd like to ask you about your drug program, the needle exchange.

Jeff: What we try to do, is be open to people. It's tough, because there's so much of a great need here. You have to set some kinds of boundaries and parameters. But we start with the sense of- we'd like to like Jesus. We like to welcome everybody. So, you know- we do have a dental program. This one guy he's a well known dentist in Palos Verdes- he does like root canals and all kinds of stuff in his office, he comes down here and we call it our own M.A.S.H. Unit- we pull teeth, we fill teeth, and we clean teeth that's all we do. It's just one guy who does it and what a great guy- Rich Mehan- and then the needle program, it's not really ours- "Clean Needles Now", I think, it's funded by the City. But, I think we're one of the few places in the whole of Los Angeles that gives them a site to be at, because no one wants to be handing out clean needles- or needles. So, that's the thing, - we try to help people where they are, give them what they need. We don't want to be spreading hepatitis- so we pass out clean needles. And we don't want to be judgmental. You know- about drug addicts. Because, I know that drugs and alcohol are big problems, and they're maybe the biggest problem. But- I tell you what: it's just as big on the West side- that problem is just as big! The problem here, is that the drug addicts and the alcoholics are homeless, they're on the street. The alcoholics and the drugs addicts have a home on the West side. They got a home, and you don't. You gotta take this thing out on the streets and the cops can just go: "Okay, yeah- you ready to go to jail today, baby?" Yeah- we see 'em, we see 'em walking around. We see how they do it. And they piss you off, and that's what it's all about. The cops get to do whatever they want on the streets. They love being in charge of these streets. On the West side- plenty of drug addicts over there, plenty of guys snorting coke, plenty of guys drinking alcohol, plenty of guys numbin out. But, nobody gets arrested for it. Nobody gets- plenty of dealers down there, too. Plenty of 'em. But, nobody gets busted, okay. And that's where the big ones are, by the way. They like to come down here and bust the little people. So we pass out the needles. And I'll tell you what else we do: We pass out free shopping carts to people. The cops: "Okay- you got a shopping cart? That's against the Law. You stole that?"



I'll write you a ticket. I'm taking that shopping cart." And you know what they do with that shopping cart, don't you? They throw it in the trash truck and crush it! What's up with that?! I don't understand it. And the Jay-Walking Tickets. And there's another pal over there, across the street right now, one of those Green Shirts. And we have a law suit against all the Green Shirts, and the Red Shirts, and the Blue Shirts. All those guys. It's just another layer of oppression for the people on the street. And, God, they're just wannabe cops, and they're out there and they wanna push you around, tell you how to live your lives and making the world safe for business. Ain't that the truth. And they're all employed by the businessmen. They're private thugs is what they are. So, we gave out free shopping carts. And I wrote an article and it was in the L.A. Times, and people were writing into the Times and saying: "You know, this person giving out free shopping carts, it promotes crime." And that's what the police said: "These shopping carts promote crime." Yeah, and we're going: "Well, people have cars and they use it for criminal activity- doesn't mean you take their cars away." Don't you get angry about that shit?! So, we gave out free shopping carts. So it has a little sign on the front- we had a lawyer draw it up.

Actually, Bob Meyers, who is the former District Attorney, City Attorney for the City of Santa Monica- the City Attorney that refused to prosecute homeless people and finally got fired for it. I don't if you know that little piece of history. That's a great, great piece of history. Bob Meyers. Anyway, he wrote up this whole thing. We put it on a plaque on the front of our shipping cart. And its marked. And they don't take our shopping carts. It was pretty fun, you know because the picture the shopping cart of Robert Hosey, who got the first shopping cart, is all the way in Italy, you know. Anarchists in Italy are writing to me: "This is a very good Anarchist action. You are empowering the people. But that's it- yo want to give people what they need. God- wouldn't it be great if all these programs down here spruced people up and once they pushed them out the door there was a fucking job for them, but we all know that that's not happening. There aren't any jobs out here, except for flipping hamburgers and doing computer input. So, our job program is giving people shopping carts. So, we try to be different, you know. I tell you what. We're different than the missions. We deliberately started off to be different from the missions. What we wanted to do i is be people who shared food with others, who broke bread with others. Who invited- invited everyone to the table. That was out goal. Rather than say: "Okay, I'm gonna save your soul. I'll get you to Heaven on time, Baby." I'm not sure if I'm getting to heaven. How can I get you to heaven?! So, what we try to do is be human beings- brothers and sisters under God. We're called the "Hippy Kitchen"- you know, it's like the "Misery House"- you get a street name, we're the "Catholic Worker Hospitality Kitchen"- nobody ever calls us the "Hospitality Kitchen", but we're the "Hippy Kitchen", because in 1970 when we came here I had long hair, and the people- the three guys with me had long hair- and we were all hippies, or wannabe hippies. Everyone h long hair if you were under 25, you know. Even John did. So, they called us hippies because- they didn't know what to call us because we weren't like a mission and they didn't know what it was. So we were the "Hippy Kitchen". Speaking of John, you know that John got his first job with us. We started a number of projects- amongst them the Inner City Law Center- which is still going on 7th and Central. A lovely young lady named Nancy Mintie who just got out of U.C.L.A. Law School, and a good Catho girl, she said: "You know- I'm thinking of doing something to help people here get their legal rights." I said: "You should come to the Catholic Worker and we will open a clinic." Well, we already actually had a little bit of something going, but she started it and really took off with it. How did you- you got hired there, didn't you?

John Malpede:
I started as volunteer there, and they hired me. What do you think of the future of this area?



Jeff: It's..I'd love to tell you I'm way hopeful. I'm not hopeful for any poor people anywhere in the world. I think that folks here are the most screwed. I feel like deja vu again, I feel like all the battles we fought and won in 1970 are coming back again.

In 1970, we just started going down to the city Hall and started Central City Redevelopment, so skid row would have a voice. I was on all those committees, I was President on the Skid Row Development Corporation. We were gonna do all this stuff- we did some stuff. But, basically all that stuff was like you know, it's like window dressing. But, now the desire to disappear Skid Row is starting up again. And I'm pretty fearful of where's it's gonna go. They're splitting up Skid Row. I think that the key is to try to save the housing. I think that they wanna get rid of it as fast as they can. But, you know, the thing we have going for us is their mistake, is that they've allowed everybody to come down here- in a very small area- and nobody else wants us, and nobody else wants the services or the people- and short

of machine-gunning everybody down here or sending them to the gas chambers- which I don't think they're gonna do-we're gonna be here one way or another. And they're gonna have to deal with us. There's..nothing that- The people here are resilient. And the people here know how to suffer. And I think that is powerful. I don't think we're gonna build Nirvana down here. I don't think they're gonna destroy us. So that's what I would say. I look to the strength, and the resiliency and the willingness of the people to suffer. And I look to my own desire to be present to that situation. And that's all I can say at this point.



Cathy: The Women and the Children. Welfare reform. Your organization- are you making any preparation for the Children.

Jeff: I know that welfare is, is going dry for women and children. I would be my hope that this would be the last place that woman or children would come. I would prefer not- and I would prefer that - and here's the problem that I see which is why I'm not making major

kind of changes in my services: It's because it's easier to serve women and children. It's easier to serve women and children. You can raise more money serving Women and children. The missions want to serve women and children. The missions want to get rid of- all of the black, male, single crack smokers. Get them out of my building. Bring in women and children. Just- I mean, just go to the Fred Jordan mission on Easter- who's there? On Christmas, who's there? They go out, they take vans, they bring in women and children from all the surrounding neighborhoods, they bring in all of the media- and they say: "Here we are." And they sing Christian hymns. Nobody wants to show pictures of unemployed black men eating food at your tables. What they want to show is women and children. "We're helping the victims." But you don't raise money with unemployed black males- with the pictures of unemployed- I'm sorry. But, you guys know it. I know how to raise money- you put a picture of a little child. And the mother. And people will send you beaucoup bucks. But when I raise money- when I send- I send out one appeal letter a year, and I always tell people: "Look. This is what I do. And if you don't send me money- don't even think of yourself as a Christian. I'm not making any great changes in the world. I'm just doing what Jesus did and if you have any- any interest in what Jesus did- you damn well better share some of your wealth with me." Yeah. All right. By the way- I'm full-time volunteer. I receive \$15 and room and board, \$15 a week and room and board. A Catholic Workers receive \$15 a week and room and board and uh...that's what we get for what we do. So the people in our community- our full-time community- which is about eight people- they are the biggest contributors to what we do. And, then we have a budget of about \$110,000.00- \$125,000 a year, which is like the salary of a halfway decent city planner. Or a good school principal. We serve, we serve about- about a 1000 meals a day. We invite people into our homes. We operate a dental clinic. Today- we're taking 50 people on a picnic to Elysian Park: hot dogs and beans and potato salad. So anyway, That's what we're doing with our \$125,000 a year. I don't know what the mission's are doing with theirs. But we're low budget, and we're deliberately a low-budget. If you don't think I know how to raise money, if you don't think I can't raise a whole bunch of money- you got another thing coming. Because I have that as second nature. What's harder for me is to stay small, to stay simple, to stay welcoming and to be like Jesus.

"Is there History on Skid Row?" investigated the displacement of very poor people due to gentrification in Skid Row Los Angeles.
A performance / installation / public conversation - 2002

