

New Haven Register

Book on New Haven Homeless a 'cry for awareness'

Family self-publishes interviews with people living in the margins

NEW HAVEN — Like anybody who spends time downtown, Helen Hudson sees the clumps of huddled, hungry, homeless people waiting outside a church for the soup kitchen to open.

But unlike most, Hudson one day decided to stop passing by those anonymous figures. She wanted to get to know them and help feed them.

After two years during the mid- 1990s spent volunteering at the kitchens in seven churches, Hudson, 82, began interviewing the people who are called "guests" there. Her idea was to give them a chance to tell their stories to what she described as "a hostile, or, at best, an indifferent world."

"Let them know we want to work," one of the men told her.

"Tell them we're not bad people," said another.

Hudson, who had already published novels on social and political themes, compiled the interviews into a manuscript and tried to interest a commercial publisher, including university presses such as Yale University Press.

But nobody wanted to publish it — until Hudson's son, writer Tom Lane, read the manuscript.

"I felt it was an important piece of work," Lane said. "I thought: what if we self-publish the book and send it to organizations working for the homeless? They could then resell the books and keep the money, using it for their soup kitchens."

Lane first approached the Episcopal Church of St. Paul & St. James, one of the places where Hudson had volunteered. They accepted Lane's proposal.

"That was a powerful moment for the whole family," Lane said.

Pitching in for this "family affair," Hudson's husband, Robert Lane, a retired Yale professor, agreed to finance publication of "Dinner at Six: Voices from the Soup Kitchen."

In addition, Tom Lane's wife, fine arts photographer Loy Whitman, did the proofreading and contributed the cover photograph — a shot of a woman weeping on a bench at Wooster Square.

"I was taking pictures during a snowstorm one morning," Whitman recalled, "and I happened to see this young woman. She was hunched over on a bench and I could hear her sobbing.

"I didn't want to be intrusive, so I kept going," Whitman said. "But she appeared in two of my pictures of the park, a very tiny figure. We enlarged the shot."

The people who told their life stories in Hudson's book include Kenneth (no real names are used), a classical pianist and Yale graduate whose career foundered when he began to hear angry voices in his head instead of music.

The voices issued commands such as "cut off your right fingers" and "jump in front of that bus." Kenneth did not obey, but he became so distraught and distracted that he could no longer give piano lessons. After he lost his income, he was forced to sell his beautiful piano.

Finally Kenneth received medical treatment and the voices faded. "It's great to be playing the piano again," he told Hudson at the end of the interview.

But he also said he had grown older and the ordeal had taken a physical as well as emotional toll. "I've lost too many teeth," he said.

"The people in the soup kitchen have no teeth," Hudson wrote. "They simply stand and wait. They are used to waiting, just as they are used to having things disappear: their jobs, their homes, their families, their welfare checks, their luck — and their teeth."

Hudson said she hasn't seen Kenneth for several years, but she added, "At that time he was teaching again and he had a room."

But as she wrote in the epilogue of her book, at least one of the "guests" didn't survive. "Cliffie, big, childish, effusive Cliffie, no longer asks me for a ride home. He was found dead on the floor of his room with half a bottle of Jim Beam and a trash bag full of empties beside him." After his obituary was read in a soup kitchen one night before grace, Hudson attended his funeral.

"It's much worse now" for the homeless, she said, than when she was interviewing them during the last decade.

Hudson said middle class people are now appearing in soup kitchens. "Charities are drying up and jobs are drying up," she said.

But Tom Lane said the public is still largely indifferent or unaware of homelessness.

"This is an issue that's become part of the furniture," he said. "People don't think about it anymore."

That's why the family believes the book is so important. "It's more than a book," Lane said. "It's a cry for awareness."