

Night Ministry brings solace to San Francisco's desperate streets

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Rev. Lyle Beckman, right, and Deacon Diana Wheeler listen to the story of a young man living on the streets for just three weeks in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco on Thursday, July 31, 2008. Beckman and Wheeler are part of **Night Ministry** program that reaches out to the poorest areas with faith and resource referrals. (Mathew Sumner/San Mateo County Times) Deacon Diana Wheeler listens to a homeless man in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco on Thursday, July 31, 2008. Wheeler is part of **Night Ministry** program that reaches out to the poorest areas of San Francisco with faith and resource referrals. (Mathew Sumner/San Mateo County Times)

SAN FRANCISCO — Minutes before her walk through the Tenderloin, Deacon Diana Wheeler stuffed cereal bars into her pockets.

"We don't give money if they ask," the 53-year-old San Mateo County resident said.

Dressed in black, except for the white clerical collar around her neck, Wheeler, along with the Rev. Lyle Beckman and a volunteer for the San Francisco **Night Ministry**, gathered for a prayer last week.

The trio asked for strength and compassion, not only for themselves, but for those living on the streets of San Francisco.

"There's always an edge to the end of the month," Beckman said. "People are desperate for a couple of bucks."

From 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., Wheeler and Beckman ministered in the Tenderloin, an area known for significant poverty, homelessness and crime.

On Ellis Street, they slowly weaved through people rushing to their destinations.

The two night ministers sought an invitation to chat through eye contact. One woman caught their attention.

"Hello Father, will you pray for me?" she said. "I need to get out of here."

They obliged.

We will listen

For 43 years, night ministers have gone out every night to various neighborhoods in the city where people are out and about.

The program started off as an experiment when a couple of clergy leaders in the city realized they should have more of a presence in the community when people are in crisis.

Now, the non-profit organization has 40 crisis hot-line counselors, nine assistant night ministers, and two **night ministry** fellows.

Their office is at a church in downtown San Francisco.

Beckman, 55, often teams up with Wheeler, who has been with the program for two months.

It's not hard for them to strike up conversations, or offer referrals for anyone seeking help.

"They just want to be heard and we will listen," Beckman of San Francisco said. "We can hear a story a thousand times, but in that moment, for that person, they are what matters."

The voices

Before midnight, 51-year-old Eddie approached Wheeler and Beckman.

Eddie, who did not want to give his last name, ranted about the area he frequents and said a lot of work needs to be done.

Behind him, people sat covered with coarse blankets at a doorstep.

"This is the paradise of the parasites," Eddie said. "Everybody leaches on each other, and they suck the blood out of each other ... I tell you no lie."

Nearby, 40-year-old Art O'Guinn took to the night ministers and followed them for a few blocks.

Holding a can of beer in a crumpled brown paper bag, O'Guinn beamed about the recent news that his wife would have to provide a monthly spousal support of \$1,058.

Unemployed, he also collects supplemental security income.

O'Guinn said he appreciated that Wheeler and Beckman were his "sounding boards."

"I won't say it was the highlight of my night, but you know, it's running a close second," he said.

The Bayview resident said he served in San Quentin from 1992 to 1999 for rape.

O'Guinn recalled that he was in a car with teenagers when a female got into the car.

"I bought them all beer," he said. "The next thing I know they took her jacket and shoes. They were little gangsters. I was portrayed as the super-duper ringleader. I'm not ashamed. Things happen."

Eye contact

Wheeler, an Episcopal Deacon and one of the night fellows, grew up in the Tenderloin.

She was a blond girl, raised to be afraid.

But when she goes out each night to minister, there's no fear.

Her clerical collar is a shield.

"People are still very respectful," said Wheeler, who works 25 hours a week. "It makes a statement of what I'm doing here, and who I am. I'm walking out here with a purpose."

Her first **night ministry** walk was 12 years ago when she went out with the Rev. Don Fox, who was the night minister before Beckman.

They went through the Tenderloin.

Wheeler said it was a meaningful experience for her.

"A lot of people are lonely out there," she said. "I can't solve everybody's problem, but by itself, looking at someone in the eye is acknowledging him as a human being, and people don't get a lot of that."

Seeing the despair and hearing their tales only makes her want to reach out more.

"I don't pretend to understand it all, but I know that there's resurrection for everything," she said. "It's not my business to make a judgment about what another person's path could be."

Rewarding work

She gets plenty of admiration for her work from the people she meets.

On Taylor Street, she welcomed a hug from a homeless man, and in past nights, her hands have been kissed by other men.

"Chivalry is not dead here," she laughed.

And Beckman said women gravitate to Wheeler for a woman's perspective or sensibility.

Their nightly walks have exposed her to bars and clubs she would never have gone to.

While Beckman was speaking to a "lady of the night," Wheeler waited outside Divas, a night club on Post Street dedicated to the transgender community.

"My grandmother would be appalled at what I do if she were still living," she said. "She's like flipping in her urn."

At 1:30 a.m. the duo started heading back to the church office, already looking forward to the next night.

"It's alive," Beckman said. "It's not a neighborhood I would call dangerous in terms of what we do. People are out with you, they know you, like you, respect you. "

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