



When the Holidays Don't Come

By Jamie Goldberg
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Patricia sat in a plastic chair and leaned against the undersized table that held only a toy easel and a broken action figure. As she stared at the bare walls of the small white room, tears began to run down her cheeks.

She and her three boys have stayed in a room at the Oshun Women's Drop-in Center off 13th and Mission since September, when she fled her abusive husband. But earlier this week, it really hit home for the first time — there will be no Christmas this year.

"I already told my children that Santa's not coming," Patricia said. "There's not going to be a Christmas tree — no lights, no opening gifts like my kids are used to. I won't even mention the word Christmas on that day."

Patricia is one of 6,455 homeless people in San Francisco — based on a conservative estimate by the city — who can't afford the holiday glitz and gifts. As residents and tourists flocked to Mission and Valencia Streets to finish their last-minute shopping this week, many homeless have been worrying about where they'll be sleeping on Christmas.

In the room Patricia had secured for the night, a single gray mat lay starkly on the linoleum floor. When it's time to sleep, she'll lay out three more mats, neatly pushed against one another, for her three boys.

"We'll stay here at the shelter for Christmas," said the 46-year-old. "But it will be more meaningful because we'll all be together. There are more important things than gift-giving. We're alive, and if that's all God is going to give to me, I'm grateful for that."

While she talked, her 8-year-old opened the door and asked if he could play online games on the center's computer in the hall. He suffers from attention deficit disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, Patricia said.

"He asked for a laptop for Christmas," she said. "When I'm able to stand on my own two feet, I'll get it for him."

At the Mission Neighborhood Resource Center on Capp and 17th streets, a group played a casual game of dominoes in one corner, while others rested their heads on the table, sleeping to pass the day. Some sat along the wall, waiting to be called in for doctor's appointments.

Robert sat alone in a corner, waiting to do laundry. He was going to be an actor in Los Angeles; now, he's homeless in San Francisco.

For a while it was interesting to observe San Francisco's "affluent consumerist" culture, he said. But lately he's been thinking about leaving.

"Being homeless in San Francisco, it's a different reality. It's like you're here but not really here. Especially at Christmas, you wall yourself off from it all because you can't afford that lifestyle."

Hunched near Robert, Gregory was reading a newspaper. He came in to get out of the cold and be placed on the list for a shelter bed; the center makes the bed reservations. The former custodian has been without a job for two years. He's alone in San Francisco, with his family in Seattle.

As he did on Thanksgiving, Gregory will wander the streets, maybe taking a bus ride or stopping to see the passing scene at Union Square or Pier 39.

"Christmas can be the most depressing holiday, if you don't have money to splurge like everyone else," he said, compulsively scratching his arms and legs as he talked.

Upstairs, half a dozen people smoked quietly on the patio. Nathan asked to buy a cigarette from a man donning a 49ers jacket. He'd pay the last 35 cents he has on him, he said.

The 40-year-old has been on and off the streets since he was 13. He usually spends Christmas begging, he said, blowing smoke toward the street. People are more generous on Christmas.

Across the patio, Debora Carr reminisced about the boyfriend she lived with before she started doing drugs. She wishes she could spend Christmas with loved ones. Instead, she might spend it on the street.

"Come on, let's go," barked a staff member. It was 11:30 a.m. and soon the center would close for lunch. The group shuffled down the stairs, and many headed out to the street.

The night before, a movie was played at the center, and dozens of people talked quietly or stared blankly at the screen as they waited to see whether they'd have a bed for the night.

"Is it shower day?" an older woman asked of no one in particular.

Fabiola Lopez and her chihuahua, Princess, leaned against the lockers that lined one wall of the room. Lopez used to celebrate Christmas with her family back in Yucatan. But she has been in the United States for 20 years and doesn't have the money to celebrate this year.

Some of the other homeless individuals at the center will find ways to celebrate.

Jose Javier gripped his cane tightly as he sat against the wall. He used to work preparing food at Whole Foods, but was laid off, like many others, he said. He sometimes works as a day laborer these days, hiding the cane he uses for his back problems so that he can appear able-bodied to potential employers.

He'll spend Christmas at his sister's home in San Mateo. Though he can't bring presents, he jumped at the chance to celebrate with relatives.

"It's a time to be together with my family and share what little everyone does have," Javier said.

Jose Cedillo, who has been unemployed for the last seven months, will spend the holiday with his brother who lives in the Excelsior. Though he is without a job, he will still come bearing gifts: a doll and a Superman toy — both homemade — for his niece and nephew.

"I think about giving gifts to my family," Cedillo said in Spanish. "They're children. Christmas is about the children."

Across the room, Hugo, a native of El Salvador, is like many others at the center who don't keep in touch with their families. He might go to a friend's house for Christmas. If he does, he'll sleep there; if not, he's not sure where he will sleep.

But he's not giving up all hope. After all, it's Christmas.

"I don't know where I'll go, but frankly I'm going to have fun," he said.